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Sex trafficking conceptualizations, solutions and the need for body based therapy for survivors

Sex trafficking is a complex phenomenon with many moving parts. Governments, grass roots organizations, feminists and the wide spectrum of sex workers conceptualize the issue disparately, including its causes and the most appropriate solutions. Provocative journalists like Peter Landesman and Victor Malarek have drawn mass attention to trafficking by highlighting the most extreme, appalling cases to create a moral panic, general anxiety about a threat to social well-being, that has effectively helped catalyze a plethora of legislation aimed to demolish sex trafficking. Reports and legislation put forth by governmental organizations like the United Nations and the United States Department of State reflect the media's worst case scenario portrayal of sex trafficking and frame those subjected to sex trafficking as helpless victims manipulated through violently coercive means, which is a reality for some. Grassroots organizations cast their attention on empowering victims by providing support and resources, and working to dismantle social and political structures that lay the systemic foundation for sex trafficking through lobbying and community action. Dissident and abolitionist feminists divergently and concomitantly instigate shifts in perspective by exercising social, political, and moral influence over the public and governmental and grassroots organizations.

All of these entities address critical components of sex trafficking including summoning traffickers, protecting victims, implementing educational and political preventative practices, empowering survivors, and unveiling social and cultural structures that condone sex trafficking. What is missing from this conversation is how to best address the needs of victims after they escape coercive sex work, a highly unique traumatic experience that should be treated with

specificity particular to the nature of the experience. While grassroots organizations train women to be political advocates for their own rights and some governmental organizations offer mental health resources, their reintegration efforts are not holistic. Using mainstream feminist Kathleen Barry's analysis of violation, research on the psychological effects of sex trafficking, and evidence that backs movement based therapies as effective in healing trauma, I propose that governmental and grassroots organizations take notable action to ensure that sex trafficking survivors have access to body based therapies in order to help them process and recover from trauma, reignite their power, and successfully reintegrate into their communities. In order to understand the need for body based therapies in alleviating the effect of sex trafficking, it is important to understand its complexities, myriad conceptualizations, and how these various perceptions materialize policy and social action.

Journalist Peter Landesman brought critical attention to sex trafficking through his New York Times article "The Girls Next Door" that unveils the presence of sex trafficking in unassuming high class areas in the United States. His journalistic style depicts an unfathomably tragic, slavery like picture of sex trafficking that involves sly and deceptive recruiting tactics, outright abductions, obscene living conditions, and vicious abuse and exploitation. The language and details are graphic and horrific with the intent to scare activism, policy and legislation out of the government and general public. Landesman and his fellow journalists who investigate sex trafficking have succeeded in prompting politicians to take action. The United Nations endorsed a film inspired by his expose, and President Obama and Queen Silvia of Sweden have made statements using the language established by these journalists to bring awareness to sex trafficking (Buffington and Guy 152). Obama declared January "National Slavery and Human

Trafficking Prevention Month,” officially equating human trafficking with slavery (Buffington and Guy 152).

Encasing sex trafficking in this moral panic frame misrepresents the complexities of trafficking and invokes more anxiety than activism in the general public: “Moral panics around sex trafficking reoccur because they provide an intensely meaningful (if distorted) outlet for any number of social anxieties, including generalized fears or degeneration, dissolution, and pollution” (Buffington and Guy 188). In the same way that Donald Trump garners supporters for his presidency by invoking fear, these journalists provide an incomplete representation of sex trafficking on which the public can project their hate, phobias and isms. Despite its mostly misleading portrayal, the moral panic construction of sex trafficking is productive in urging governmental organizations to employ anti-trafficking policy and legislation.

The United Nations and The United States define trafficking in terms of criminalization and victimization. Definitions by both entities involve recruitment, transport, harboring or obtaining persons through threat, force, fraud, or coercion to have control over someone for exploitative purposes which may include slavery, involuntary servitude, forced labor and/or debt bondage (U.S. Dept. of State 2; United Nations 42). The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol) was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2000 and asks governments to enforce a “3P” paradigm: Prevention of trafficking, Prosecution of traffickers and Protection of victims (US Dept. of State 11). The United States signed on to the protocol and has a good track record of enforcing it. For example, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) of 2000 prohibits all forms of human trafficking, making it possible to ruthlessly prosecute traffickers and, as illuminated in the next paragraph, hound other countries into compliance with the TVPA (US

Dept. of State 353). The U.S. aims to protect victims by providing federally funded victims assistance to trafficking survivors and has laws in place that protect migrant victims from deportation (U.S. Dept. of State 354). Prevention efforts in the U.S. include outreach campaigns to educate the public about trafficking and passing a federal law to prohibit recruiters from charging fees to workers and requiring that they register with the government and disclose employment terms to workers (U.S. Dept. of State 354).

The United States is in alignment with the Palermo Protocol, however when countries become a party to this protocol they are doing nothing more than confirming their intention to commit to implementing trafficking legislation. The U.N. does not enforce adherence to the protocol in individual countries, partly because there are social, governmental and cultural differences such as the age of consent and arranged marriages at play. The U.S. remedies this lack of incentive to act by enforcing global compliance with the TVPA through a tier system. In an annual human trafficking report the secretary of state evaluates the effort of each country to prohibit severe forms of trafficking, make them punishable by law, and eliminate severe forms of trafficking (DeStefano 118). If a country falls on the third tier, non-compliance without evidence of effort to comply, the U.S. may deny the country non-humanitarian aid. Because of the financial power the U.S. possesses, like the International Monetary Fund, for example, many countries feel urged to cooperate. Even though the TVPA has mobilized anti-trafficking legislation around the globe, it does not come without the opportunity for the U.S. to play politics and bestow unachievable expectations onto countries that simply do not have the financial or organizational means to meet minimum TVPA requirements (Destafano 126). The 2015 US Human Trafficking Report states that “at the heart of this phenomenon is the traffickers’ goal of exploiting and enslaving their victims and the myriad coercive and deceptive

practices they use to do so” (U.S. Dept. of State 7). However, the world has a long history of sex trafficking. Implementing the “3P’s” only addresses the symptoms of the real heart of the issue.

“Sex trafficking as a phenomenon exists because of structural and thematic elements of patriarchy, social inequality, economic disparity and political asymmetry” (Buffington and Guy 155). It is likely that as long as these structural and thematic elements are in place, sex trafficking will flourish. The 2015 Trafficking report supports this theory: “Modern slavery doesn’t exist in a vacuum. It’s connected to a host of 21st century challenges, including the persistence of extreme poverty, discrimination against women and minorities, corruption and other failures of governance, the abuse of social media, and the power and reach of transnational organized crime (U.S. Dept. of State 4). Each of these items is linked to patriarchal structures, and economic, social and political perversion. However, the TVPA does not tackle these issues head on. The TVPA and Palermo Protocol are designed to remedy the symptoms of these well-developed and constantly reinforced structures.

Many grassroots organizations concentrate their efforts on addressing some of these underlying issues through their work with coerced and non-coerced sex workers. The Foundation Against Trafficking in Women (SVT) was founded in response to a report on the “Investigation into the nature, global scale, and channels through which women are trafficked into the Netherlands” (Chew 67-68). This organization in conjunction with the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) challenge patriarchy, social inequality and economic disparity by conducting victim based research, providing education and various resources for victims and their communities, and advocating for reform and legislation that protect the rights of women and migrants (Chew 71). They form alliances with organizations around the globe to strengthen their efforts.

GAATW focuses much of its efforts on advocating for the rights of migrant workers, as they believe the social, political and economic ties to migration significantly enable sex trafficking. At the event in which the organization was founded, it was proclaimed that many global governmental efforts to combat trafficking have made the situation worse (Chew 71). The governments promote exporting migrant labor without putting any protections in place for migrants, and fail to facilitate women's participation in formal, regulated sectors (Chew 71). For example, in an attempt to put an end to the inhumane treatment of women migrants who go to the Middle East for domestic work, governments in Bangladesh and the Philippines banned women from migrating to the Middle East for that purpose (Chew 73). This did not stop women from migrating. Instead it made them dependent on recruiting agencies for illegal immigration, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation (Chew 73). Pro-rights advocate Lin Chew suggests that allowing migrants the freedom to move across borders through "transparent, non exploitive practices," and recognizing migrant employment as legitimate work to be regulated under state labor laws will significantly decrease sex trafficking (Chew 76).

As stated previously, cultural and governmental differences throughout the world make it difficult to implement global legislation to combat trafficking. The feminist participatory action research (FPAR) conducted by GAATW in Vietnam and Cambodia brought forth solutions based on collaborations between local women and local organizations that align with the culture and perceptions specific to the region. During regular group meetings, women in the community conceptualized the sex trafficking problem and formed their own solutions, which were carried out with the help of GAATW and their local organizational partners (Bootinand 176).

For example, the women's group in Cambodia landed on poverty and lack of education as the main causes of trafficking in their area, therefore the local organizations helped facilitate

literacy classes and income generation activities in the community (Bootinand 186). The formation of the Cambodian Prostitute Union is a direct result of engaging women in conversation through FPAR. This organization aims to minimize and alleviate discrimination against women in prostitution at the policy level. Not only do the women influence what solutions are implemented, the process of FPAR educates and empowers women, equipping them with the knowledge and passion needed to demand their rights and counteract patriarchal structures (Bootinand 186). This research shows that more flexibility is needed at the legislative level, as solutions should be culturally appropriate and geared toward the specific problems in a region (Bootinand 191). It also shows that while policies of a bigger scope are often slow to reflect change, transformation can happen on individual and local levels (Bootinand 191).

Laura Maria Agustin and Anne McClintock, dissident feminists who are in favor of distinguishing between coerced and non-coerced sex work and decriminalizing prostitution, would support FPAR, as they believe that it is important to give voice to the women and migrants involved in sex work and sex trafficking. When women and migrant views are considered they are empowered to be advocates for their rights. Where sex work is illegal and immigration laws are strict, women and migrants are more vulnerable to harsh and inhumane working conditions because informing the authorities of maltreatment may lead to the prosecution of victims, and possibly deportation if they are migrants (Agustin 98; McClintock 3). In other words, stigma and criminalization of prostitution may enable sex trafficking.

Kathleen Barry has a vastly different perspective on sex work and trafficking than McClintock, Agustin and the grassroots activists previously discussed. She does not believe the voices of sex workers matter because they possess a false sense of control and the act of selling sexual services to men, regardless of if consent is involved, is always a violation of human

dignity and supports patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, she suggests that sex work is always sex trafficking because consent is not possible. Barry states that prostitution is the “fullest patriarchal reduction of women to sexed body (Barry 22).

In contrast to McClintock’s call to decriminalize prostitution, Barry believes that normalizing prostitution does not make it less exploitive. If women willingly identify as sex objects the negative effects of prostitution are magnified (Barry 31). Thus, Barry calls for the abolition of prostitution. Mainstream feminist Donna Hughes also calls for abolition because her research suggests that legalizing prostitution increases sex trafficking in order to meet an increased demand (Hughes 12). However, when abolitionists claim that the voices of women who participate in the sex trade are not welcome, oppression is reinforced, which is what we are trying to eliminate in the fight against sex trafficking.

Furthermore, aligning one’s perception with that of moral panics, as Barry does, portrays sex workers as passive victims. Conceiving of women in this way not only dismisses the experiences of many women but also may potentially intensify the problem. Men are more likely to assault and coerce a woman that they portray as vulnerable and defenseless (McClintock 7). In the same way that constant exposure to sexualized women in the media leads to the objectification of women, constant exposure to the notion that women are victims encourages the treatment of them as such. Also, assigning these women to the victim realm highlights the “helpers” and removes power from the women who, with the proper societal and legislative support, could advocate for themselves (Agustin 105).

Anti-trafficking policy and legislation focuses on harsh punishments for traffickers and victim support, while grassroots organizations focus on empowering women to advocate for themselves. Dissident feminist draw a distinction between sex trafficking and sex work in order

to create an environment where women and migrants who are subjected to bad treatment can report it, while mainstream feminist believe that all sex work is sex trafficking and allowing sex work on any level will lead to increased sex trafficking. It is important to consider what happens to these victims who are “protected” after they escape sex trafficking.

In numerous studies it has been found that survivors of sex trafficking experience psychological and behavioral symptoms including depression, self blame, post-traumatic stress, aggressive tendencies, social withdrawal, anxiety, panic disorder, substance abuse, eating disorders and altered behavior around men (Crawford and Kaufman 907-913; Clawson et al. 1). Communities often socially reject returnees; so ensuring adequate care upon return is especially crucial (Crawford and Kaufman 913). The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) compiles an annual report that shows how government programs are addressing the needs of trafficking victims (Clawson et al 1). HHS offers trauma specific services designed to treat the physical and mental symptoms of physical or sexual abuse (Clawson et al 4). However, it is often difficult to get trafficking victims to seek mental health services because of language barriers and the shame that often accompanies sex trafficking (Clawson et al 2-4). Coming back to an exploitation free life may be shocking and disorienting to victims, so it is important that these survivors receive mental and emotional support.

Even though Barry’s philosophy and call to action seem to take power away from women and deny the more complex experiences sex workers and sex trafficking victims, her corporeal analysis of violation is useful in understanding the psychological and embodied experiences of sex trafficking survivors, and may therefore be valuable in determining what sorts of post-traumatic care and reintegration procedures should be implemented. Because the

violation is initiated at the level of the body, it follows that body based therapeutic practices would be beneficial to women who have experienced sex trafficking.

Kathleen Barry's philosophy of corporeal violation is influenced by physician Suzanne Kepe's definition of human: "the condition of existing in the world with a body which is a source of energy and a mind, a psyche closely linked to that body, depending on and reflecting everything that happens in that body" (Barry 27). Barry proposes four stages in which prostitution socially constructs the exploitation of women: Distancing, disengagement, dissociation, disembodiment and dissembling (Barry 29). While I do not agree with Barry that prostitution and sex trafficking are equivalent, these four stages can be insightfully applied to the experience of a sex trafficking survivor, illuminating the nature of corporeal violations and why body based therapeutic practices are important for reintegration.

All four stages are manifestations of the need to survive while enduring a painful experience. The initial stage of distancing involves creating distance between the victim's actions in the coerced situation and her real identity (Barry 30). In other words, the victim denies that it is her true self who is engaging in the act. In the second stage, disengagement, the victim emotionally and mentally disengages in the coerced sex act while physically performing it, thus differentiating parts of herself to survive (Barry 31-32). To disengage in this sense means to remove the mind and emotions from the physical act. Dissociation refers to acting emotionally engaged to please the client while the self is retreating (Barry 34). For example, the victim may fake a loving demeanor to avoid retaliation from the John. Disembodiment and Dissembling are the result of distancing, disengaging and dissociating from the event while acting as if one is embodied (Barry 35). Disembodiment takes place, for example, when the victim embodies or performs sexuality during a coercive sex act. In essence, "women become estranged from

themselves in order to save themselves” (Barry 30). One can imagine that repeatedly practicing denial of the self, separation of self from the body, and faked emotional and sexual engagement would make it challenging and disorienting for a victim to drop into a life free of exploitation and coercion.

Due to the heinous nature of the violation, it is common for sex trafficking victims to develop some level of post-traumatic stress. Theories on post-traumatic stress disorder suggest that it develops because the body remains in a constant state of fight, flight or freeze as a result of a traumatic experience or experiences, and because the mind cannot conceive of the traumatic event or events as having ended (Rothschild 150). In terms of the four stages of violation, PTSD for a sex trafficking victim might involve a constant state of dissociation or disembodiment even though the threat of the trauma is no longer present. Dance/movement therapy and other somatically based therapies can assist in regulating nervous system hyper arousal and relegating the traumatic events to the past. According to psychologist Babette Rothschild, “body awareness makes it possible to gauge, slow down, and halt traumatic hyper arousal, and to separate past from present” (Rothschild 100-101). Cultivating a sense of body awareness through movement may be effective in eliminating the learned survival mechanisms of dissociation, disengagement, disembodiment and distancing by calming the nervous system and training the body to kinesthetically adopt alternate ways to exist in the body.

Dance Therapy may include a variety of activities including “rhythmic dance, spontaneous and creative movements, thematic movement improvisations, unconscious symbolic body movement, group dance, and a range of movement and relaxation exercises” (Mills and Daniluk 78). All of these activities not only cultivate body awareness, they also invite the survivor to make choices, use her body in powerful ways, and stay in the present moment; things

that are not available when the body is constantly violated and the mind is trained to numb itself and escape.

Body based therapies and practices can help people access and practice their strength. For example “many who have been assaulted or raped have benefitted from self-defense training, which reawakens normal fight responses and teaches additional protective strategies” (Rothschild 53). Experiencing the body in a state of strength as a result of one’s actions provides instant evidence and display of one’s own power. Regarding the effect of dance therapy on dissociative patients, psychologists Sabine Koch and Steven Harvey state,

By experiencing their own strength in a realistic way, dissociative patients can address their aggression toward the outside (the perpetrator) instead of toward the inside, can leave behind the role of the victim, accept and integrate their own good and bad aspects, take on a more active role, and move on with their lives (384).

Dance therapy can redirect shame and self-loathing energy outward, reacquaint the survivor with lost parts of herself, and exhibit her power.

In order to counteract the mental and physical defense mechanisms that survivors employed to survive sex trafficking, the body must be involved in recovery. While the therapies suggested by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for trafficking victims, cognitive behavioral therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), are effective, these therapies do not address violation at the level of the body (Clawson et al. 6-7). Expressive body movement can give form to unconscious thoughts and behaviors, “lending itself as a natural medium to further emotional integration” (Panhofer et al. 314). In addition to processing trauma, research suggests that dance movement therapy is effective in increasing

serotonin levels while decreasing dopamine levels (Koch et al. 341). This phenomenon indicates that dance movement therapy may help alleviate depression, which is characterized by decreased serotonin levels, and regulate the sympathetic nervous system, which activates the fight or flight response (Koch et al. 341). Depression is also common result of sex trafficking.

When considering appropriate therapies on a global level, dance therapy may be more appropriate than traditional western forms of therapy. Therapies that involve talking and disclosure may not be welcome for trafficking victims from other cultures (Macy and Johns 7). Dance is part of daily life in many cultures around the globe. Accessing memories, unconscious thoughts and behaviors through dance may be more appropriate for some sex trafficking survivors. During the Feminist Participatory Action Research conducted in Vietnam, it was found that women were not comfortable verbally expressing themselves (Bootinand 190). While verbal expression is important for self-advocacy, movement may be a better mode of therapy. The HHS states that a shift away from traditional western treatment paradigms is needed to meet the mental health needs of refugee and immigrant victims (Clawson et al. 4).

A look into the psychological effects of sex trafficking demonstrates the severe effects this phenomenon has on victims. Experiencing chronic sexual coercion yields unique mental and corporeal effects that must be treated holistically with emphasis on re-educating the body. Sex trafficking happens in virtually every city in the world and beyond. The moral panic incited by journalists brought sex trafficking to our immediate attention as a phenomenon that requires urgent action to eliminate. The Palermo protocol and TVPA act have implemented minimum standards and policy to fight sex trafficking. Grassroots organizations have focused their efforts on supporting and protecting victims, and join main stream and dissident feminists in working to eliminate underlying causes of trafficking such as patriarchy, social inequality, economic

disparity and political asymmetry. Despite the aggressive efforts of the United Nations, United States, other governments and grassroots organizations around the world, sex trafficking is showing no signs of stopping. Deeply rooted systems in our world need to shift in order to cut off the patriarchal and xenophobic power supplies that fuel it. Making appropriate therapies available for sex trafficking victims will not stop sex trafficking, but it might increase the chance of survivors living full and productive lives when they reintegrate into their communities.

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