Advancing the efforts of the macro-level social work response against sex trafficking

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Abstract

This article explores the conceptualization of sex trafficking in social work, through research, theory, and policy. We will view sex trafficking from a macro level addressing the global phenomenon. Theoretical frameworks, perspectives, and models will be utilized to analyze the foundation of current policy and research. To adequately address the challenges that sex trafficking presents, social work needs to move toward a multidisciplinary approach. Social work should focus on empowering the voices of survivors in both policy and research. Survivors of sex trafficking are empowered through the increase in their value as individuals and not commodities.

Keywords

Policy, research, sex trafficking, social work, theory

Introduction

Sex trafficking is a global social issue where there is a key role for the social work profession to prevent and end sex trafficking. Social workers are trained to utilize community and clinical practice to connect people and systems. This linkage is essential for a coordinated effort to produce a sizeable effect against the powerful economic forces at the core of trafficking. Social work must increase its efforts to combat sex trafficking for long-lasting collaborative efforts to be realized by practitioners and survivors. If social work does not respond, the guiding ethics and principles of the profession will not be fully exercised. The profession of social work has a mandate to serve vulnerable populations, effect positive social change, and strive for justice on a local, national, and global level. It is in this arena that social work and sex trafficking meet. That is not to say that

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those operating in other realms of practice must abandon the focus on other social issues; rather we advocate for social workers to become aware of the emerging field of practice and view the challenges of sex trafficking through a global lens.

The range of social work services available is broad, extending from global policy to domestic clinical services. Each of these interactions takes place in a unique atmosphere of culture and diversity. This article will explore sex trafficking and social work from a macro perspective with attention paid to systems and structures that encourage or inhibit justice for survivors. Specifically, this article will discuss policy development and creation, the current challenges and prospects of research, and the necessity of a theoretical foundation for social work to understand and navigate the complexity of sex trafficking.

This article focuses solely on critically examining the intersection of sex trafficking and social work. Sex trafficking requires specific attention due to the unique psychosocial and biological vulnerabilities experienced by victims (Hom and Woods, 2013; Hossain et al., 2010).

As the media disproportionately focuses on sex trafficking, myths have begun to out way the facts (Sanghera, 2011). Therefore, social workers need to be informed of the discourses that shape the issue in policy and practice (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012). This is not to say that the concerns of trafficking for labor exploitation, domestic servanthood, or organs should be dismissed. The process of trafficking often creates overlapping layers of exploitation where victims have the potential of experiencing a variety of the abuses that are considered separate forms of trafficking (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson, 2003).

Many social workers may not realize how often they have opportunity to prevent trafficking and help victims escape. In order to prevent overlooking a client being trafficked, social workers working as case managers and counselors can reduce trafficking by having a basic knowledge of the risk factors. Any professional serving in medical, legal, or social service fields would benefit from recognizing the signs of a trafficked victim (Hodge, 2014; Macy and Graham, 2012). The stigma, emotional and psychological manipulation that accompanies being sexually exploited will often cause a victim to avoid seeking help. Instead, a victim is more likely to come forward with another presenting issue, leaving the social worker to use professional insight to reach out to the client (Macy and Graham, 2012). Therefore, it is even more important that social workers prepare themselves with the ability to identify and assess victims, as well as understand the sensitive and complex nature of the crime (Okech et al., 2012). Social work is equipped with an empathic foundation, tools for therapeutic intervention and social change, and the capacity to facilitate multidisciplinary responses.

Methods

This article was written following a desk study of the available literature on sex trafficking with social work and social science peer-reviewed journals. The reference period for this article began in January 2013 and ended 8 months later in August, 2013. With few expectations (Anderson and O'Connell Davidson, 2003; Goździak and Bump, 2008) the dearth of the literature included in this study was peer reviewed in order to exhibit the availability of social work research on sex trafficking. Keyword searches included the following: 'sex traffick*', 'traffick*', and 'social work' within social work journals. The follow search terms will be used when searching in social science journals: 'Sex traffick*', 'human traffick*', 'sex slave*', 'prostitution', 'sex trade', and 'sex exploitation'. The databases that were used are as follows: Social Work Abstracts, SocIndex, SAGE publications, Academic Search Complete, Social Service Abstracts, and PsycINFO. Articles were also included from the review of author reference pages.

The social work response to sex trafficking

Addressing sex trafficking in social work is an emerging practice field; however, the profession is equipped with diverse modalities and frameworks for intervention. Historically, the social work profession has moved forward in developing operational frameworks for trauma and abuse (Ahn et al., 2013; Macy, 2007). On the macro level, the advocacy for the rights and protection of children has been amplified and governments have risen to the occasion to pass anti-trafficking legislation (Todres, 2010). The world of policy and legislation is working to ratify laws and covenants to impede the sale and movement of individuals for sex. Despite these efforts, the trade continues to thrive (Wheaton et al., 2010).

The enthusiasm to address trafficking has led to uncoordinated efforts in policy creation (Todres, 2010). Research is dominated by predominantly Western voices (Todres, 2010). It is important to note that to fully understand sex trafficking, a diverse chorus of voices is needed from the global community. As a whole, social work needs to pay close attention to the strong Western tone that can be found in the profession and work to embrace the ethical challenges found within a globalized world (Dominelli, 2012). Furthermore, a primarily Western voice will not fully address the complexity of culture, race, and spiritual beliefs found within victims and the systems of abuse used against them (Desayllas, 2007). Careful attention must be given in the rhetoric used in research and practice as political and economic power dynamics between wealthy, Western nations can suppress voices of victims from lower income nations (Desayllas, 2007).

The incorporation of non-Western thought into the discussion surrounding sex trafficking places an increased level of responsibility on the practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers. The weight of this responsibility is felt in the increased knowledge needed to work against oppressive structures. We believe theoretical and practical restructuring exposes the interconnected realities of globalization that allow sex trafficking to thrive and the vulnerable to be exploited. By acknowledging the realities of globalization, new conceptualizations of social development and human rights are birthed. For a global phenomenon to be effectively addressed, social work must work within the cultural dynamics of power and vulnerability to ensure the empowerment of survivors through policy and program creation.

The dilemma of research

The investigation of the qualitative and quantitative of research available, specifically from the social work field, is limited. The difficulties have been well documented in researching specially sex trafficking (Todres, 2010; Zhang, 2009) and human trafficking at large (see Brunovskis and Surtees, 2010; Goździak and Bump, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2011). Goździak and Bump (2008) found that social science researchers face unique challenges per the information they seek to find whether it be qualitative interviews, global trend summations, or understanding traffickers' motivations. Within the current field of study, there has not been a coordinated approach to the construction of research (Zhang, 2009). The fundamental reasons for many of these expansive knowledge and research gaps are that interventions are more valued than the time needed to ensure that the intervention is evidence based (Todres, 2010).

The inherently criminal nature of sex trafficking makes counting victims or criminal offenses difficult and does not accurately depict the extent of global trafficking (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2010; Weitzer, 2012). This fact does not diminish the need for researchers and policy-makers to push forward and continue efforts to prevent and stop sex trafficking. However, considerable ethical challenges regarding the safety for themselves, participants, and any related organizations

when attempting to collect data do exist. The issues of criminality for women actively involved in sex work (forced or voluntary) and the growing pressures of immigration further limit researchers' access (Berman, 2003).

The use of empirical evidence attempts to ensure ethical research methodologies and interventions. Outside of academia, the popularity of the subject of sex trafficking can be helpful to gain support through advocacy; however, it can also shape public opinion through anecdotal reports (Scott and Harper, 2006). The swiftness of media non-governmental organizations and international agencies in publishing is helpful in presenting timely perspectives and information.

However, this information lacks power of empirical validity that peer-reviewed evidence-based research attempts to provide. This imbalance may be reconciled through collaborative and multi-disciplinary initiatives. Through the incorporation of diverse perspectives, advocacy and research can benefit from one another and build a stronger platform for change. Zhang (2009) speaks to this challenge in relation to the readily cited data from international organizations about the prevalence of sex trafficking worldwide. The caution is founded in that the data presented do not include collection methods and measures of validity.

The existing social work literature presents an incomplete narrative of the social work profession's response to this issue. The lack of shared knowledge presents questions of how the social work profession is responding to the gravity of sex trafficking. The available literature is not widely generalizable, nor is it tailored to the social work field. With these limitations and challenges, can the available literature inform best practice? Many peer-reviewed studies have incorporated manuals, online information, and non-profit organizational materials to better understand trafficking (Goździak and Bump, 2008) because of the lack of literature in their field. Conversation between academics and practitioners is essential when researching the complexities of sex trafficking. Through increased communication between academics and practitioners, the pool of research and development of best practice can be significantly enhanced.

The contribution of the social work profession thus far has been limited. In 2007, Hodge and Lietz called for social workers to utilize a multi-ecological response, which 'targets interventions at multiple levels' (p. 169). In 2008, Hodge published an article evaluating sex trafficking within the United States and the global implications it presents. Palmer (2010) spoke to the intersection of the social work response to sex trafficking through therapeutic jurisprudence. Therapeutic jurisprudence seeks for a positive intersection between individuals' mental health/social concerns and the legal system (Palmer, 2010). Six years after Hodge and Lietz (2007) asked for a professional response, the state of social work literature has seen minimal progress. In addition, there is a lack of peer-reviewed articles within social sciences researching from an empirical basis (Goździak and Bump, 2008). Zhang (2009) confirmed this finding with a review of literature that found a 'glaring' lack of empirical data collected through primary research (p. 185).

Despite the dividing gaps, research has helped to create awareness to prevention and intervention strategies for sex trafficking. Moving from the dilemmas of research, progress has been slowed due to the struggle with inconsistent definitions and the lack of multidisciplinary collaboration in the field. In an attempt to move this conversation forward, the following sections will discuss the complexities of these two challenges.

Inconsistent definitions

In 2000, the first attempt at an internationally recognized definition of sex trafficking was accepted in Palermo, Italy, as the United Nations signed the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (Aronowitz, 2001). Within this convention, trafficking is defined as

… 'Trafficking in persons' shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs … (United Nations, 2000)

Leading up to this Convention, terms and definitions of who was considered a victim of sex trafficking and what determines an act of trafficking greatly differed between states, organizations, and advocacy groups (Chuang, 1998). In the current discourses, there is discontent and debate surrounding this universal definition in an interdisciplinary arena (Todres, 2010). Through research conducted within social services in the London Metropolitan Area, Pearce (2011) found that practitioners and law enforcement officials did not understand the terms currently used for survivors. This resulted in survivors in need of services being passed around like 'hot potatoes' between agencies (Pearce, 2011: 1431). The outcome of vulnerable individuals being shuffled around between agencies strongly exhibits the negative impact of chaotic terminology. This lack of unity fosters tension among disciplines and prevents a unified approach.

The operational impasse has created a state of confusion that impedes progress and places survivors at a disadvantage for receiving services (Pearce, 2011). Scholars actively debate the use of the terms 'sex work' versus 'sex trafficking (Outshoorn, 2005). Sex work is considered to be any sexual service provided by an individual in exchange for money (Holman, 2008; Weitzer, 2012). Societal stigmatization can restrict services for victims of sex trafficking as they may be misidentified as sex workers (Alvarez and Alessi, 2012). This bias stunts the possibilities for comprehensive policy creation and other anti-trafficking efforts (Kaneti, 2011).

Alongside the questions surrounding definitions, Melrose and Barrett (2006) call for a closer examination at the multiple events that culminate in a person being defined as trafficked. The United Nations (2000) Palermo Protocol stands out as one of the most 'prominent' definitions of sex trafficking (Hodge and Lietz, 2007: 164). This definition hinges on the use of '… exploitation rather than consent …' when evaluating a person's circumstance (Hodge and Lietz, 2007: 164). Instead of fixating on the level of consent given by an individual, the entirety of the circumstance must be evaluated to understand the broader systems of oppression (Melrose and Barrett, 2006).

To construct a person-centered definition, the individual must be considered. The current definition seeks to define the legal environment surrounding victims; however, they fail to see the individual at the core of the discussion. The theoretical and practical conversations surrounding sex trafficking must be broadened to understand the systems surrounding individuals. The relationships between disciplines working against sex trafficking require examination to assess their effectiveness.

Multidisciplinary approaches

The complex nature of sex trafficking requires a comprehensive response by social services and government agencies. Sex trafficking intersects a variety of fields, including medical, legal, criminal, and human service professions. There is an advantage for social work professionals to cut across multidisciplinary lines and increase collaborative efforts (Gitterman and Heller, 2011). Ferguson et al. (2009) illustrate this advantage in an empirical study of social service providers in the United States. This study advocates for the needs and benefits of interdisciplinary education and trainings for practitioners. The results of their study suggest the use of 'working groups' as a

cost-effective method to bring practitioners together to share information and resources (Ferguson et al., 2009: 591). A working group is conceptualized as a space for social service professionals in the field of sex trafficking to share practice knowledge, resources, and educational opportunities (Ferguson et al., 2009: 591). Furthermore, social workers must recognize the power of collaboration to holistically address sex trafficking. To take advantage of multidisciplinary collaboration, social workers must seek out current research and theories developed by other disciplines.

In the global context, multidisciplinary work is essential as services for victims of sex trafficking cross international borders. The rise of response from multinational and non-governmental organizations providing services for victims of sex trafficking has provided greater capacity to share resources and knowledge. International collaboration by both governments and non-profit agencies is essential to effectively diminish and eradicate sex trafficking. To work within the global context, a theoretical compass is needed to navigate the topography of culture, political systems, and economic concerns.

Frameworks, models, and theories: A map for action

For social workers to be able to navigate the intricate dynamics of global governance and individual trauma, theoretical tools of understanding are required. The frameworks and theories provided within the following section inform practice and aid in designing strategies to promote positive social progress. The incorporation of theory in social work practice is required for a rigorous and ethical approach. Social work needs to more fully embrace the aid that theory can bring as it provides a foundation for research and intervention. For the purposes of this article, sex trafficking is conceptualized as a complex intersection of cultural values and economies that create an underlying web of devastating dynamics for vulnerable populations. To travel within the global implications of this issue, theoretical constructs provide bridges of conceptual knowledge.

Social work and the ecological model

Recently, in the field of social work, Hodge and Lietz (2007) suggest macro, mezzo, and micro levels of intervention for the study of sex trafficking. Expanding from this work, we suggest the incorporation of ecological models as a mode of conceptualizing this social phenomenon. According to Peirson et al. (2011), using ecological models to conceptualize an issue is vital in facilitating societal change on a systemic level. Ecological models provide a holistic framework from which all disciplines (including medical, education, human service providers, and policy-makers) can assess an issue and take appropriate action. In a world of constant intersection and interaction, it is impossible to ignore the complexity of human life. Even within the smallest of systems, actions produce effect. The overarching framework of ecological models can be used to navigate this complexity. The genesis of ecological models can be found in the field of psychology; however, it has been adapted and expanded throughout a wide range of professions (Peirson et al., 2011). Concepts from ecological models highlight the interaction and adaptations between individuals and their environment. This understanding provides a framework of analysis, which allows social workers to evaluate an issue or client(s) needs as a component of a larger system. Although the temptation to only address symptoms of sex trafficking may be convenient, doing so unjustly simplifies a complex global issue.

Feminist theories

Globally, women are often at a political and economic disadvantage, making them a vulnerable population (Roby, 2005). To understand this vulnerability, feminist theories are used by (Desayllas,

2007) scholars and professionals in identifying how social constructs affect women. Feminist theories are generally defined as examining social issues from a gender- and sex-based framework (Saulnier, 2008). Due to the diversity of how feminist theory can be conceptualized (Cavalieri, 2011), we have generalized the foundational principles to capture the dearth of information available. According to Iniguez de Heridia (2007), feminist theories look at gender inequality and use information to facilitate progressive policy change, positive social values, and equal access to resources. Iniguez de Heridia (2007) suggests trafficking will continue as long as gender inequality issues are not addressed. Due to the global subjugation of women and children, they become the prime targets for sex trafficking (Melrose and Barrett, 2006). Feminist theories seek to address these disparities by highlighting both the systems and structures utilized to create power dynamics but also expose the painful outcomes for the vulnerable (Cavalieri, 2011). Social workers can use the information gained from research on gender studies and the subsequent development of feminist theories to combat unjust treatment of women. Feminist theories have the potential to motivate professionals to take action through advocacy, education, and human service provisions.

Economic models and concepts

Economic models help conceptualize sex trafficking and human value from a financial perspective. The systematic vulnerability of women produces a climate ripe for exploitation. This exploitation can be graphically seen within the economic context of women and their dependents. Gender-biased economic structures leave women with few economic and employment choices, thus increasing their vulnerability to be trafficked (Flowe, 2010; Yen, 2008). Although the majority of trafficking victims originate from impoverished countries and are often transported into wealthier nations (Roby, 2005), trafficking exists in nearly all economic environments (Wheaton et al., 2010) and must be addressed with this in mind. The industry of sex trafficking has the capacity for significant monetary profits for perpetrators. Financial motivation for criminals drives the industry because they are not countered by effective anti-trafficking policy (Todres, 2010). The business of sex trafficking is not chaotic but seeks to gain the highest profit possible (Smith, 2011). The root of trafficking is demand where the vulnerable are at risk.

To understand the interplay between vulnerable populations and economic systems, the use of conceptual economic models can provide theoretical insight to practitioners and policy-makers. Effective intervention in human trafficking requires insight and exploration of the currently employed models used by trafficker (Wheaton et al., 2010). The economic model describes human trafficking as a business model in which traffickers weigh the risks and benefits of buying and selling people (Leman and Janssens, 2008). Traffickers that use the economic model operate from a 'rational choice' theoretical lens (Wheaton et al., 2010: 117). This lens acknowledges high financial prospects and low risk of being caught for trafficking crimes (Wheaton et al., 2010). Little incentive exists for traffickers to cease their activities because anti-trafficking policy is often not implemented (Todres, 2010). Few legislative mechanisms are in place to hold traffickers accountable with the threat of penal action; thus, the trade continues unhindered with high profit margins (Yen, 2008).

According to both Yen (2008) and Samarasinghe (2009), demand for the industry is what drives the supply of victims. Samarasinghe (2009) writes that demand stems from three major actors: customers, traffickers, and sex industries. Understanding the mentality and logic that motivates each of these actors will create a platform for effective policy change and implementation. We believe that value directs action, and when financial incentive is placed above the desire to preserve human rights, sex trafficking is made possible. Following the trafficking initiation process where individuals are stripped of the possibilities of communication and legal assistance or

resources, the opportunities for escape are slim. From this point forward, women are caught in a debilitating relationship of economic dependence on traffickers (Yen, 2008). Understanding this dynamic is necessary to effectively address this issue. Thus, it is imperative that social workers apply economic models and utilize the feminist lens when examining the broader systems and structure of oppression.

Policy: The mechanism for change

The proper application of ecological models, feminist theories, and economic models is essential for policy change. Additionally, policy creation should be the culmination of research and theory. The variables that contribute to an individual being at risk for sex trafficking guide the formulation of policy; however, implementation is slow (Smith, 2011). Following implementation, effective change is hindered through the confusion of the host of inconsistent definitions surrounding survivors of sex trafficking. The confusion produced in this environment does not serve to aid survivors, but rather allows trafficking to continue even with significant legislative efforts in place.

Policy coordination becomes increasingly complicated when attempting to do so on an international level (Smith, 2011). A fundamental challenge to effective global policy is the inherent disagreement that surrounds the value of vulnerable populations, specifically women, across cultural lines. These difficulties escalate when vulnerable populations are moved over international boundaries where new cultures and political systems are encountered. Due to the complexity of state immigration concerns, victims of sex trafficking are caught between government policies and the need for safety (Kaneti, 2011). Without global coordination of anti-sex trafficking policy across state boundaries, progress cannot be achieved.

Due to the interrelated factors of sex trafficking, there is little incentive for traffickers to stop their activity (Danailova-Trainor and Laczko, 2010). Law enforcement agencies are on the front lines of the fight against sex trafficking (Wilson et al., 2006). Therefore, international governments and law enforcement worldwide need to increase incentives to discourage criminal activity (Kaneti, 2012). Smith (2010) states, 'among those 69 governments that have passed domestic anti-trafficking legislation since 2000, 40% have yet to enforce those laws and convict a single trafficker' (p. 283). Although the dominant course of action taken by policy-makers is creating legal mechanisms of punishment, this appears to be an inadequate approach (Smith, 2010). Social workers have the unique position to present research to policy-makers and explain the need for a holistic solution. Economic struggles and cultural values heavily affect the perpetuation of sex trafficking and should therefore be addressed during policy development (Danailova-Trainor and Laczko, 2010). Ultimately, the lack of value for vulnerable populations enables traffickers.

Discussion

The conversation surrounding sex trafficking provides no shortages of challenges, questions, and concerns for social work practice. While more empirical evidence is needed, insights can be harnessed from existing published work. Peer review publications allow discussion of these merits and push for further knowledge. Significant changes are needed in the conceptualization of sex trafficking from a theoretical, policy, and research perspective, in order to enact changes that positively affect survivors of sex trafficking and their communities.

Constructing a different tomorrow: Implications from theory

The interweaving theoretical perspectives and models provide a wealth of information for social workers to harness. The multi-ecological framework exhibits the person in their environment

where adaptations are made in order to survive and develop. Additionally, utilizing feminist theories to examine the risk factors for individuals sheds light on strategies for prevention. The vulnerable populations highlighted by feminist theories expose the economic barriers that traffickers use for their advantage. This illumination should provide insight to creating needed intervention strategies for survivors. In the diverse practice environment of global social work, theoretical models aid practitioners in connecting local concerns with global systems. Although trafficking manifests in a variety of capacities with unique cultural considerations, theoretical knowledge allows the social worker to interact with this diversity.

To navigate the complex reality of sex trafficking, theoretical frameworks are imperative tools to use when administering social work interventions. Through targeted education, social workers can dismiss myths that victims are responsible for their circumstance and promote safer societies (Roby, 2005). We agree with Smith (2011) that by collaboration of intersecting fields, social workers can use economic models to predict areas of the world that will have higher risk of sex trafficking. Social workers can help facilitate change within economically vulnerable communities through educating women and enhancing their economic capacity.

Shifting the structure of social change: Implications for policy

Reconstructed policy mechanisms are needed to address economic and cultural oppression. By identifying the contributing factors that place individuals at risk, policy will have a greater potential to be effective in alleviating the strains of poverty, unjust value, and the confusion of inconsistent definitions. Mitigating the risk factors of gender and economic vulnerability through policy may have a greater impact on stopping sex trafficking. The attempt to globally implement laws, which requires united definitions of sex trafficking and equal value systems, has shown to limit change. Smith (2010) recommends developing preventive policy instead of reactionary measures when the crime has already taken place. Global policy efforts must shift their focus from short-term solutions and address the underlying variables that contribute to sex trafficking in order to make a lasting effect (Danailova-Trainor and Laczko, 2010).

The social work voice is desperately needed in policy creation, as the profession bears witness to the person within the system. The actualization of human rights for vulnerable populations and survivors of sex trafficking must be at the core of policy construction. We believe that to move toward a policy model where social work is involved, social service professionals must see the merit of collaboration and work from a place of unity. In pursuit of enacting macro-level policy change, social workers must push for further education and training of social service professionals. The practice knowledge provided by social workers can be translated into effective policy, as the needs of vulnerable populations and survivors are documented.

The more we know, the more we can do: Implications for research

In order to provide empirical documentation of the service needs of victims of sex trafficking to shift policy, social workers need to bolster the current efforts within research creation and dissemination. This strengthening is necessary for pushing the boundary of existing knowledge forward to stay abreast with the changes in the arena of trafficking. In order to conduct relevant sex trafficking research, the use of global perspectives of social work is essential when interacting with a shifting field. Social workers need to continue with a critical eye for research findings, when evaluating policy effectiveness. In a population that is reliant on the protection that policy can bring, evidence-based research serves as a safeguard for survivors, organizations, and governments.

The responsibility of social service providers to prevent, treat, and, above all, understand the phenomenon of trafficking is challenging and filled with ethical challenges. Without empirical

evidence, policy and practice can potentially be misinformed and at risk of undeserving vulnerable populations. Caution is needed when implementing programs and intervention with few guidelines of best practice available for practitioners and policy-makers (Todres, 2010). Through work across disciplines, social work is posed to assist with shifting the focus of existing definitions to include a global, person-centered perspective. Social work can raise organizational and policy standards to utilize definitions that empower survivors.

Moving from this article, a social work evaluation is needed for the existing programs, research, and policies that are in place. This consideration is to be had with a global perspective. Specifically, there needs to be a definition of sex trafficking that empowers the survivor and understanding the impact of societal structures of value.

Conclusion

Throughout the investigation of sex trafficking, it is difficult to ignore the complexity of the issue. Therefore, the need to act on behalf of victims and survivors is equally as challenging. The research dilemmas deepen, the policy concerns morph, and a definition remains elusive. The core of sex trafficking is the utter disregard of human life. And, by putting a quantifiable dollar amount on a person, it is further cheapened. In the history of a profession that has fought for abolition, human rights, and equality, the modern-day social worker is called to the same standard. There is nothing easy about the task that is at hand. There are many questions and concerns to be raised, but social workers must not be deterred by these challenges. Pushing forward, victims of sex trafficking need advocates in influential positions. The voices of national survivors must be heard for a robust global voice.

The interconnected nature of societal values, the oppression of women, and the economic hardships experienced by vulnerable populations impact a wide cross-section of social work practice. The social work profession cannot continue to wait for second-hand information from related fields, but instead must work in cooperation with other fields to create research and interventions grounded in social work theory and practice. The challenges of sex trafficking have been well documented. The field is in need of social workers to investigate and research how change can be enacted. The axiom of 'professionals make practice' is essential in determining the response of social workers (Scott and Harper, 2006). As social workers continue to develop a heightened awareness to sex trafficking, expand services to include survivors, and conduct research on the issue; the profession will become better positioned to strategically address sex trafficking on a global level. Social work can shift toward change for survivors, conduct research to expand what we know, and build a foundation of empowerment.

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