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Hidden in Plain Sight: Gender-Based Differences in Addressing Sex Trafficking in Chicago

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FEATURE ARTICLE

**HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT:
GENDER-BASED DIFFERENCES
IN ADDRESSING SEX
TRAFFICKING IN CHICAGO**

by KATHRYN HUBER

When people in the United States hear the term “sex trafficking,” they often picture a young girl in a faraway, impoverished country, forced into prostitution against her will. Most of them find this image sad or troubling, and they probably wish that there was something they could do to help. Still, they reassure themselves that sex trafficking is an isolated problem of

underdeveloped nations, far removed from the U.S. “What a relief,” they often think, “that we don’t have to worry about things like that here.”

Contrary to this common misconception, however, sex trafficking is a multi-million dollar industry in the U.S., one that is often tied to organized crime, gang activity, and drug trafficking.¹ This is especially true of Chicago, thanks to a perfect storm of intertwining factors that create a lucrative market for commercial sex.² Sex trafficking is often viewed as exclusively a women’s issue, and to some extent that is accurate – over 90 percent of sex trafficking victims are women and girls. However, just as it is important to acknowledge that sex trafficking is both an international and a local problem, it is also important to recognize that there are male victims of sex trafficking, many of them juveniles. Often, they are not identified or recognized as victims, and do not receive appropriate interventions and services when they are discovered.³

Male and female victims who have been trafficked have many similar needs, including shelter, counseling, and assistance with immigration and legal matters.⁴ Unfortunately, the response they receive from law enforcement, the justice system, social service networks, and the public is often noticeably inconsistent.⁵ In order to competently address the significant issue of sex trafficking in Chicago, it is necessary to respond to those affected with sensitivity to gender-specific issues, while at the same recognizing that in many respects, male and female victims share more similarities than differences in their need for comprehensive intervention.

A PROBLEM CLOSE TO HOME

Regardless of the gender of its victims, sex trafficking is a distinctly local issue for the Chicago metro area.⁶ The reasons for this phenomenon are varied, but there are several overlapping factors that intertwine in Chicago, facilitating a thriving market for commercial sex.⁷ The city is a major transit hub for domestic and international travel, with millions of people passing through every year.⁸ Traffickers benefit from a ready supply of customers, many of whom flock to the city for business, leisure, or major sports and entertainment events.⁹ In addition, Chicago is a highly segregated city, and victims residing in insular ethnic communities may not be as visible to the public, or they may be unable to seek help outside the language and culture of their neighborhood.¹⁰ Perhaps most importantly, sex trafficking is often a lucrative venture,

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and warring gang factions and organized crime syndicates often get into the business as a less risky and more profitable undertaking than selling drugs.¹¹

Despite the attention and efforts of Illinois lawmakers and law enforcement agencies, the problem of sex trafficking is still a prevalent one. In Chicago last year, an estimated 16,000-25,000 girls and women were victims of sex trafficking, along with 450-5,000 men and boys.¹² Illinois has some of the strictest laws in the country against human trafficking, yet historically, very few people are prosecuted under these statutes.¹³ Law enforcement crackdowns tend to suppress the problem for a period of time, but without reaching the source, such operations are only a temporary fix.¹⁴

Though they have some distinct characteristics, male and female victims share many similarities in their reasons for becoming involved in sex trafficking, their needs after being identified as a victim, and the support that is most beneficial to them in rebuilding their lives. For both genders, risk factors include a history of abuse, neglect, or sexual victimization, poverty, homelessness, status as a ward of the state, limited educational attainment, and prior employment in a sex-based industry, such as stripping or pornography.¹⁵ Once identified, victims often need help finding shelter, navigating the legal system, enrolling in counseling, and obtaining employment and independent living skills.¹⁶ Without assistance, both genders face many similar consequences, including developing trauma-based mental health issues, contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and chronic health conditions, elevated risk for violent victimization or homicide, and increased rates of suicide.¹⁷



Despite these similar profiles, victims are often treated very differently on the basis of gender.¹⁸ Male trafficking victims tend to be arrested and charged at much higher rates, and often are not identified as victims as readily as women.¹⁹ This is due at least in part to stigma – the vast majority of the demand for commercial sex comes from men, so male victims facing societal bias against same-sex conduct may be extremely reluctant to seek help.²⁰ In contrast to recent efforts within law enforcement and the criminal justice system toward victim sensitivity for women involved in commercial sex, male victims are still largely viewed as willful participants who have chosen the sex trade as a “lifestyle.”²¹ In reality, many male victims become involved in the industry as minors, often because they are recognized by traffickers as vulnerable.²² Federal funding, social services, law enforcement resources, and outreach programs are limited for all victims, but for men, they are virtually non-existent.²³ Many agencies cite budget realities – the majority of their clients are women, and they are not financially able to facilitate separate shelters, groups, and resources for men.²⁴

A SOLUTION TO GENDER DISPARITY

One economically feasible solution might be specialized programs within homeless shelters that already serve male clients. Many shelters for women already screen for domestic violence or sex trafficking victimization, often by adding a few items to an intake questionnaire.²⁵ At men’s shelters, intake screening could be adapted in a similar manner, and staff could be trained to recognize male victims of trafficking just as those at women’s shelters are now trained to recognize female victims. Since shelters already have the staff, infrastructure, and supportive services in place, adding effective services for trafficking victims could be accomplished at minimal cost, without the difficulty and expense of starting an entirely new program or agency.²⁶ Youth shelters and other agencies serving homeless minors are particularly likely to come in contact with male trafficking victims.²⁷ Consequently, youth shelters need to be prepared to screen and identify male victims, and to provide services that will be sensitive to their needs.²⁸

For law enforcement, the same comprehensive training that is being utilized to identify female victims can and should be used to identify male victims, who are often equally exploited and equally powerless over their situation.²⁹ Law enforcement is frequently the first point of contact for victims of both genders,

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and the tone of that interaction is likely to shape whether the victim reaches out for help or withdraws further from the police in the future.³⁰ Once a victim has been indentified, it is also critically important that prosecutors within the State's Attorney's Office and U.S. Attorney's Office be knowledgeable about the prevalence and impact of sex trafficking on male survivors, and that they recognize the similar dynamic of victimization that many female *and* male victims are trapped in.³¹ Illinois lawmakers have chosen to make sex trafficking a priority and have passed strict legislation to facilitate prosecution.³² Now, it is equally important that law enforcement and the legal system utilize these statutes frequently and consistently, and that they apply these legal protections for the benefit of both genders.³³

CONCLUSION

In order to make its efforts truly meaningful to combating human trafficking, Chicago must recognize not only how male and female victims differ, but the common needs they share. This could be accomplished through increased training for law enforcement in recognizing victims of both genders, gender neutral laws and statutes designed to combat sex trafficking, public education to reduce stigma and increase awareness, and utilizing the Illinois Human Trafficking Act in making charging decisions, regardless of the gender of the victim.³⁴ By protecting the needs of *all* sex trafficking victims, Chicago will be able to make meaningful strides to eliminate this prevalent but preventable issue. In a city working to both combat sex trafficking and eliminate the demand that gives rise to its existence, Chicago cannot afford to overlook an entire category of victims based on gender.

NOTES

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5 See generally, Keziah, *supra* note 3; Gummow, *supra* note 3; Moxley-Goldsmith, *supra* note 3; REICHERT & SYLWESTRZAK, *supra* note 1.

6 Hounmenou, *supra* note 2; Goh, *supra* note 2.

7 See generally, Goh, *supra* note 2; Hounmenou, *supra* note 2; END DEMAND ILLINOIS, *supra* note 2.

8 Griffin, *supra* note 1; Hounmenou, *supra* note 2; END DEMAND ILLINOIS, *supra* note 2.

9 Griffin, *supra* note 1; Hounmenou, *supra* note 2.

10 END DEMAND ILLINOIS, *supra* note 2.

11 Goh, *supra* note 2; see generally Fenster, *supra* note 2.

12 Hounmenou, *supra* note 2; Griffin, *supra* note 1; ILL. RESCUE AND RESTORE COALITION, *supra* note 2.

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- 13 Griffin, *supra* note 1; ILL. RESCUE AND RESTORE COALITION, *supra* note 2.
- 14 Eisen, *supra* note 2.
- 15 Sun Chin, *supra* note 4; Griffin, *supra* note 2; REICHERT & SYLWESTRZAK, *supra* note 1; *see generally* POLARIS PROJECT, *supra* note 1.
- 16 REICHERT & SYLWESTRZAK, *supra* note 1; *see generally* CALIFORNIA CHILD WELFARE COUNCIL, *supra* note 4.
- 17 REICHERT & SYLWESTRZAK, *supra* note 1.
- 18 Keziah, *supra* note 3; Irvine, *supra* note 2; REICHERT & SYLWESTRZAK, *supra* note 1; Moxley-Goldsmith, *supra* note 3; Sun Chin, *supra* note 4.
- 19 Keziah, *supra* note 3; Moxley-Goldsmith, *supra* note 3; *see generally* Irvine, *supra* note 2.
- 20 Keziah, *supra* note 3; Moxley-Goldsmith, *supra* note 2; Sun Chin, *supra* note 4.
- 21 Clymer, *supra* note 3; Sun Chin, *supra* note 4; Moxley-Goldsmith, *supra* note 3.
- 22 Moxley-Goldsmith, *supra* note 3; Keziah, *supra* note 3; Sun Chin, *supra* note 4; POLARIS PROJECT, *supra* note 3.
- 23 Sun Chin, *supra* note 4; Keziah, *supra* note 3; *See generally* REICHERT & SYLWESTRZAK, *supra* note 1.
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- 26 *See generally* Clawson & Grace, *supra* note 4.
- 27 Chelsea Parsons, et.al., *3 Key Challenges in Combating the Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States*, CENTER FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS, April 8, 2014, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/report/2014/04/08/87293/3-key-challenges-in-combating-the-sex-trafficking-of-minors-in-the-united-states/>.
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- 29 Sun Chin, *supra* note 4.
- 30 Sun Chin, *supra* note 4; Moxley-Goldsmith, *supra* note 3.
- 31 Hounmenou, *supra* note 2; Griffin, *supra* note 1; Clymer, *supra* note 3; Parsons et.al., *supra* note 27; Sun Chin, *supra* note 15; *See generally* CALIFORNIA CHILD WELFARE COUNCIL, *supra* note 4.
- 32 Hounmenou, *supra* note 2; Griffin, *supra* note 1; ILL. RESCUE AND RESTORE COALITION, *supra* note 2; END DEMAND ILLINOIS, *supra* note 2; Irvine, *supra* note 2.
- 33 RESCUE AND RESTORE COALITION, *supra* note 2; Parsons et.al., *supra* note 27.
- 34 *See generally*, REICHERT & SYLWESTRZAK, *supra* note 1; CALIFORNIA CHILD WELFARE COUNCIL, *supra* note 4, Ryan, *supra* note 28; Clawson & Grace *supra* note 4; Parsons et.al., *supra* note 27.