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How does the sex trafficking industry impact victims' mental and physical health?

Sex trafficking is an ongoing dilemma that victimizes individuals to perform sexual services in return for profit. This paper takes a closer look at the question "How does the sex trafficking industry impact victims' mental and physical health?" by explaining the mental and physical complications victims endure from the trauma of the sex trafficking industry. The paper introduces the psychological harm caused by the industry and provides an in-depth explanation of the relationship between sexual exploitation such as depression, PTSD, panic disorder, anxiety, and substance abuse disorder. The paper will also discuss the physical harm inflicted by the industry such as severe changes in the brain's anatomy, higher rates of HIV/AIDS, and below par physical health.

Joseph Stromberg, a former writer for the news website, Vox, discusses the current and future objectives of the space industry in his article "Private spaceflight, explained." Stromberg goes into detail explaining the role that private corporations play in the upcoming plans for private spaceflight. From the title, Stromberg aims to draw the attention of individuals who are not well informed on the topic as he is providing reasoning and explanations on the issue, while also targeting a general audience who might have minimum level of knowledge on the topic but are seeking to understand the issue. Stromberg's tone throughout the article is blunt and occasionally relaxed. For instance, when discussing the popularity surrounding Elon Musk's

success with SpaceX, he attributes it to “a distinct brand of fanboy” while also covering the “Most credible plans for Mars exploration.” This showcases his ability to use language in order to make the article more appealing to his audience by shifting tones. Stromberg indicates that the purpose of the article is to assess and summarize the ongoing events in the private spaceflight industry as in the article he poses questions that examine what private spaceflight is and how it is being dealt with. The medium Stromberg uses is digital, and the genre of the article is explanatory as it focuses on one special event and goes into heavy detail. Stromberg uses language that is simple in order to communicate the information back to his audience in a clear manner. From the language Stromberg used, his stance on the issue is against privatized spaceflight, he describes it as not “being available to anyone but the super-rich.” He takes a critical stance on the issue by assessing the downfalls of privatized spaceflight. The purpose of the article is to inform a general audience of the upcoming changes in private spaceflight. By using a digital medium, he provides a candid tone in order to communicate his stance against privatized spaceflight.

### **What is sex trafficking?**

Often associated with the sex trafficking industry, terms such as sex work, prostitution and sexual exploitation influence perception of what the sex trafficking industry entails.

Distinguishing the difference between these terms is essential in avoiding confusion and clouding understanding. Sex trafficking victimizes individuals in order to “perform a commercial sex act through force, fraud, or coercion regardless of citizenship or national origin” (Gerassi, 591). Within the sex trafficking industry exist the terms, commercial sex exploitation of children (CSEC) and domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), both “used interchangeably and generally refer to the sex trafficking of minors, stipulated to be individuals under the age of 18” (Gerassi,

592). Essentially, sex trafficking exploits another individual whether it be a minor or adult into performing sexual services in return for money at the expense of the victim. Navigating through these terms can be difficult as they revolve around the same issue but the circumstances at which they occur are what distinguish between an individual being forced into sex trafficking which apply to “circumstances of force, fraud, and/or coercion by any third party, such as pimp-controlled prostitution” (Fedina, Williamson, Perdue, 2655) and an individual not coerced into sex work but for the sake of “selling or exchange of sex for money, food, drugs, and/or shelter to survive” (Fedina, Williamson, Perdue, 2655).

### **How do international and domestic sex trafficking statistics compare in the United States?**

The threat of international sex trafficking increases daily as victims are constantly being transported through borders unsuspected. Within the United States it is estimated that “between 2 and 4 million persons if trafficking within borders (i.e., domestic trafficking) is included” (Muftic Finn, 1861) meaning that more people are put at risk of sexual exploitation. This brings attention to the number of international sex trafficking that takes place in the United States, it is estimated that “14,500 to 17,000 individuals are trafficked annually into the United States, and 80% of these international victims are female and 70% are trafficked into the sex industry” (Muftic Finn, 1861). Just within the United States it is reported that “more U.S. citizens are found in sex trafficking than labor trafficking” and that “Between January 2008 and June 2010, 2,515 suspected incidents of human trafficking were investigated, and nearly 8 in 10 of the suspected incidents involved sex trafficking” (Muftic Finn, 1862). In comparison to the greater number of foreign victims that are forced into labor trafficking. Of the people trafficked into the United States, U.S citizens are more likely to fall victim to sexual exploitation regardless of the circumstances they are placed in.

## **Research available on sex trafficking in the United States**

Critics argue that sex trafficking reports are only a small percentage of human trafficking (Glenn); accurate reports are difficult to formulate due to lack of research that has been produced in the United States within the last decade. They reason that “lack of a uniform system of data collection to identify victims increases the difficulty of obtaining accurate statistics” (Gerassi, 594); even going so far as to argue that “the methodological formula by which this estimation was calculated is flawed and inaccurate” (Gerassi, 594). However, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) paired with the U.S Department of Justice’s Child Exploitation and Obscenity established the Innocence Lost Initiative in order to combat the increasing threat of domestic child sex trafficking. The Innocence Lost Initiative recorded “more than 2.3 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation to law enforcement” (Garessi, 594). Efforts to record accurate statistics have been employed through the organization proving that the number of people trafficked is dangerously high.

### **Sex Trafficking victim demographics**

According to a study done in 2011, of the 44,090 individuals charged with vice crimes “46.8% ( $n = 20,013$ ) ranged in ages between 18 and 29 with an additional 760 individuals charged as minors” (Garessi, 595). From the study we can observe how the distinction between sex work and forced sexual exploitation becomes confusing as the study derived data from women charged for prostitution but also consisted of several minors charged for the same crime. In another survey conducted across five cities in one state it was found that “Among all respondents in the sample, 72.5% were female, 26% were male, and .7% identified as transgender” (Fedina, Williamson, Perdue, 2655). This provides insight into who is being trafficked and what kinds of

people are being targeted. The study also recorded that “The majority of the sample was Black or African American (59.7%) and non-Hispanic (96.7%)” (Fedina, Williamson, Perdue, 2663). Among the people surveyed 48.3% (Fedina, Williamson, Perdue, 2663) identified as current or past victims of the sex trafficking industry. From 2008 to 2015 sex trafficking incidents were reported and once investigated revealed that 94% of the victims were female and that “slightly less were under the age of 18” (Muftic Finn, 1862). From the data presented most people subjected to sex trafficking are female minors, which suggests that they are more prone to coercion.

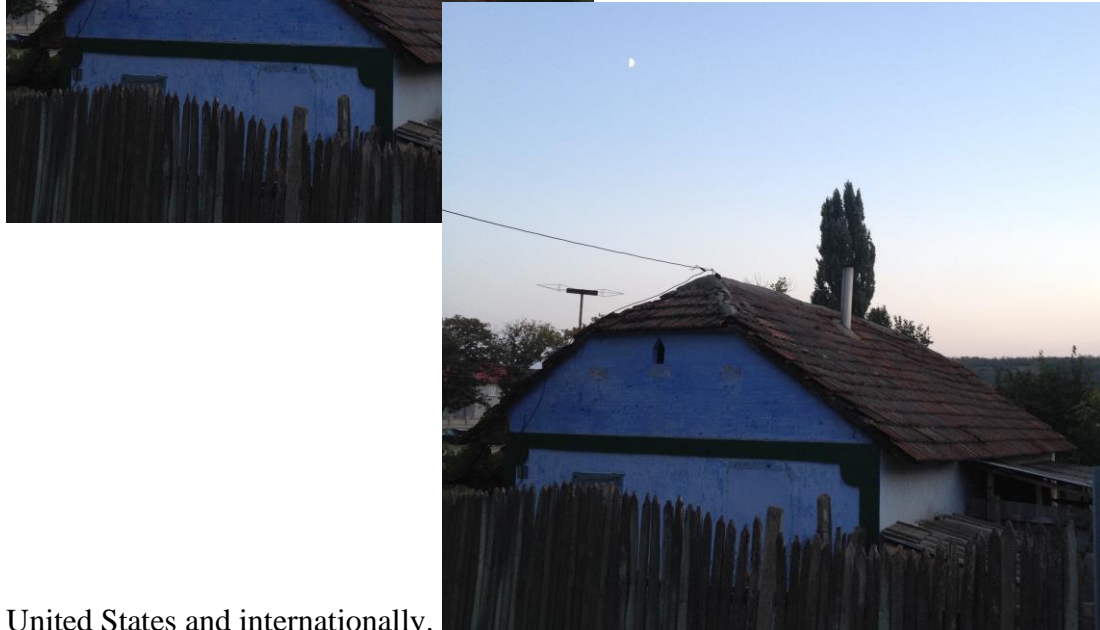
### **How is mental health impacted by the sex trafficking industry?**

Victims of the sex trafficking industry face several complicated mental health issues, ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder to anxiety and depression (Mohr 23).

#### **1) Depression and PTSD**

Victims of sexual exploitation develop severe cases of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Two studies spanning across several countries, not including the U.S. reported that “more than half of the 204 trafficking victims interviewed across 12 countries met criteria for depression, and 77% had symptoms of PTSD” (Gerassi, 596). According to the second study, there was a “68% ( $n = 562$ ) rate of PTSD across all sexually trafficked participants from nine countries and 69% ( $n = 87$ ) among U.S. victims” (Gerassi, 596). Separate reports documented the results of under 100 participants that portrayed “female victims of sexual exploitation experience rates of PTSD ranging from 27% to 50%. Similarly, these types of studies showed depression rates of up to 60%” (Gerassi, 596). The studies illustrate clear connections between how the mental state of victims is affected by the trauma of the sex trafficking industry.

Prolonged abuse, in cases of sex trafficking lead to physical changes within the brain. When an individual is forced to endure stressful situations, it can lead to “neuroplasticity-associated changes in brain structure” (Levine, Schumacher, 2). The 80 percent of women and 40 percent of men interviewed reported “high levels of depression, anxiety, and PTSD” (Krisch). The studies prove that the sex trafficking industry results in increased rates of mental illness across the



United States and internationally.

Rural Moldova: A typical home in rural Moldova, where there are few economic opportunities. ©Kelsey Hoie Ferrell

## **2) Trauma and emotional stress**

Long term exposure to the sex trafficking industry causes severe psychological harm to its victims. They are obligated to endure reoccurring violent offenses and are constantly forced into vulnerable positions by their traffickers. Victims experience “several forms of victimization during or in addition to ongoing sexual exploitation” (Garessi) meaning that added to the trauma of performing forced sexual acts other factors such as physical and psychological violence contribute to the development of mental illnesses such as anxiety and suicidal ideation. A report documenting the mental health of victims found that “78% of survivors experience clinical

anxiety (range 48–98%)” (Levine 4), other effects include “fear and distrust, being trapped, hopelessness, shame, humiliation, a sense of continuous stress, anger, and irritability” some survivors reported “poor quality sleep, insomnia, and nightmares” (Levine 4). There are several reports documenting the trauma of the industry but a lack of research on the mental health of victims following their release. The trauma impacts several aspects of the victims’ lives which make it difficult to stabilize. Victims of sexual trafficking are also more likely to experience “violence and abuse from a pimp and/or someone purchasing sex from them” (Gerassi, 596). Many of the victims live in constant states of fear therefore upon release they are not emotionally stable to deal with the trauma of their past experiences and run the risk of “additional exposure to threatened or actualized assault or other forms of trauma” (Gerassi, 596). In an interview with a member of the anti-slavery organization, The International Justice Mission, they emphasized the importance of providing “Trauma Focused-Cognitive Behavioral Therapy” for victims as it has proven to be the “most effective in treating trauma victims, because it provides flexibility to meet the specific needs of the individual while providing a progression of stages for true and holistic emotional healing”.

### **3) Substance abuse and dependence**

Victims of the industry rely on different coping mechanisms to endure the trauma of forced sexual exploitation. In most cases, drug and alcohol dependence are brought onto victims by their traffickers. According to a study performed in Minneapolis it was found that “adult women who began trading sex for money as minors were more likely to abuse substances after they began trading sex” (Gerassi, 597) suggesting that the correlation between substance abuse and sexual exploitation is strong because once the victims are exposed to long-term psychological trauma they resort to addiction. The connection between mental health and sexual exploitation is

“empirically linked to substance abuse, and victims are generally more likely to use drugs than alcohol” (Garessi, 597); female victims, specifically young females became addicted to the substances and rely on them to function in their day to day lives. For instance, it was reported that “75% of respondents in one study indicated having used drugs as compared to only 26% who had used alcohol” (Garessi, 597). The evidence suggests a strong pattern of drug use indicating that the psychological impact on the victims surpassed that of abuse and lead into drug and alcohol dependence.

### **What are the physical impacts of the sex trafficking industry?**

Aside from the several long-term psychological impacts of the industry, the physical repercussions prove to be dire as well. Victims live in a constant state of chronic stress which influences their physical well-being making it difficult for them to recuperate.

#### **1) Neuronal formation and Brain anatomy**

The constant state of emotional distress causes victims to experience changes in the brain’s anatomy, specifically affecting the brain’s plasticity. Brain plasticity or neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to continuously change according to certain factors like behavior, environment or neural processes. Long-term exposure to traumatizing events such as the sex trafficking industry directly influences brain anatomy and neuronal structure, meaning that “Multiple neuroplasticity factors control brain remodeling in response to environmental change” (Levine 2). The traumatizing environment of the industry forces victims to endure chronic stress which is responsible for “neuroplasticity-associated changes in brain structure and function” (Levine 2) signifying that “Chronic stress impacts brain structure and function rendering the brain more vulnerable to the ill effects of abuse” (Levine 3). In response to the stress inducing industry,



victims undergo severe changes in their brain's ability to process the trauma; their brain lacks the connections necessary to restore the damaged circuits which allow it to compensate for the physical injuries sustained from a traumatic experience. Essentially, victims are left with permanent changes in the brain's anatomy making it extremely difficult to withstand emotional and physical trauma.

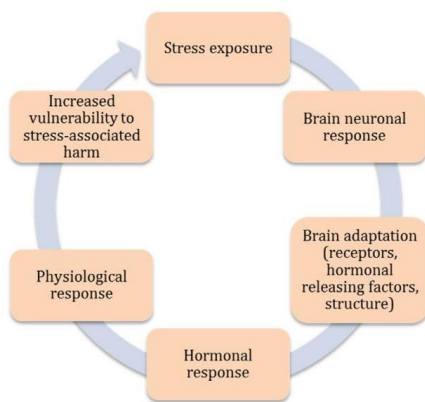


Figure depicting the relationship between chronic stress and changes in brain biology

## 2) Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Individuals trapped in the sex trafficking industry are more likely to contract diseases such as HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C due to the constant change of sexual partners, with men who purchase the service being the primary carriers of the disease (Muftic Finn). Among other gynecological issues, sexually transmitted diseases compose the majority of health consequences that victims handle. A study performed by Raymond and Hughes to track sex trafficking trends in the United States found that among other physical injuries the “contraction of major illnesses (e.g., hepatitis) and STI’s was higher among U.S. women than international women” (Muftic Finn, 1864). Although there is limited research available measuring the physical risks, the data revolving around sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV/AIDS “has received extensive

attention due to their transmission risk” indicating the number of individuals with or at risk of contracting STI’s is dangerously high due to the nature of the industry.

### **3) Poor physical health**

Individuals trapped in sexual exploitation experience a myriad of physical injuries ranging from somatic symptoms to several gynecological issues. A study done in Nepal detailed the physical effects of the sex trafficking industry on Nepalese women ranging from 12-19; they found that the survivors experienced symptoms like headaches, itching, stomach pain and pelvic pain (Levine). Some victims might even possess evidence of “cigarette burns, attempts at self-harm, rashes, evidence of intravenous drug use, vitamin deficiency, bruising from physical abuse and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis or lice” (Levine 4). The variation of physical effects illustrates the extent at which they experience physical injuries and depicts the conditions of which they are forced to work in by their traffickers. Due to continuous drug use, some victims must be “examined for dental caries and poor overall dental hygiene; methamphetamine and bulimia scar teeth too” (Levine 4). Gynecological issues of the industry include “sexually transmitted diseases (STD’s), cervical dysplasia, non-menstrual vaginal bleeding, vaginal pain, dysuria, dyspareunia, traumatic scarring and ovulatory failure” (Levine 5) signifying that aside from high rates of STD’s, victims are also at risk of developing severe internal injuries which will cause long-term damage. Furthermore, reports of overall declining health found that “6 in 10 reporting back pain, memory difficulty, stomach pain, pelvic pain, or gynecological infection, and 8 in 10 reporting headaches and fatigue” (Muftic Finn, 1863).

### **Synthesis**

The sex trafficking industry is an unexplored topic in the sense that the research specifically discussing physical and mental effects is limited. From my sources I found that several common themes were the lack of accurate sex trafficking statistics, lack of research examining the physical and mental effects and the use of appropriate terms. Lara Gerassi's article shares the common theme with Lisa R. Muftic and Marry A. Finn's article that differentiating the terms between forced/coerced sexual services and deliberate sex work is vital to communicating accurate information to the public. Glenn Kessler's article argues that the current data on the number of victims trafficked for sex work is exaggerated. However, his claim is contradicted by Gerassi's research supporting the idea that although there is limited research available examining the psychological and physical effects of the industry, there is sufficient data available reporting the number of individuals trafficked and at risk of being trafficked in the United States and internationally. Therefore, making Kessler's claim ineffective. James A. Levine's report on the physical changes of the brain's anatomy corroborate with Gerassi and Mohr's ideas because they create a connection between how long-term trauma causes victims to develop drug and alcohol addictions. Each source provides different insights into the complexity of the sex trafficking industry which allows for a more extensive understanding of the industry.

## **Conclusion**

It is crucial to understand the physical and psychological repercussions of the sex trafficking industry. Victims endure severe trauma and chronic stress which leads to several mental and physical issues. Gaining insight into how they cope with the trauma allows us to develop a better understanding of what the industry entails. It is with this understanding that we become informed of all aspects of the industry and develop an informed opinion on the issue at hand.

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