



NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families

The Intersections of Human Trafficking, Intimate Partner Violence, and Child Welfare

Human trafficking, intimate partner violence, and child maltreatment do not exist in silos. They occur on a continuum of interpersonal violence, share many common characteristics, and often overlap. This resource will provide an overview of the intersections and underlying causes, and suggest ways to respond using survivor-centered practice and policy.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

Intimate partner violence is domestic violence by a current or former spouse or partner in an intimate relationship against the other spouse or partner. It can take a number of forms, such as physical, verbal, emotional, economic and sexual abuse.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The use of force, fraud, coercion, and/or systems of indebtedness or debt bondage to compel an individual to engage in commercial sex acts, labor, or domestic services against their will and/or without pay, or compelling a minor to engage in commercial sex acts.

CHILD MALTREATMENT

Any act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or presents an imminent risk of serious harm.

Increasingly, domestic violence organizations and child welfare systems are also called on to respond to both adult and child trafficking therefore working in collaboration is key.

Intimate Partner Trafficking:

Spouses and intimate partners may compel their partner to engage in commercial sex, forced labor or involuntary servitude. The abuser may tell their partner it is for benefit of their family or the relationship, for financial support, or to support an addiction. ¹

Familial Trafficking: Family members may compel relatives or their own children to engage in commercial sex, forced labor or involuntary servitude. The person using violence utilizes existing power dynamics and vulnerabilities to exploit the family member. May be normalized within the family context.²

Survival Sex and Peer Networks: Youth or young adults facing homelessness or economic insecurity may engage in commercial sex acts in order to meet basic needs. They may utilize acquaintances and peer networks to help facilitate sexual exchanges.³

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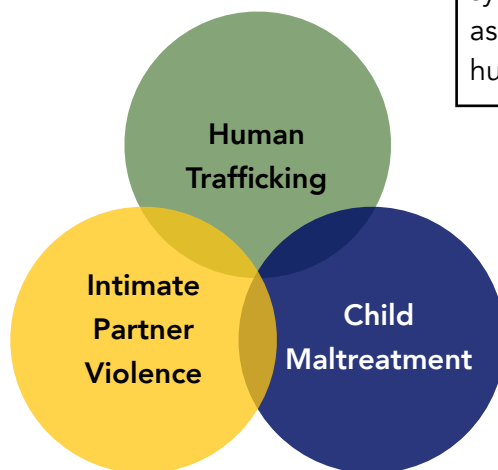
EXPLORING THE INTERSECTIONS

IPV increases vulnerability to trafficking. A study found as many as 70% of adult female trafficking victims experienced IPV prior to being trafficked.⁴ Another found 79% of IPV victims had experienced economic exploitation.⁵

Child victims of human trafficking have been found to have a high prevalence of prior physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and exposure to family violence.^{7,10,11}

Many of the methods used by traffickers to exert power and control over victims resemble those used by people who use violence in intimate relationships. These include economic abuse, emotional abuse, threats to harm the victim or their children/family, isolation, physical violence, sexual violence and intimidation.^{1,6,7}

Involvement with the child welfare system and placement in foster care is associated with increased risk of human trafficking victimization.^{12,13,14}



Children may run away to escape family violence or unpleasant foster care placements, becoming easy targets for traffickers, who exploit their need to find food, shelter, and other necessities.¹³ Research indicates roughly 1 in 6 children reported as runaways are likely victims of sex trafficking.¹⁵

Detecting trafficking within the context of marriage or family may be difficult due to cultural norms surrounding domestic duties, gender roles, and child labor.⁸

Youth with a history of child welfare involvement and family violence are especially vulnerable to trafficking by intimate partners. They may be more likely to normalize violent and coercive relationship dynamics.⁷

Traffickers may use access to their victim's children as one of their tactics for exerting control, threatening to harm or take children away if the victim does not comply, or may even coerce victims into allowing their children to be exploited as well.^{1,9}

Contrary to popular belief, traffickers are often known to their victims. Data indicate that victims of trafficking are increasingly recruited by family members and intimate partners.^{2,16}

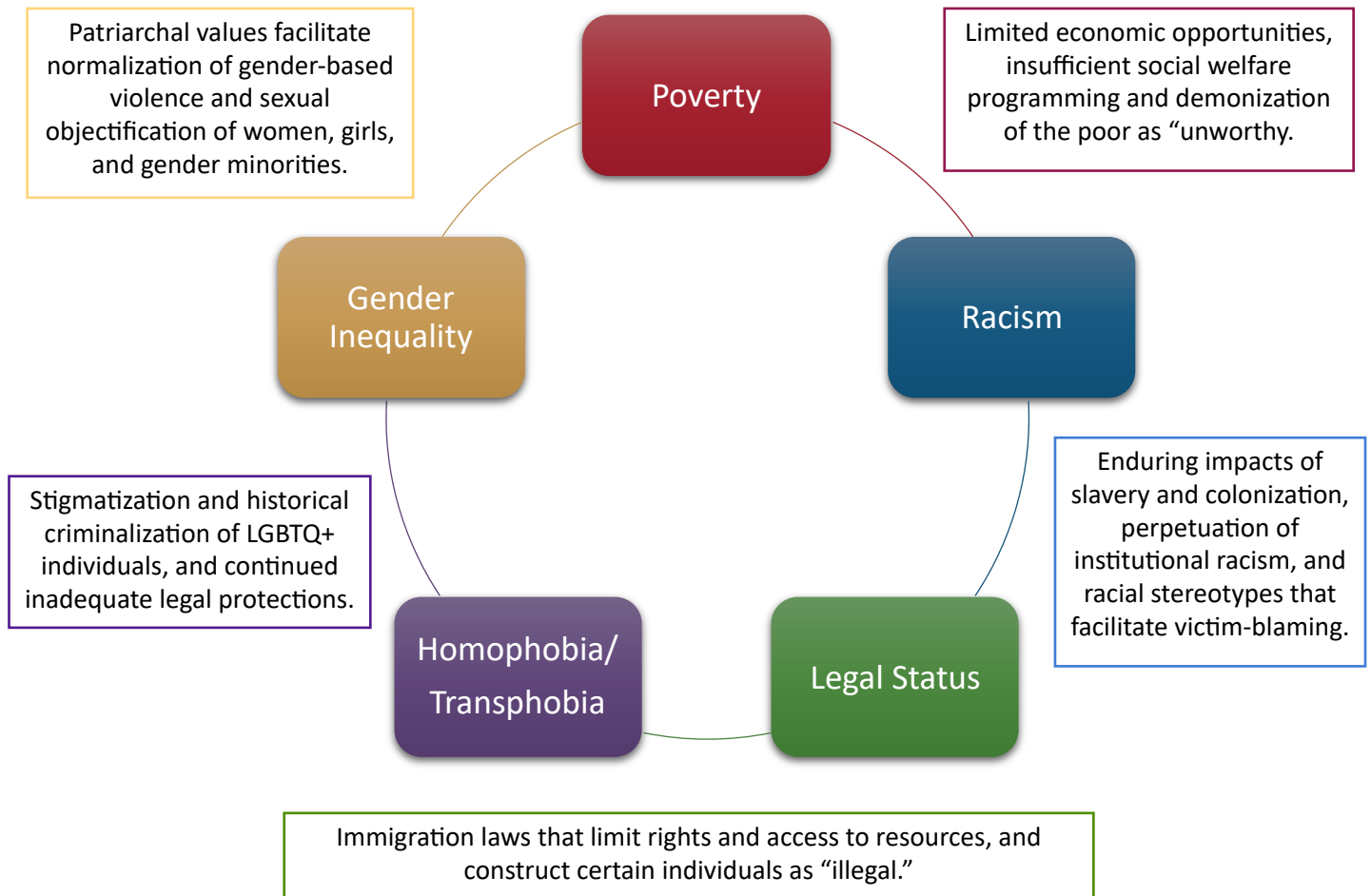
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UNDERSTANDING THE ROOT CAUSE

Human trafficking, intimate partner violence, and child welfare involvement share a common set of socioeconomic factors driven by systemic inequities and oppression, which produce vulnerability and limit access to protections and recourse. The impacts of intergenerational trauma and lack of opportunities arising from historical and ongoing forms of oppression increase susceptibility to victimization. Meanwhile, systems often fail to respond in ways that are helpful, and even further victimize individuals from oppressed communities.^{7,14,17,1}



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TIPS FOR SURVIVOR CENTERED POLICY AND PRACTICE

Build Trust and Self-Efficacy WITH Survivors

- Responses to trafficking and services need to be survivor-driven. It is important to meet survivors “where they are at” by responding to self-identified needs and following the survivor’s lead regarding what services and interventions they desire.^{17,18,19}
- Survivors often distrust formal systems. While there may be a sense of urgency to act, it might be necessary to slow down and take time to build rapport to avoid doing further harm.^{17,19}
- Survivors may not be ready to exit their current situation, and providers should not pressure them to do so in order to receive assistance. It may take several attempts before a survivor fully exits from their trafficking. It is critical to serve survivors when they are ready.¹⁷
- Recognize that survivors often blame themselves and may not identify as victims. Healing must start with helping survivors to understand that what has happened is not their fault, and any engagement in illicit activities was out of necessity to survive.^{17,18}

Address Safety Concerns

- Assess levels of endangerment based on the particulars of a survivor’s situation, including the context of their exploitation, who the perpetrators are, the survivor’s relationship to them and the extent of their networks, what threats exist to the survivor and their family, and whether continued connections to their family and community will be helpful or harmful in ensuring their safety. Survivors need assurance not only for their own safety, but the safety of their children and family as well.¹⁹
- Work with survivors to develop a realistic safety plan that responds to their specific situation and needs. Initially, it may be necessary to focus on harm reduction. A harm-reduction approach will build autonomy and empower survivors to exit from trafficking.¹⁷

Train Service Providers

- Trained advocates are crucial and need to be at the forefront of interventions. Well-intentioned rescues or other efforts to help by untrained individuals can jeopardize survivor safety.^{17,19}
- Those working to address trafficking should collaborate, promote education and awareness of the systemic causes of inequities and the ways these contribute to victimization, and challenge oppressive social structures by advocating for change.¹⁸

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TIPS FOR SURVIVOR CENTERED POLICY AND PRACTICE (Continued)

Respond to the Complexity Appropriately when Children are Involved

- Responses to child victims that involve incarceration or placement in locked settings “for their protection” are generally not trauma informed and give children the impression that they are being punished for what happened. It is just as important for children as it is for adults that they regain a sense of control over their situation and are empowered to make decisions about what they need and want.^{18,20}
- It is critical for child welfare, child support, and child custody systems to be aware that female victims may have children by their traffickers. These systems need the capacity to assess for the presence of trafficking and how trafficking victimization may impact a parent’s ability to comply with parenting expectations and/or system requirements.⁹
- Victims are frequently coerced by their traffickers into oppressing others, so the lines between victim and perpetrator may be blurred. This may take the form of victims recruiting others off the streets or from institutions such as group homes or rehab facilities, or parents who appear complicit in the exploitation of their own children. Understanding the full context is necessary before drawing conclusions and may take time to uncover the truth.^{7,14,17}

Promote Systems Change

- Survivors may be fearful of law enforcement, particularly if they have had prior arrests or are undocumented. Survivors need to be able to access supportive services without engaging law enforcement unless they are ready to do so. Provision of services should not be predicated on the survivor’s cooperation in prosecuting their exploiter(s)/abuser(s).¹⁷
- Trauma-informed care must address the vulnerability and harm caused by poly-victimization, including the harms caused by oppressive institutions and inequities. Availability of culturally specific services and advocates is critical, given the complex history of racial oppression and distrust that survivors may feel towards mainstream organizations.^{7,17,18,19}

In Conclusion

Be aware that a survivor’s exit from one type of victimization does not necessarily mean they are free from other forms of victimization. Just as individuals fleeing abusive family or intimate relationships can be vulnerable to trafficking, those exiting from trafficking situations may similarly be vulnerable to future abusive relationships. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the normalization of violence and struggles to achieve self-sufficiency commonly experienced by survivors. Collaboration, practical resources, skill development, and economic opportunities that empower survivors to achieve independence are crucial.⁷

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