

The Impacts of Trafficking in Persons

Understanding the Physical, Psychological, and Emotional Impacts on Trafficking Victims, Including on Children and Adolescents

Introduction

Trafficking in persons is a grave crime and violation of human rights that affects millions of individuals worldwide. It profoundly affects the lives of all trafficking victims, with particularly severe and long-lasting impacts on children and adolescents due to their stage of development and heightened vulnerability. The physical, psychological, and emotional impacts of trafficking are profound and multifaceted, deeply affecting the lives of victims. These individuals often endure harrowing conditions throughout their exploitation, suffering not only severe physical hardships but also deep psychological and emotional scars.

Trafficking victims may be subjected to deplorable living and working conditions, including inadequate sanitation and hygiene, poor nutrition, unsafe work environments, excessive work, exposure to HIV/AIDS and other infections, and a complete lack of access to healthcare. Such conditions can lead to a variety of physical health issues, from malnutrition and infectious diseases to chronic pain and injuries. Moreover, the neglect of basic health needs, including reproductive health services, further exacerbates their suffering.

Beyond the physical toll, the psychological and emotional impacts are equally devastating. Victims frequently experience a range of persistent mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and feelings of helplessness and isolation. The treatment they receive from traffickers and others—characterized by repeated physical, sexual, and psychological violence—can lead to deep-seated trauma that affects their ability to recover and reintegrate after trafficking in persons. The coercive control exercised by traffickers strips victims of their autonomy and self-worth, leaving victims with profound emotional scars that can persist long after their escape.

Professionals working with trafficking victims must understand the impact of trafficking in persons on victims to ensure that their responses, reaction and interventions are effective, ethical, and trauma-informed. This applies to practitioners working in the areas such as child protection, health care, law enforcement, education, and social services. Understanding these many impacts of trafficking in persons is crucial in developing effective interventions and policies for trafficking survivors that address not only their immediate needs but also their long-term recovery and reintegration. It is also important so that practitioners know how to interact sensitively with trafficking victims' and respond appropriately to their actions, reactions and behaviors. This knowledge and understanding enables practitioners to recognize respond not only with professional competence but also sensitivity and empathy and to avoid re-traumatization.



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Below is a discussion of the most common impacts of trafficking in persons – physical, psychological and emotional. However, trafficking in persons does not impact every victim the same way. The impacts of trafficking depends on a number of factors, including:

- * the specifics of each persons' life before, during and after trafficking exploitation
- * the form of trafficking exploitation (whether for sexual exploitation, forced labour/labour exploitation, begging, marriage)
- * the duration of trafficking exploitation (how long they were exploited)
- * whether the victim is an adult or a child including how old they are when trafficked (child or adolescent)
- * the conditions in which someone was trafficked (e.g. levels of violence, isolation, abuse, extent of exploitation, etc)
- * whether there was a timely protective response and how it was developed, etc.

It is essential to ensure that each trafficking victim, regardless of their specific background and experience, receives the compassionate, informed, and effective care they need to recover.

Physical Impacts of Trafficking in Persons

The physical impacts of trafficking in persons stem from the various conditions and experiences victims face during their exploitation, including inhumane living conditions, inadequate diet, poor hygiene, and constant exposure to physical and sexual violence. Many victims also endure neglect and lack access to healthcare, further exacerbating their health status. These conditions not only affect the immediate well-being of individuals, but they can also lead to long-term health problems, including chronic illnesses, permanent injuries, and mental health conditions associated with their trauma.

The physical impacts may result directly from the trafficking experience directly, such as injuries and abuse suffered while in captivity. However, these effects can also arise during the process of escape or exit from trafficking, where victims may encounter dangerous situations that worsen their physical health. For instance, the lack of medical care during this critical period can lead to infections or health complications that, if untreated, may have lasting consequences.

Furthermore, survivors who are not immediately identified and assisted may suffer various forms of physical impacts at different stages of their post-trafficking lives. The absence of ongoing medical follow-up and adequate support can result in a decline in victims' overall health, affecting their ability to reintegrate into society and lead productive lives. Therefore, addressing the physical impacts of trafficking in persons requires a comprehensive approach that not only treats immediate injuries but also considers the long-term well-being of survivors.

Among the physical impacts of trafficking in persons are:

- * Physical injuries and effects
- * Sexual and reproductive health issues
- * Effects of living and working conditions
- * Illness and disease
- * Substance use disorders

Physical injuries and effects

Many trafficking victims endure significant physical harm during their exploitation. This harm may occur through:

- * Violence and abuse: Used as a means of control, to enforce submission, or to exact punishment
- * Poor and/or unsafe living and working conditions: Resulting in various injuries related to unsafe environments or excessive work
- * Injuries during exit or escape: Victims may sustain injuries while attempting to flee from their traffickers
- * Post-trafficking injuries: Victims may continue to experience physical impacts after leaving trafficking situations, as a result of injuries suffered while trafficking and/or declining health status

Additionally, physical injuries may go untreated or inadequately treated if victims are not identified or provided assistance. Common physical injuries and impacts may include: bruising, burns, cuts and scars, broken bones, concussions and other forms of head injury, infections when wounds and injuries are left untreated, infections and injuries from procedures by untrained medical practitioners or in unsanitary conditions, and disrupted physical growth and healthy development of children and adolescents.

Exposure to violence at an early age can impair brain development; therefore, trafficking can negatively affect children's cognitive development and undermine their educational achievements.

Sexual and reproductive health issues

Victims may experience sexual and reproductive health issues if they were trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Additionally, victims' sexual and reproductive health issues may result from sexual violence suffered while trafficked, during exit or escape from trafficking or at some stage of their post-trafficking life, or even before trafficking occurred. These health issues may include:

- * Sexually transmitted infections including HIV
- * Miscarriage, forced abortions, maternal complications and mortality, neonatal conditions
- * Pelvic pain
- * Urinary difficulties
- * Trauma to vagina or rectum
- * Problems with sexual function and the experience of pleasure
- * Reproductive health disorders (e.g. ovarian inflammation, pelvic inflammatory disease), due to untreated STIs or physical trauma, leading to chronic pain, infertility, and other long-term health consequences
- * Infertility from chronic untreated sexually transmitted infections or unsafe abortions

Effects of living and working conditions

Poor and dangerous living and working conditions while trafficked have an impact on trafficking victims' physical health and well-being. Trafficking victims often work long hours in unhealthy and dangerous conditions, without protective equipment or safety measures. Victims endure inadequate or unhealthy food, unhygienic conditions, prolonged sleep loss, poor sanitation, limited access to clean water for drinking and hygiene, and restricted access to health services. These conditions may result in:

- * Malnutrition, weight loss, dehydration
- * Fatigue and exhaustion
- * Headaches
- * Hearing problems
- * Dental problems
- * Gastrointestinal problems

- * Weak eyesight and other eye problems
- * Body aches and pains (e.g. stomach pain, chronic back pain)
- * Cardiovascular or respiratory problems
- * Heat stroke or stress, hypothermia, frostbite
- * Weak immune system
- * Poor physical growth and development in the case of children and adolescents

Illness and disease

Because of the living and working conditions, victims of trafficking in persons may suffer from illness or disease. Poor working conditions include poor ventilation and sanitation, long/excessive work hours, repetitive-motion activities, poor training in use of heavy or high-risk equipment, chemical hazards, lack of protective equipment, and airborne and bacterial contaminants.

Poor access to health care can also cause or exacerbate illness and disease. In addition, trafficking may exacerbate pre-existing medical conditions including illness or disease. Possible illnesses or diseases may include:

- * Respiratory illness: e.g. asthma, bronchitis, tuberculosis, pneumonia, allergic rhinitis, respiratory infections
- * Skin conditions: e.g. rashes, scabies, lice infestations
- * Musculoskeletal disorders: repetitive-motion syndromes e.g. carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis
- * Blood born and/or sexually transmitted diseases: e.g. hepatitis A, B and C, tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (e.g. chlamydia, herpes, human papillomavirus)
- * Diseases that result from trafficking exploitation (e.g. diabetes, heart conditions, renal dysfunction)
- * Pre-existing diseases (e.g. diabetes, cancer) or disease that emerges after trafficking

Substance use disorders

Trafficking victims may be encouraged or forced to use various substances (alcohol, narcotics) by their traffickers as a means of sedating and controlling them. Victims may also use drugs as a means of coping with their trafficking situation and the impacts of their on-going exploitation. Victims may also continue their substance use after trafficking ends, as a means of coping with all that they have suffered and endured, and due to a lack of appropriate treatment and services. These situations may result in a series of physical consequences, including:

- * Tolerance, leading to escalating use and increased risk of overdose
- * Dependence and withdrawal symptoms
- * Damage to organs (liver, kidneys, lungs)
- * Cognitive impairment (memory loss, difficulties focusing)
- * Overdose and consequent death

Psychological Impacts of Trafficking in Persons

The experiences and situations one endures while trafficked can lead to a number of psychological impacts. These experiences and situations may include exposure to physical and sexual violence, emotional abuse, manipulation, and dehumanization by traffickers. Victims often endure significant trauma, leading to conditions such as high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. Additionally, the isolation from family and community, along with the loss of autonomy, can result in feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem.

Many victims may struggle with trust issues, making it challenging to form new relationships and seek support from others. Long-term psychological impacts can also manifest in difficulties with decision-making and coping mechanisms, leading to a cycle of vulnerability that can perpetuate their suffering even after escaping trafficking situations.

Psychological impacts may also occur during escape or exit from trafficking due to additional risks and violence, and a variety of psychological symptoms can surface over time even after the victim has been rescued or escaped. Left untreated, these psychological impacts can lead to on-going psychological issues and mental health problems. Many trafficking victims are not immediately identified and assisted, so they suffer different psychological impacts at some stage of their post-trafficking life.

Other external factors may have a negative impact on the psychological well-being of trafficking victims. For example, being in debt due to migration related costs or being without work after trafficking is a significant source of stress and anxiety for many trafficking victims. Foreign trafficking victims may fear going unidentified as trafficking

victims and instead being arrested and detained as an irregular migrant or for crimes committed while trafficked. Victims who are trafficked abroad may be unable to ask for support due to language barriers and a lack of cultural familiarity. The stigma associated with being a trafficking victim further exacerbates these psychological effects, making it difficult for survivors to reintegrate into society and seek help. Victims often become isolated from social circles, which leaves them unable to engage with their community or to reach out for help.

Trafficked children and adolescents may often experience isolation and disconnection from peers and caring adults; trafficking might profoundly impact their hope for the future, their sense of connection to others, and their purpose or meaning in life.

Among the psychological impacts of trafficking in persons are:

- * Difficulties with learning, attention, concentration
- * Aggression, disruptive behaviour
- * Attachment issues
- * Anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation
- * Trauma
- * Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- * Somatic discomfort and disorders
- * Sleep disorders and difficulty sleeping
- * Normalization of violence
- * Dissociative symptoms
- * Alterations in sexuality

Difficulties with learning, attention, concentration

The trauma and abuse experienced during trafficking can severely affect mental functions such as attention, focus, and overall cognitive capacity. These effects differ in adults and children due to differences in developmental stages, coping mechanisms, and social support systems. Trafficked children and adolescents often experience a disrupted educational pathway. They may not be able to attend school or may only attend irregularly, interfering with their learning and intellectual growth. Those that do attend school may perform poorly due to fatigue, sleep disturbances, or brain development problems stemming from the violence suffered. After trafficking, children and adolescents may struggle to catch up on missed learning and face challenges in integrating into the school environment (e.g. face shame and judgment and/or bullying from peers). Both child and adult victims may

experience adverse outcomes from abuse suffered such as cognitive and language difficulties, deficits in verbal and memory skills, difficulties organizing thoughts, planning, prioritizing, and staying focused on tasks, and difficulties maintaining attention in social, educational, or work settings.

Aggression, disruptive behavior

To prevent further attacks or abuse, trafficking victims may become defensive, hostile, or detached. When children have been trafficking victims, their responses may be viewed as maladaptive, impact their interactions with others, and/or lead to a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or other conditions.

Attachment issues

Trafficked children, especially those trafficked at a young age, may develop insecure or disorganized attachments. Attachment difficulties can lead to trouble engaging with parents and caregivers, other adults (e.g. teachers), or peers. Children may avoid social interactions or find it difficult to trust others, which impacts their ability to maintain or form healthy relationships.

Anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicidal ideation

Immense stress and elevated cortisol levels can lead to anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation among trafficking victims. The constant fear and unpredictability of their situations can create a pervasive sense of hopelessness and despair.

For children and adolescents, the effects are even more pronounced; they may develop hypervigilance as a protective mechanism, remaining excessively alert to their surroundings in an attempt to anticipate and avoid potential threats. This heightened state of awareness, while initially a coping strategy, can evolve into chronic anxiety, making it difficult for them to engage in everyday activities or to feel safe in their environments. Moreover, the stigma and shame surrounding their experiences can further isolate them, exacerbating feelings of worthlessness and leading to self-harming behaviors as a means of expressing emotional pain. The risk of suicidal ideation becomes a critical concern, as these individuals may see no way out of their suffering.

Trauma

Many trafficking victims suffer from trauma. They may experience a range of psychological effects, such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and difficulties in emotional regulation. Especially in young children, trauma can lead to regression or loss of previously acquired skills. However, not all trafficking victims are traumatized. Whether trafficking is traumatizing is determined by various influencing factors such as: the historical experiences of the person, the moment in life in which the event occurs, the situation of violence to which the person was exposed, the response of the environment, the duration and repetition of the event, and, in the case of trafficking, the phase in which the person is (during or after trafficking). Individual's perception and processing of lived experiences ultimately define whether they become traumatic.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is one of the most common and debilitating conditions experienced by survivors. Trafficking victims endure a myriad of repetitive and prolonged traumatic events, including physical and sexual violence, emotional abuse, and extreme exploitation, which can lead to the development of PTSD. Symptoms may manifest as intrusive memories, flashbacks, and severe anxiety, causing individuals to relive their traumatic experiences repeatedly. Survivors often grapple with heightened emotional responses, leading to difficulties in regulating their feelings and reactions. This can result in emotional numbness, avoidance of reminders of the trauma, and an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Additionally, survivors may struggle with trust issues, finding it challenging to form healthy relationships or seek support from others, as their experiences have shattered their sense of safety and security. The impacts of PTSD can hinder their ability to reintegrate into society, affecting their daily functioning, education or employment prospects, and overall quality of life.

Somatic discomfort and disorders

Survivors of trafficking in persons often manifest their emotional distress through somatic symptoms, such as pain, fatigue, and gastrointestinal issues, which lack clear medical explanations. Additionally, victims' lack of social support and stigma surrounding their experiences can hinder access to appropriate treatment, further exacerbating their symptoms.

Sleep disorders and difficulty sleeping

Sleep disorders are prevalent among trafficking victims, significantly impacting their overall well-being and recovery. Many survivors struggle with falling asleep or staying asleep due to heightened anxiety, trauma-related stress, or hypervigilance. This insomnia can lead to chronic fatigue and a weaker immune system, impairing their ability to function in daily life. Conversely, some victims may find themselves sleeping excessively, using sleep as a means to escape their reality or cope with overwhelming emotions. Additionally, nightmares are common among trafficking survivors, often linked to traumatic memories or fears related to their experiences, leading to disrupted sleep and further emotional distress. These sleep disturbances can create a vicious cycle, where lack of restorative sleep exacerbates anxiety and depression, making it even harder for victims to heal and reintegrate into society.

Normalization of violence

Prolonged exposure to violence, manipulation, and coercion may lead victims to internalize their trafficking experiences and view them as normative aspects of everyday life. They may minimize their suffering as a coping mechanism, convincing themselves that their experiences are typical or deserved. This mindset can be reinforced by the traffickers' tactics, which often involve dehumanization and a constant barrage of threats. As a result, victims may struggle to recognize the severity of their circumstances, making it difficult for them to seek help or envision a life beyond their exploitation.

Dissociative symptoms

Trafficking victims often experience dissociative symptoms, or a profound disconnection from their thoughts, emotions, memories, environment, behavior, and even their sense of identity. This dissociation serves as a defense mechanism. Victims may struggle with fragmented memories or feelings of detachment from their own lives, which can hinder their ability to engage fully with reality. Victims may engage in substance abuse, self-harm, or risky behaviors, further complicating their daily lives and recovery process. Additionally, the lack of a coherent sense of self can make it challenging for survivors to form healthy relationships, trust others, or seek help.

Alterations in sexuality

Trafficking survivors may experience disruptions in their understanding and experiences of healthy sexual relationships. Survivors may lose the ability to trust their partners, may have misconceptions regarding the expectations of reciprocity and non-exploitation, and may have fears and concerns regarding the acceptance of current and future sexual partners.

Emotional Impacts of Trafficking in Persons

The nature of trafficking – on-going exposure to violence and exploitation, separation from family, lack of emotional support and care, and lack of safety – has an emotional impact on trafficking victims. The distinction between psychological and emotional issues can be subtle, as they are often intertwined. While psychological issues primarily involve cognitive and behavioral challenges, emotional issues are more related to feelings and emotional reactions.

Among the emotional impacts of trafficking in persons are:

- * Difficulty in emotional management
- * Despair and hopelessness
- * Guilt, self blame, shame
- * Loss of confidence, low self esteem
- * Loss of trust in others
- * Isolation and disconnection
- * Cognitive distortions
- * Social and family impact related to emotional impact

Difficulty in emotional management

Trafficking victims may have difficulty with emotional identification, expression, and regulation. They may experience intrusive thoughts about their trafficking experiences. Trafficking victims may avoid thinking or talking about their experiences.

Despair and hopelessness

Survivors of trafficking often experience profound despair and hopelessness, largely due to their limited understanding of their rights and their lack of exposure to healthy emotional experiences. In contexts of systemic violence, they may be isolated from positive role models and supportive environments. A lack of exposure to healthy relationships or emotional well-being can leave survivors feeling trapped and powerless, unable to envision a better future. Without access to education or resources that highlight their rights and potential for healing, individuals may internalize their trauma and believe that their circumstances are unchangeable, further deepening their emotional distress.

Guilt, self blame, shame

Some trafficking victims feel guilty about their trafficking experiences (e.g. being sexually exploited, coerced into illegal activities, or forced to betray their own values). They often blame themselves for their circumstances, thinking they could have done something differently to change the outcome. They judge themselves harshly for not having acted sooner or for feeling powerless in their situations. Trafficking victims may worry about blame, discrimination, and stigmatization if others know that they are a trafficking victim. They may fear or face stigmatization and discrimination when they return to their communities or educational institutions.

Loss of confidence, low self esteem

Trafficking exploitation impacts victims' self-esteem. The constant threats, isolation, and exposure to abuse can lead to a significant erosion of self-confidence and self-worth. Victims may internalize the abuse they endured and believe they are unworthy of respect or love. . This diminished sense of self can create a cycle of hopelessness and undermine one's ability to set personal goals and pursue healthy relationships.

Loss of trust in others

After experiencing situations of systematic violence and exploitation, trafficking victims lose trust in other people to try and protect themselves from other situations of exploitation and abuse. This may have profound impacts on children and adolescents' social development and interpersonal relationships.

Isolation and disconnection

Trafficking victims are generally isolated from their family, friends, and community while trafficked. They may also be strategically isolated from others through restrictions on movement, time, and activities imposed on them by traffickers. Moreover, traffickers may foster conflict between victims they control, in order to prevent any rebellion.

Cognitive distortions

Some trafficking victims have beliefs or thoughts that they perceive to be absolute reality. Often, these thoughts regard evaluations about oneself or the environment in which one develops. Some examples of cognitive distortions that trafficking victims manifest are: "I'm worthless", "I don't deserve anything good to happen to me", "No one cares", "I should have

known better”.

Social and family impact related to emotional impact

The repercussions of trafficking extend far beyond the victims themselves, affecting their families and communities in profound ways. The emotional impact on these indirect victims can perpetuate cycles of trauma and dysfunction within families, making it crucial to address their needs alongside those of the primary victims.

Specific Issues and Considerations in the Case of Children and Adolescents

In the case of children and adolescents, the impact of trafficking is particularly severe due to their ongoing growth and development.

Physically, these young individuals face not only short-term physical hardships, such as malnutrition and injuries from unsafe working conditions, but also long-term consequences of hindered physical development. Their vulnerability makes them more susceptible to health problems that can affect them for years to come.

Psychologically, the trauma experienced by children and adolescents can profoundly disrupt their formative years. Victims often endure extreme abuse, leading to mental health issues like anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, cognitive impairment, memory loss, and behavioral challenges. These experiences can damage their self-esteem and sense of safety, making it difficult for them to engage in healthy social interactions and pursue education.

Emotionally, trafficking can result in attachment issues and difficulties in forming trusting relationships. The betrayal they experience can leave lasting scars, leading to feelings of shame and isolation. Addressing these emotional needs is crucial for their recovery and reintegration, emphasizing the need for supportive environments that promote healing and resilience.

The cognitive and educational impact of trafficking is a distinct dimension that warrants separate attention, even though it is closely interconnected with psychological, emotional, and physical effects. Trauma from trafficking can significantly disrupt a person’s ability to learn, process information, and retain knowledge. For children and adolescents, this often includes prolonged interruptions in formal education, limited access to literacy development, and lack of age-appropriate learning opportunities. These disruptions can have long-term consequences, such as delayed academic progress, lower educational attainment, and limited future opportunities for economic independence and social reintegration.

Trauma-related cognitive impacts may also include impairments in concentration, memory, and problem-solving skills. These difficulties stem from the brain’s response to chronic stress and trauma, which can interfere with executive functioning and the ability to engage in structured learning environments. Children may appear distracted, disengaged, or unable to follow instructions, while adolescents might struggle with abstract thinking and planning for

the future. While these cognitive effects can also occur in adults, in children and adolescents they represent a deeper risk to the fulfillment of basic rights such as education and contribute to increased vulnerability due to their developmental stage. Recognizing the cognitive and educational consequences of trafficking as a separate impact dimension helps ensure that interventions go beyond emotional recovery and also address learning gaps, cognitive rehabilitation, and educational support tailored to the victim's developmental stage.

The impact of trafficking extends beyond the immediate victim, affecting long-term emotional, social, and familial dynamics. In particular, trafficking-related experiences can lead to complex situations such as teenage pregnancy or the indirect victimization of children whose parents were trafficked. These cases illustrate the broader and intergenerational consequences of exploitation, which require careful consideration in support and recovery efforts.

For example, teenage pregnancy may result from trafficking in persons and has long term impacts in the life of the trafficked girl and her child(ren). Teenage girls who become pregnant as a result of exploitation may face unique emotional challenges, on the top of sexual health issues. They not only contend with the emotional fallout of their trafficking experiences but also navigate the complexities of motherhood at a young age, often without adequate support. This can lead to cycles of poverty and vulnerability, as well as difficulties in providing a stable and nurturing environment for their children. These circumstances may lead to mixed feelings of love and rejection (and consequent guilt) about their children, as they are faced with an early and unwanted responsibility.

In addition, some children and adolescents have not been directly exploited, but their mothers or fathers have. These children and adolescents may have been subjected to discrimination, mockery, cognitive backwardness, malnutrition and other problems. In addition, they may have lived for long periods without their primary caregiver. Or, they may have lived with their parents as their parents were being exploited. Either way, these children and adolescents have experienced violence and have been exposed to situations that make them vulnerable. These family members may grapple with feelings of helplessness, fear, and stigma associated with the trafficking situation, leading to strained relationships and disrupted family dynamics.