Victim, Survivor, or Social Deviant? Approaches to Addressing Human Trafficking
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It has become standard practice to categorize sex workers in one of two ways: prostitutes or sex trafficking victims. But there are also those who do not consider themselves victims, survivors or social deviants, do not wish to be treated as such, and may not want to (or cannot) leave this lifestyle (whether it is forced or chosen). Those who choose to enter the world of sex work may do so as a means of survival, feel as though they can do no other type of work, or have been convinced they are worthless by abuse or other types of coercion. As professionals that encounter these individuals, whether they choose this work or not, it is our responsibility to listen to their individual stories and empower them to take control of their own lives, instead of grouping them in such broad categories.

Who are they?
The Ohio Attorney General's Office produced a report on Human Trafficking in 2012¹ that included interviews of various people involved in the sex work and human trafficking industry. This report provided good information about who is involved in human trafficking, who is buying, who is selling, and how people can identify the silenced victims. In this report, those who were being sold had higher rates of previous and/or current experiences with domestic violence, sexual assault, and mental illness (such as depression, bipolar disorder, and PTSD). These numbers indicate that those at risk for being trafficked or becoming involved in prostitution are significantly oppressed in the general public before being labeled as social deviants.

As professionals, quickly defining and labeling people as victims may discount their experience. By having their stories lumped together and placing undesirable labels on their type of work, the individual loses their autonomy. Each person should have the right to describe their own experiences without an external force making that decision for them. These individuals do not need to be discounted in society any more then they already have been. Having a price tag attached to the majority of their sexual experiences and having harsh laws passed to criminalize their activities provides a stigmatization that they will carry with them throughout their lives.

What are the Implications of Being a Sex Worker?
There are mixed messages in American society about individuals who walk the streets or promote themselves on the Internet to sell sex. On one hand, they are to be considered

victims of human trafficking who are thought of as needing rescued or “saved.” On the other hand, if they are caught selling sex then they need to be treated as criminals. It is confusing and seems misguided to charge a victim of a crime with a crime; however, those in sex work continue to receive charge after criminal charge.

Having a felony charge on one’s record can be extremely damaging to an individual’s character. Just having one felony can affect one’s ability to receive adequate housing, public services, and sustainable employment. Now imagine someone in their thirties who has been a sex worker, either willingly or unwillingly, for many years and has acquired 15-20 felony prostitution charges. How will he/she receive any of the aforementioned benefits? Who is going to accept his/her application for a job or housing? Furthermore, what would be the incentive for him/her to leave the only lifestyle he/she has ever known to enter a mainstream society that will look down on him/her?

Who’s Buying?
The buying and selling of an individual is oppression. Those who have been identified as “johns” are no longer the strange men who troll the streets to find women. Various research studies have found that those who purchase sex are often well-educated, middle class men without a criminal background.

In the Ohio Attorney General’s 2012 report about Human Trafficking it was reported that those in authoritative positions were the ones purchasing sex. Those human trafficking survivors interviewed claimed that the majority of the people they were sold to were professionals in law enforcement, education, business, the military, and many other prominent professions. Clearly the consumers appear to be powerful; their power in their professional lives appears to have given them the authority and power in their personal lives to think it is acceptable to purchase other human beings.

According to the Ohio State Bar Association human trafficking and its victims are defined in Ohio and under federal law is defined as:

- Children involved in the sex trade; adults age 18 or over who are coerced, manipulated or deceived into performing commercial sex acts; anyone forced into different forms of “labor” or “services,” such as domestic workers or farm-workers forced to work against their will. Each of these situations has one or more of the following in common: elements of force, including physical abuse or the threat of physical abuse; fraud; compulsion or coercive control that, much as in the case of victims of domestic abuse, often involves emotional and mental manipulation, although it does not always involve violence. The Ohio Trafficking in Persons statute requires only that a victim’s will be ‘overcome by force, fear, duress or intimidation.”

In 2012, Governor John Kasich signed an executive order forming The Ohio Human Trafficking Task Force. H.B. 262, the Ohio Human Trafficking Act of 2012, was passed which raised the penalty for committing the crime of human trafficking to a first-degree

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felony with a mandatory minimum sentence of 10-15 years. According to the recommendations submitted, “This penalty matches the federal statute and allows Ohio to effectively prosecute pimps and traffickers. The law created a diversion program whereby juvenile victims of human trafficking will receive the protection and treatment they need through the juvenile justice system. The law allows for adult victims of human trafficking with prior convictions of prostitution or solicitation to have their records expunged.”

How Can We Help?
It is not a question of whether these individuals are victims or willing participants; it is a matter of providing any willing person with the services to keep them safe and help them achieve their own goals for their life. Education about these individuals and sharing knowledge is the first step to improving services to this underserved population. Ohio governmental agencies such as the Governor’s Human Trafficking Task Force, Ohio Attorney General’s Office and the Office of Representative Teresa Fedor are providing informational sessions and gathering information about human trafficking in Ohio. Groups such as the Cleveland Rape Crisis Center and the Collaborative Initiative to End Human Trafficking in Cleveland who collaborate on Project STAR (Sex Trafficking Advocacy and Recovery), as well as the Central Ohio Rescue and Restore Coalition, provide support services, outreach, and education on human trafficking.

It would be futile to approach our work with the mentality of being abolitionists and wanting to rescue every person in the sex work industry, just as it is futile to criminalize all individuals involved in sex work. There are various groups around Ohio encouraging those who are in prostitution to take control over their own fates. In Toledo, Second Chance provides support groups, counseling, and other social services for those affected by sex work and/or human trafficking. Gracehaven in Columbus provides various client-centered services to sexually exploited children. Empowering individuals to be self-advocates has proven to be the best method for real change, and it is time to apply this approach to the realm of sex trafficking and sex work.

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