

The Female Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Epidemic: Awareness and Prevention

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According to the United Nations (UN) (2002), human trafficking is growing more rapidly than all other organized crime (Hodge, D.R. & Lietz, C.A., 2007, p. 166; United Nations 2002). The domestic sex trafficking of girls is an epidemic problem that needs addressing. As awareness grows about domestic minor sex trafficking, public perspectives change, but stigma remains a barrier to necessary systematic change, which would include protection and support of girls and women who have been victims of DMST or are at risk of DMST. Sex trafficking is a complex issue with many areas worthy of investigation. This paper focuses on some main aspects of the DMST issue and proposes some key methods to stop it. DMST prevention and the rehabilitation of its victims may be achieved through further research on the issue, education, standardized terminology, and improved methods of identification, treatment, and prevention of DMST.

Researchers Hodge & Lietz (2007) cite the UN Palermo Protocol (2000) as possibly the most prominent definition of human trafficking (p. 164):

“Trafficking in persons” shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (United Nations 2000).

### **Sex Trafficking is a Global Issue**

Human trafficking affects all countries. The U.S. Department of State found that 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked over international borders annually (Hodge, D.R. & Lietz, C.A.,

2007, p. 163). It occurs across national borders and within borders. Sex trafficking is not the only type of human trafficking, but the predominant type. With 70-80% of those trafficked being female, 50% being children, and 70% of all trafficked females being commercially sexually exploited, researchers Hodge and Lietz (2007) determined that, “the largest subset of human trafficking is the sexual trafficking of young women and children” (p. 163).

Researcher, Lauren Copley indicates one effect of globalization is that trade policies have damaged the economy of Latino countries; therefore people migrate in order to find work (Copley, L., 2014). Traffickers profit from poverty and gender disparity in these patriarchal countries by convincing girls and women they have legitimate work in the US and then force them into the commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) industry (Copley, L., 2014). They tell girls and women they owe money for smuggling them into the US. Latino girls and women, often lack math skills, since education is not generally a focus in traditional roles. They cannot keep track of debt they pay and remain in “debt-bondage” for years. Many people have difficulty believing that DMST is a severe problem in the US, but the truth is that most women and children affected by commercial sexual exploitation are born in the US (Cedeño, M., 2012).

### **Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST)**

Estimates are unreliable owing to the covert nature of human trafficking, but according to researchers Banks & Kyckelhahn, 40% of cases reported to federally funded agencies between 2008 and 2010 involved sex trafficking of minors (Perkins, E.B. & Ruiz, C., 2017, p. 172). Shared Hope International describes domestic minor sex trafficking as the commercial sexual exploitation of children within the U.S., sometimes referred to as child sex slavery, child sex trafficking, and child prostitution (Cedeño, M., 2012, p. 168). Countryman-Roswurm (2006) declares it “a transaction in which the body of a child and/or youth is treated as a commodity”

(Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014, p. 525). DMST includes children of all ages, predominantly girls. DMST is prolific throughout the United States (Countryman-Roswurm, K. & Bolin, B.L., 2014). Indeed, research (Cavis 1999; Flower 1988) suggests that annually, one to two million young people are sold into domestic sexual slavery (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014, p. 522). Those affected by DMST come from all socioeconomic strata, in part as a result of mass availability of internet. Researchers Tidball, Zheng, and Creswell note experts report sellers typically advertise their child victims online and search social networking sites for prey (Tidball, S., Zheng, M., & Creswell, J.W. 2016, p. 54).

It is difficult to accurately identify those who are sex trafficked due their transiency. Traffickers frequently transport youth between states for sale or trade (Countryman-Roswurm, K. & Bolin, B.L., 2014). Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin (2014) discuss the “[Need ... to become educated on the risk factors, nature, and extent of DMST... for identification tools and intervention methods that help to serve and protect this marginalized population of youth and end this growing epidemic” (p. 522). Researchers note risk factors of DMST involve female gender, history of abuse and sexual victimization, runaways or “throwaways,” substance abuse and addiction, gang activity, and caregiver dysfunction, for instance, mental illness, domestic violence, and substance abuse (Joan Reid, 2011, p. 146).

**The Stigma of DMST.** Negative attitudes regarding sex work further complicate the DMST issue. Countryman-Roswurm and Bolin (2014) have observed that researchers, e.g., Flowers 2001a; Morgan 2014; Thompson 1999; Smith 2014, view DMST as a choice to engage in prostitution, as a consensual act between individuals, or as a woman’s right to “sex work” for income, e.g., Doyle 2014; Morgan 2014; Smith 2014 (p. 523). Moreover, many justice and social service institutions continue to use the term “prostitution” in describing DMST (Countryman -

Roswurm, K. & Bolin, B.L., 2014). In addition, they infer that because of inconsistencies in DMST terminology and controversy as to how to define the issue, professionals, including police and nurses, who regularly encounter victims, do not treat them as such, and therefore they do not receive needed trauma care (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014). Countryman-Roswurm and Bolin (2014) conclude that, “Lost in these synonyms is the human child who should be protected rather than judged and turned away” (p. 523).

**Young Girls are Particularly Vulnerable.** DMST girls tend to be young (Cedeño, M., 2012). For example, human services participants in the Tidball, et al. (2016) study responded that age 11 is “ideal” for buyers and the most attractive age range is 12-14 because girls are vulnerable during that time (p. 61). Countryman-Roswurm and Bolin relate, “[Poverty; familial abuse and neglect, problematic relationships with caregivers, and drug and alcohol abuse are correlated with the risk of female DMST (p. 525). Moreover, Flowers (2001a) determined from studies that sexual abuse is a significant predictor of DMST in young girls (Countryman-Roswurm, K. & Bolin, B.L., 2014, p. 526). DMST girls are predominantly African-American. In support of this, researcher Reid 2011 noted, “minority girls from low-income families, living in an urban neighborhood possessed key documented risk markers for exploitation in prostitution” (p. 153).

Moreover, numerous studies affirm Reid’s findings (2011) that indicate the connection of derogatory self-attitudes to delinquent activities and demonstrate that “a negative self-schema, characterized by feelings of disparagement toward self and others, result[s] in heightened vulnerability to exploitation and sexual revictimization” (p. 153). Dworkin (1997) explains that with sexual abuse, “The child is already “trained” for her perpetrator ... not to have any real boundaries to her own body; to know that she’s valued only for sex...” (Countryman-Roswurm

& Bolin, 2014, p. 526). Confounding this issue is, as Reid (2001) notes that traffickers typically pose as caring boyfriends offering help to minors in trouble.

**Gender Disparity in the Treatment of DMST Victims.** Countryman-Roswurm and Bolin (2014) declare that “[Legally and historically, prostitution has been defined as a gender-specific offense — or one in which the offender is female” (p. 523). Moreover, Chesney-Lind and Sheldon (1988) note that, although research shows young females are at greater risk of becoming victims to sexual harassment and/or violence than young males, those who work with at risk youth view female sexuality as part of the girls’ deviance (Perkins and Ruiz, 2017). Additionally, transnational feminist activist, Ruchira Gupta (Steinem & Gupta, 2014) compared sex trafficking in India and the US and concluded, “It is based on the fact that there is gender discrimination. It’s not just class, it’s not just caste, but there is something beyond it [that] is making women unequal (p. 180). Participants in the Tidball, et al. (2016) study opined that trafficked girls are inappropriately and unfairly treated and prosecuted and that they should be protected as victims. One participant (Tidball, et al. 2016) shared that sensitivity training of law enforcement has not been well addressed (p. 62). For example, police often labeled girl victims as prostitutes and sent them back to their homes and/or charged them with prostitution, which remained on their records for life (Tidball, et al., 2016, p. 62). This assumption that trafficked girls are simply delinquents is a covert way of undermining girls’ sexual human rights, while sex trafficking is an outright violation.

**The Social Construction of the Sexualization of Girls.** The patriarchal roots of most cultures around the world treated women and girls as property. Buying and selling women is an extension of this socially conditioned belief. Global media constructs the sexualization of girls and promotes sexual violence. Accordingly, Kotrla (2011) explains that the glamorization of

pimping through many mediums of daily life, such as clothing, music, television, video games, and other types of entertainment have created a culture of tolerance regarding commercial sex. In addition, Rachel Lloyd observes that we live in “a culture that continuously objectifies girls and women and that sexualizes and commodifies youth” (Cedeño, M., 2012, p. 159). Kimberly Kotrla (2010) further illustrated this by sharing research from Shared Hope International (n.d.) showing that four countries with large commercial sex markets — Jamaica, the Netherlands, the United States, and Japan— tolerate sex trafficking.

**Demand for Young Girls Fuels Exploitation.** Cedeño (2012) pinpoints that, “Pimps target vulnerable youth because people are willing to pay to have sex with children. Demand for sexual acts with children is therefore the driving force behind the child sex trafficking industry” (p. 163). Buyers excuse their behavior with the belief that women in prostitution are different from other women (Cedeño, M., 2012). Changing the attitude that it is acceptable to sell women and girls as sexual objects is paramount.

Raising fines to buyers for prostitution charges could deter from repeat offenses and significantly reduce the demand for a supply of young girls for CSE. Steinem discussed what is known as the third way: not criminalizing the buyer (jailing), but of penalizing and educating him (Steinem, G. & Gupta, R., 2014, 192). This approach could have far-reaching positive results in preventing repeat offenders.

**Comparing Anti-Trafficking, Sexual Abuse, and Prostitution Laws.** Positive legislation has resulted from greater awareness of human trafficking. The 2007, New York Penal Law 230.34 addresses trafficking, including sex trafficking (Cedeño, M., 2012, p. 169). Cedeño (2012) citing McKinney 2005, states that New York Criminal Procedure Law § 440.10(1)(i) on prostitution allows that if the person is convicted for an offense as a result of being sex trafficked

under section 230.34 or the federal Trafficking Victims Protection Act, she can move to have those offenses expunged. Victims typically need legal assistance to attain this. New York has also charged the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance and the Division of Criminal Justice Services with providing specialized social services to victims of trafficking (Cedeño, M., 2012, p. 169). Additionally, the TVPA (2000) is a federal law that addresses sex trafficking, including DMST. New York's recent undertaking to protect commercially exploited youth is the passage of the Safe Harbor Act, "which [cited in, Governor Paterson Signs Law to Protect Sexually Exploited Youth 2008] decriminalized child prostitution and recognized that these children are victims—not criminals—in need of special social services" (p. 171).

Conflicts abound in New York State anti-trafficking, sexual abuse/assault and prostitution laws. Cedeño (2012) illuminates with her research, that New York State does not adequately target the demand side, meaning the buyers, of the criminal industry. Furthermore, New York's prostitution statutes categorize children that are sold for sex differently than children who are sexually abused without the exchange of goods or money (Cedeño, M., 2012). Cedeño explains, "[Once money is exchanged the lack of consent presumption no longer applies and that same child could be charged with prostitution" (Cedeño, M., 2012, p. 167). Additionally, anti-trafficking law contradicts the TVPA and the UN Protocol to Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, in that NY requires proof of coercion in order for the child to receive services (Cedeño, M., 2012; United Nations, 2000). More problematic is that Safe Harbor does not provide funding to carry out the mandates within the law. Lastly, NYS does not provide equal protection because youth over 16 are unable to petition as a person in need of supervision (PINS) and tried as adults under NYS Family Court (Cedeño, M., 2012). Cedeño (2012) recommends that NY amend the anti-trafficking statute and Safe Harbor to remove the

requirement to prove coercion and to allow all youth, including 16 and 17 years olds to qualify for PINS.

**Measures to Prevent the Sexual Exploitation of Girls.** Prevention of DMST requires a multi-level approach. Countryman-Roswurm and Bolin (2014) suggest actions to respond to DMST including reframing sex trafficking as a form of abuse requiring response from a human rights perspective, committing to serve sexually exploited children and address their trauma, and providing a common language to facilitate an effective community response. Based on her research, Reid (2011) suggests that providing services to caregivers with challenges, such as parenting classes, addiction treatment, and assistance for domestic violence could quell the escalation of DMST. Crisis-lines and mobile vans that provide food, clothing, hygiene, and shelter help RHSY with daily living needs and may prevent them from obtaining them using survival sex. Social services and related human services must address long-term needs, such as transitional housing, case management, counseling, and legal assistance. Reid (2011) advises development of training materials, identification tools, and intervention methods for social workers to provide services and protection to vulnerable youth.

Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin (2014) explain that social workers need to address survivors' trauma in a way that is empowering and reduces their vulnerability. For example, Reid (2011) proposes "strategies centered on reprocessing cognitions of not being deserving of healthy relationships and shaping new beliefs of worthiness in relation to others" as well as "interventions fostering the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain healthy and romantic sexual relationships" (p. 154). Girls need to learn how to assert their choice. As Steinem once advised, "Nobody has a right to sell our body. You have a right to decide as you grow up about your own choices so nobody owns you" (Steinem, G. & Gupta, R., 2014, p. 181).

Ferrer-Wreder et al. 2004 found psychoeducational groups improve cognitive and social skills (Countryman-Roswurm, K. & Bolin, B.L., 2014). Additionally, Country-Roswurm and Bolin (2014) assert that the groups improve self-esteem, hopefulness, and interpersonal skills for those with multiple sexual abuse trauma. Lloyd (2011) confirms that, these groups can also be effective in developing needed skills to decrease vulnerability to DMST and increase awareness of the issue, such as the influence of the media's portrayal of sexual exploitation and the risks associated with DMST regarding race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Countryman-Roswurm, K. & Bolin, B.L., 2014). In their study of youth at risk for DMST, Countryman-Roswurm and Bolin (2014), found that , 70% displayed that the group taught them ways to develop healthier relationships with themselves, peers, family members, and dating partners and 88% understood how to handle an abusive relationship and/or being sex trafficked (Countryman-Roswurm & Bolin, 2014, p. 533).

In conclusion, though research, education, change in language used regarding victims of DMST, improved laws and enforcement, and strategic approaches using consistent terminology in social work and related human services, DMST can be prevented and the victims successfully rehabilitated. Increased consciousness of the domestic minor sex trafficking issue has begun to change views about CSE, although the associated stigma hinders needed systemic modifications to protect and support girls and women. With DMST existing throughout the U.S. and all over the globe, it has reached epidemic proportions. Aggressive growth of human trafficking has the potential to affect vulnerable populations throughout the world regardless of their cultural background.

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