

Sex Trafficking: Correcting the Denotation of a Survivor's Experience

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Introduction

Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit (United Nations). Through heightened awareness and publicity through the development of the internet and social media, it is understood that human trafficking can be committed and practiced anywhere, at any time, and with anyone. Among the varying concentrations of human trafficking, sex trafficking will be the focus of this text. Sex trafficking is regarded as a form of modern-day slavery in which individuals perform commercial sex through the use of force, fraud, or coercion (National Human Trafficking Hotline). This focus of trafficking suspectedly affects 4.5 million people from all kinds of backgrounds and these numbers only continue to grow (The Refuge For DMST). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), physical injuries, and various mental health issues are common, even expected, in survivors as a result of these events. These psychological effects are developed by experienced trauma. When rejoining society, these effects continue to affect the survivor in all aspects whether it is financial, social, and/or physical.

A potential psychological effect resulting from trauma is battered woman syndrome (BWS). BWS is an extension of PTSD but includes characteristics that include social and self-image issues in addition to trauma response issues: specifically, issues of disrupted interpersonal relationships from a batterer's power and control measures, body image distortion and/or somatic or physical complaints, and difficulty with sexual intimacy are brought to the forefront in instances of battered woman syndrome. With a focus on the psychological effects stemming from sex trafficking, traits of BWS are consistent across all survivors although PTSD is noted as the most popular lingering effect of human trafficking. When regarding the experience of the survivor, additional psychological effects are not typically considered or discussed. A survivor's experience can sum to more than the symptoms listed within PTSD. Introducing battered woman syndrome as a descriptor of the physiological effects of survivors will help properly explain a survivor's experience while they were trafficked and also when rejoining society.

Analyzing how the characteristics of battered woman syndrome more accurately portrays a survivor’s physiological state, more so than the indicators of PTSD, can help build a better understanding of a survivor’s experience. With a new perspective through the lens of battered woman syndrome, a survivor’s psychological effects and responses from their trauma can be analyzed with further certainty. BWS can be identified in male survivors, however, this text will focus on the presence of this syndrome in female survivors. Through the survivor’s perspective, it will be observed what structure exists in sex trafficking, and in what ways battered woman syndrome appears in the survivor’s life, specifically looking at their trauma.

Literature Review

The Human Rights Quarterly from John Hopkins University Press (2007) describes what trauma is and how it is currently being studied. They begin by detailing that reexperiencing and avoidance are two core trauma responses that can both be experienced cognitively, affectively, behaviorally, and physiologically (Shigekane 2007). Cognitive reexperience symptoms derived from trauma are most commonly intrusive thoughts and images. Anxiety and anger are symptoms highly associated with affective reexperiencing. Behavioral symptoms tend to mimic those that were experienced at the time of the trauma. Lastly, physiological symptoms take the form of autonomic arousal and physical sensations, which are partial determining criteria for PTSD (Shigekane 2007). The other core traumatic response, avoidance, is classified as “avoidance of thoughts, feelings, conversations, activities, places, people, or memories associated with the trauma” (Shigekane 2007). This trauma response is an effort to protect the individual from any feelings and fear associated with the traumatic experience. Further, they introduce eight secondary trauma responses which include depression, aggression, substance abuse, physical illness, low self-esteem, identity confusion, difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and guilt or shame (Shigekane 2007).

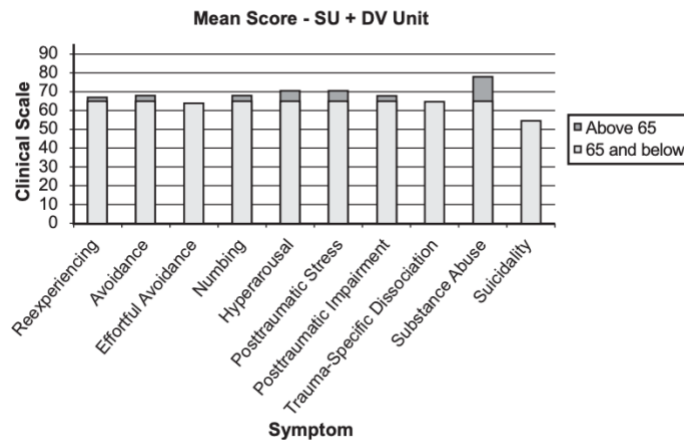


FIGURE 1. Walker, L. (2009). *The Battered Woman Syndrome* [Book].
[https://yunus.hacettepe.edu.tr/~cin/Criticism%20of%20the%20Western%20Society%20&%20Civilization%20-%20Collection%205/Domestic%20Violence/Walker%20-%20The%20Battered%20Woman%20Syndrome%20\(2009\).pdf](https://yunus.hacettepe.edu.tr/~cin/Criticism%20of%20the%20Western%20Society%20&%20Civilization%20-%20Collection%205/Domestic%20Violence/Walker%20-%20The%20Battered%20Woman%20Syndrome%20(2009).pdf).

These associated responses are shaped by one’s social environment or circumstance following the trauma but not the trauma itself. Understanding trauma provides a context for the causation and formation of battered women syndrome within an individual’s psyche. They also acknowledge that the trauma associated with battered woman syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder, are commonly experienced among women who were previously in violent environments.

Lenore E. A. Walker sets battered woman syndrome (BWS) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) apart through three determiners: power imbalances, intimacy conflicts, and diminished self-image (Walker 2009). The construct of sex, intimacy, and power all correlate to an intense concentration on self-survival. Low self-esteem is a prime contributor to body image. Whether one is abused emotionally or physically, “the more severe the abuse, the more often the battered woman reports symptoms associated with low self-esteem” (Walker 2009). Because an abuser aims to diminish a survivor’s self-esteem through isolation, humiliation, and abuse, in turn, a survivor’s overall body image will diminish as well. She builds a definition of this syndrome by comparing and contrasting it with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Characteristics of PTSD include intrusive recollections of the trauma event(s), hyperarousal and high levels of anxiety, avoidance behavior and emotion numbing (usually expressed as depression, dissociation, minimization, repression, and denial, and negative alterations in mood and cognition) (Walker 2009). BWS is identified with these four descriptors and three additional pieces of criteria such as disrupted interpersonal relationships from batterer’s power and control measures, body image distortion and/or somatic or physical complaints, and sexual intimacy issues (Walker 2009).

PTSD	BWS
Intrusive Recollection of the Event Hyperarousal and High Levels of Anxiety Avoidance Behaviors Emotional Numbing	Intrusive Recollection of the Event Hyperarousal and High Levels of Anxiety Avoidance Behaviors Emotional Numbing Disrupted Interpersonal Relationship

	Body Image Distortion Sexual Intimacy Issues
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FIGURE 2.

Walker defines BWS as “...the pattern of the signs and symptoms that have been found to occur after a woman has been physically, sexually, and/or psychologically abused in an intimate relationship, when the partner (usually, but not always, a man) exerted power and control over the woman to coerce her into doing whatever he wanted without regard for her rights or feelings” (Walker 2009). Battered woman syndrome builds on the criteria of PTSD. As Walker describes, BWS includes elements of sex, distorted self-image, and dominance.

In instances of battered woman syndrome, the four methods of control that are attributed to this syndrome are the same four methods used by human traffickers. Research from the *Brown Journal of World Affairs* identifies four prevalent themes involved in human trafficking; fear, lack of knowledge about alternatives, isolation, and physical and psychological confinement (Logan, Walker, and Hunt 2009). An emphasis is placed on the component of physical and psychological confinement. The effects of restraining movement and mental capacity are detailed to be the most severe and impactful abuse a survivor faces both at the time of infliction and life post-trauma. An abuser uses psychological abuse and degradation as the prime methods when controlling their victims. Threats of shaming victims by exposing their circumstances to their family or the public or threatening their safety are common psychological tactics used to entrap individuals in trafficking (Logan, Walker, and Hunt 2009). Dominating tactics like fear, lack of knowledge about alternatives, isolation, and physical and psychological confinement are often correlative to the numerous psychological effects and traumas that a survivor may experience.

Additionally, the factors that are a part of how one acquires trauma and how external factors reinforce and perpetuate it must be considered. Familial support networks and one’s involvement in society contribute to the processing of a traumatic experience (Ferit and Matilda 2011). Specifically in human trafficking, there is an overarching element of control and dominance exerted on a survivor by their abuser. This affects a survivor’s relationship with social institutions. Trafficking is responsible for “weakening parental authority, undermining extended family relationships, and eliminating the family’s nurture and moral development of an individual” (Ferit and Matilda 2011). Survivors are “submerged in trauma” because they are removed from society. In addition to feeling aimless, unhappy, depressed, or experiencing addiction as a result of trafficking, a central idea that restrains a survivor is their inability to see themselves as a part of society due to the isolation and dominance that they were subject to (Ferit and Matilda 2011). One’s relationship with

themselves correlates to their perceived relationship with society, these are commutative. When a survivor is deprived of their natural freedoms, it can negatively impact their outlook on society, minimize their hope, and make it more difficult to transition into society once released (Shigekane 2007). Society can often hold a deep misconception of the difficulties a survivor faces which can serve as an additional barrier between an individual and society. Trauma stemming from human trafficking is not simply between the survivor and the abuser but potentially between the survivor and society.

Sexual abuse is defined as “an experience of trauma which in turn, has a neurobiological impact on one’s brain and nervous system” (Haskell and Randall 2019). Factors like the nature of the assault, the duration, the extent of physical harm, the victim’s relationship with the abuser, the victim’s past, and others’ responses to a victim’s story all contribute to the extent of one’s trauma (Haskell and Randall 2019). The sexualized nature of sex trafficking adds another aspect of trauma to an already traumatic event. Victims are in fear of death and/or severe physical injury constantly. These regular fears correlate to an extreme degree of post-traumatic harm. In addition, they define a traumatic event as “an experience so frightening and overwhelming that the person entails a sense of loss of control” (Haskell and Randall 2019). The term “defense circuitry” is introduced and it is described to dominate brain functioning when any of the five senses detects a serious threat (Haskell and Randall 2019). The environment of human trafficking harbors never-ending poses of threat, “...abusers inflict terror through threats of death or serious harm against victims and their families and through inconsistent and unpredictable outbursts of violence...” (Shigekane 2007). This is the identical environment seen in situations of battered women syndrome. If one continuously lives with their defense circuitry engaged, there is going to be a loss of self since their brain is being dominated by fight, flight, or freeze. When escape feels impossible and assault seems unavoidable, these extreme survival reflexes will consume one’s brain function. If the brain is focused on survival, a connection to oneself deteriorates the longer the brain is held in this state. Since a human trafficking survivor is in a constant state of duress, they will experience the defense circuitry (Haskell and Randall 2019). Once a threat no longer seems immediate, the brain returns to a processing state where a survivor has to now deal with the trauma that they just endured.

The Brown Journal of World Affairs analyzed the mental health of human trafficking survivors and identified a process that trafficking survivors may experience in correspondence to this traumatic experience. This process includes recruitment, transit, exploitation, integration, or if applicable, reintegration (Zimmerman and Pocock 2013). Along with this presents the possibility of detention and re-trafficking in this process.

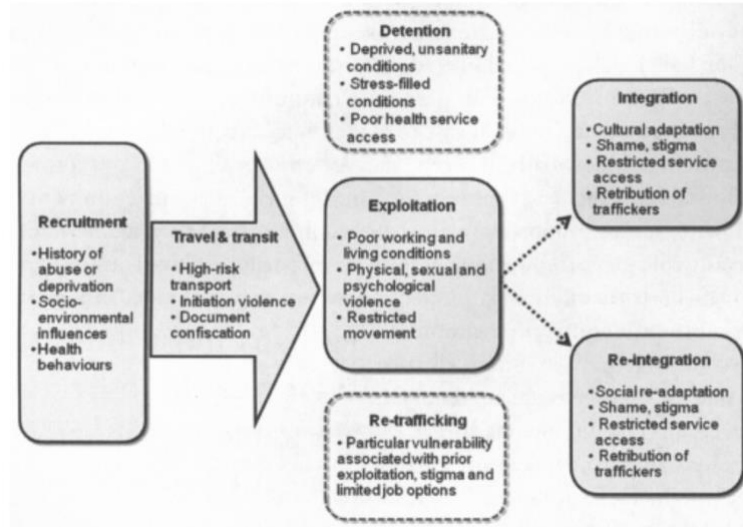


FIGURE 3. Conceptual model of the stages of the human-trafficking process. Source: Cathy Zimmerman, Mazeda Hossain, and Charlotte Watts, “Human Trafficking and Health: A Conceptual Model to Inform Policy, Intervention and Research.” *Social Science and Medicine* 73, no. 2 (2011): 327-35.

With this in mind, they analyze one’s mental health throughout the stages of this process. Referring to any stage in the cycle or a process, “the greater the exposures (number, time, or severity) to adverse events the trafficked person has experienced, the greater the likelihood of a stronger cumulative effect on their future health and well-being” (Zimmerman and Pocock 2013). Because a survivor has been subject to this cycle with many factors of severity, this directly leads to deteriorated mental health. All of what a survivor may experience within any stage of this cycle is highly predictive of adverse mental health outcomes, particularly anxiety syndromes like PTSD, depression, and/or suicidal ideation (Zimmerman and Pocock 2013).

Litam from *The Professional Counselor* suggests that “survivors are more likely to accept situations characterized by abuse since their experience has attributed them to unhealthy relationships and a lack of self-efficiency” (Litam 2019). The brain pathways of human trafficking survivors may be altered as a result of their experience since the presence of chronic fear can inflict barriers to cognitive processing and decision-making. When referring to what classifies a “survivor”, Litam explains that “once a person begins reframing their worldview and working to heal, they progress from the label as a ‘victim’ to a ‘survivor’ to a ‘thriving survivor’” (Litam 2019). To become a thriving survivor, one must address what one endured and seek treatment. Litam identifies both safety and decision-making as two main points for mental health resources to ensure when offering treatment. Safety is a foundation for working with human trafficking survivors so they can develop trustworthy relationships, eliminate self-harm, overcome challenges, remove themselves from

dangerous situations, and promote wellness (Litam 2019). Decision-making is also a foundation because survivors are coming from a situation where they were acting solely on their trafficker's demand so a presentation of choices is both a difficult but exciting challenge to overcome.

Literature Review Conclusion

This literature review offers another perspective on how to further understand a survivor's experience. BWS provides a context behind a survivor's outlook on themselves and society as a result of their experience. To support this, the structure of the human trafficking cycle is introduced along with the psychological components common in this experience. Areas that can be a result of sex trafficking like trauma, developed behaviors, and other lasting effects are discussed to closer identify a survivor's experience with BWS. The sustained form of abuse from sex trafficking is psychophysical including a combination of physical abuse, domination with mental constraint, and degradation leaves a survivor with a heavily warped sense of self. Because sex trafficking takes such a significant toll on a survivor's perception of themselves, it closely aligns with the criteria of battered woman syndrome (disrupted interpersonal relationships, body image distortion and/or somatic or physical complaints, and sexual intimacy issues). Understanding sex trafficking, trauma, and the underlying ramifications that can attach to a survivor are key to better understanding their experience.

Methods

The following paper will be a comparative study between the behaviors of women who show signs of battered woman syndrome and women who have been sex trafficked. Those who portray BWS in this study have not been sex trafficked. Because trafficking survivors are rarely considered to have BWS, comparing them to women who are already diagnosed with BWS due to other instances of abuse, will help emphasize the similarities between their psyche. This is analyzed through psychological texts that demonstrate a survivor's psychological and social endeavors. Through comparing the two, it can be argued that battered woman syndrome serves as a more accurate descriptor for a sex trafficking survivor's experience than PTSD. Through the accounts of sexual and domestic abuse survivors like Andrea, Citra, Anji, Starr, Kate, and more, along with sex trafficking survivors like Rachel Hestmark and Jessa Crisp, this paper travels through their experiences both in and free from the controls of such immediate violence and discovers how they navigate their interpersonal struggles. To demonstrate this the survivor's words and mannerisms are observed in raw interviews as well as analyzed interviews from sources taken by professionals in the psychological and neuroscience fields. The sources

used allow the reader to understand a survivor's experience based on their perception and follow the after-effects of their abuse. The texts, definitions, psychological concepts, and previously studied behavior are analyzed to gather context and medical criteria that support the survivor's voice. With the information and validation from the psychological field, a connection between battered woman syndrome and sex trafficking can be supported.

Analysis

By first examining the accounts of sexual and domestic abuse survivors and then secondly, the experiences of sex trafficking survivors, a connection can be made with the BWS criteria voiced by Lenore E. Walker. Through analyzing multiple interviews with survivors varying in domestic and sexual abuse, battered women syndrome can be linked as a correlative experience to those of sex trafficking survivors.

All of the interviewed survivors of sexual and/or domestic abuse recalled issues with intimacy, their interpersonal relationship, and their self-esteem after their abuse. These three issues are the defined criteria for battered women syndrome. When asked to describe how intimacy is a challenge in their everyday lives, abuse survivors like Jasmyn are conflicted by feeling like she had "disconnected her sense of self from her sexuality..." (SurvivorRevive 2020). Sexual abuse can incline survivors to hypersexualize themselves because it has been implemented in them that they are only worth what their bodies can provide (SurvivorRevive 2020). This can lead to a lack of boundaries in future relationships, and continued abuse, both of which are deeply intertwined with the other two pieces of BWS criteria, being issues of disrupted interpersonal relationships and body image distortion.

If one believes that the only way she can be loved is through the disconnected, sexualized essence of herself, then her relationship with herself and her image can be drastically tainted. Abuse survivors like Andrea, after an assault, can feel "worthless, disgusted, used, conflicted, and at fault..." (SurvivorRevive 2021) as a result of the abuse. She recalled these feelings to have led to mental health challenges like self-harm and suicide ideation. In an abuse survivor, Anji's, experience, she detailed not having a secure sense of self as an individual and claimed her five-year-old son as having a deeper sense of it than she did (SurvivorRevive 2021). A disconnect between one's physical being and their mental state is common among abuse survivors as it is a method of compartmentalizing their trauma. But with this separation of self comes an impacted view of a survivor's self-esteem. Each interviewed survivor recalled their self-image being dramatically impacted as a result of abuse. When asked about their self-esteem and the psychological challenges that came as a result of their abuse, both sex trafficking survivors and abuse survivors described post-traumatic responses they developed like trust

issues, lost sense of self, hyper-fixations, suicide ideation, feelings of worthlessness, and more (SurvivorRevive 2021), all which can be connected to a negatively impacted sense of self and intimacy as well. When asked how their diminished self-esteem affected their lives, all the interviewed abuse survivors and survivors of sex trafficking detailed feelings of hopelessness, tainted views on love, purposelessness, and more (SurvivorRevive 2021). Kate, an abuse survivor, notes, "...I think it was all kind of like a loop of being hyper-sexualized, objectified, coerced, which led me to wear this mask, and because of that mask I think the biggest barrier that was a consequence of that was not being able to live authentically" (SurvivorRevive 2021). The "mask" Kate is referring to is a common notion other survivors express; feelings that they were not able to embrace their true selves and were forced to figuratively mask the pain and abuse that they faced. All of these challenges have hindered a survivor's potential to live authentically, meaning they feel as though they can not live as their true selves as a result of their trauma.

With commonly acquired post-traumatic responses like reexperiencing and avoidance, (Shigekane 2007) it can feel impossible for survivors to view their lives as being lived authentically. Anji recounts a time when she reexperienced her abuse as being paralyzed by fear while feeling that she was losing her mind when she would turn over in bed and see her past abusers there instead of her sleeping husband (SurvivorRevive 2021). The traumatic responses that can come with experiences of abuse can be reoccurring and triggered by anything. Some triggers can stem from reminders of the abuser, similarities in the atmosphere in which the abuse was inflicted, or could be when a survivor fosters a certain emotion. Derricka, an abuse survivor, lists her potential triggers as "large crowds, when someone is passive aggressive, feeling like I am being watched, yelling, and I am always in fight or flight mode" (SurvivorRevive 2020). While triggers for abuse survivor Molly included "people who look like my abuser, black cars, anything that reminds me of my abuser, aggressive physical touch, and I am always watching over my shoulder" (SurvivorRevive 2020). These traumatic triggers along with many more can occur at any given time or in any given place for a survivor of either abuse or sex trafficking. Living with this trauma and potential triggers can serve as a constant reminder of a survivor's endured abuse and may impact their view on the authenticity of their lives. The interviewed survivors listed responses to their traumatic events which included emotional numbing, depression, isolation, tainted view of society, and future goals feeling unattainable due to their traumatic experience (SurvivorRevive 2021). These responses can dilute one's outlook toward life, others, and themselves. The BWS criteria and the impacts of trauma are deeply intertwined as they form their own perception of the abuse they endured.

A sexual or domestic abuse survivor's outlook toward their abuse is similar to the way a survivor of sex trafficking understands their

experience. The three components that help define battered women syndrome (disrupted interpersonal relationships from batterer's power and control measures, body image distortion and/or somatic or physical complaints, and sexual intimacy issues) are also seen in survivors of sex trafficking. Intimacy with others is dramatically impacted for survivors like Jessa Crisp, who was trafficked multiple times, that note, "...after my second trafficking experience it was almost impossible for me to trust anyone" (Real Women/ Real Stories 2017). Additionally, interpersonal relationships are greatly tarnished for survivors of sex trafficking. The account, "...you zone out in the midst of many customers, you stop seeing their faces, you just try to bring as much money home at night, to make sure he doesn't beat you down..." (OPB 2015) from sex trafficking survivor, Rachel Hestmark, details a loss of self, objectification, and dissociation she had to endure to get by day-to-day. The last comparative piece of BWS criteria, following power imbalances and intimacy conflicts, is deteriorated self-esteem which is also prevalent in survivors of sex trafficking. As a result of her life-long abuse, Jessa Crisp began to identify with her abuse so when she escaped the cycle, she said, "For me, it was a long long struggle of me in my mind having to redefine what was happening to me- realizing this was wrong- realizing this was not normal- realizing that this was not okay" (Real Women/ Real Stories 2017). This struggle stems from her low self-esteem which was a result of her subjectivity to sex trafficking. The three pieces of criteria of battered women syndrome (power imbalances, intimacy conflicts, and diminished self-image) apply to survivors of sex trafficking because sexual abuse and control are key themes in sex trafficking. Survivors of sex trafficking experience effects that taint their perception and sociability with themselves, others, and society as a result of their experience. This is also directly voiced by those with BWS. Survivors of sex trafficking also share similar traumatic response experiences to those of abuse survivors. Both Jessa and Rachel recalled feelings of depression, isolation, degradation, guilt, shame, and other mental health challenges that stemmed from their time in a trafficking environment (OPB 2015), similar to the traumatic responses to sexual and domestic abuse. Rachel Hestmark recalls re-experiencing her trauma as being "...paralyzed from fear, on my bed, through the TV, fifteen years later, I still had that fear." (OPB 2015). The trafficking survivors described almost identical traumatic responses to those of the abuse survivors who are considered to have BWS. The psychological, emotional, and social impacts are consistent across both categories of survivors.

Both sex trafficking and abuse are based on sexual exploitation and/or psychophysical domination. These two areas overlap considerably. The research is analyzed to detect the presence of power imbalances, intimacy conflicts, and diminished self-image across all of the survivors' stories. It has been observed that all of the interviewed survivors experience psychological effects and behaviors that are similar. When a survivor of

sexual or domestic abuse is identified as having battered woman syndrome, the characteristics needed to diagnose this are the same characteristics exhibited in sex trafficking survivors. This suggests that the sexual and demeaning component of these traumatic events links all of these experiences together. Because of this, it can be expected that sex trafficking survivors will experience battered women syndrome.

Conclusion

When referring to the experience of a sex trafficking survivor, PTSD is commonly the one and only descriptor used. The intent of this paper is to introduce battered woman syndrome as a more accurate term to describe the impacts of sex trafficking on a survivor. In order to identify battered woman syndrome in this particular experience, a deeper understanding of both psyche and trauma are necessary to analyze the overlapping criteria. This paper aims to present the concepts of sex trafficking, psychological effects, and trauma as they collaboratively resemble battered woman syndrome. Despite the research that supports its legitimacy, some believe that battered woman syndrome is nonexistent or deem it inapplicable. This paper works to combat this incorrect notion.

To identify the similarities, research was gathered from real survivors of sexual and domestic abuse and sex trafficking. Looking particularly at female survivors, they each offered insight into their experience. Both the differences and the similarities among each survivor's story were supportive of the paper's aim. Hearing directly from a vast number of survivors allowed for a trend to be established between them. While it is the most accurate account possible, it is also empowering to survivors to include their first account stories of their experience. By recording the details of each survivor's experience, the three pieces of criteria from Walker's definition of BWS (disrupted interpersonal relationships, body image distortion, and sexual intimacy issues) could be identified in all of these survivors whether that be of sexual/domestic abuse or sex trafficking.

By comparing the accounts of survivors who exhibit BWS with sex trafficking survivors, similarities could be identified between the two. The research goes into depth on the components that make up Walker's criteria for BWS. Concepts and origins of trauma and psychological effects are identified to provide context and understanding of power imbalances, conflicts in intimacy, and/or a diminished self-image form. The research shows that sex trafficking survivors experience more than just PTSD. The impacts of sex trafficking include a warped perception of self and can leave a survivor unable to foster authentic relationships with others. These effects are not included in the definition of PTSD, which suggests that a new, more accurate descriptor should be used in regard to a survivor's experience.

The overarching theme in this paper is that sex trafficking survivors are not being accurately portrayed when their experience is regarded as solely PTSD. This research aims to help better understand a survivor and what they endure both during and after they are trafficked. Through this information, it is evident that there are components of a survivor's experience that PTSD cannot account for. Using battered woman syndrome to describe a survivor is a more correct and telling term because the psychological effects and behaviors more closely identify with BWS rather than PTSD. When a survivor's experience is better understood, more can be done to support them and more can be done to address the issue of sex trafficking.

Justice for survivors is not fulfilled with solely the indictment of a perpetrator. The experience of sex trafficking leaves a life-long impact on an individual. Justice for survivors also includes awareness and support from the community; it is to understand their experience and be an ally. Education is the only way to achieve this and it starts with properly defining their experience.

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