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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEX TRAFFICKING AMONG THREE AGENCIES  
SEEKING TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

ALEXIS LANGE

126 Pages

Since 2000, there has been a growing interest in human trafficking by researchers, governments, organizations, law enforcement, and the general public. One form of human trafficking that has captured the most interest and awareness is sex trafficking. However, despite the growing research and understanding of the problem, there is no shared, collective understanding and definition of sex trafficking. Various constructions and approaches have made it challenging to prevent sex trafficking, protect victims, and prosecute traffickers. For this research, I will take a social constructionist/social problems perspective by interviewing three agencies about how they identify, define, frame, and approach the problem of sex trafficking. The framing, defining, and approaches of the problem by the three agencies reflects their impact and efforts to address sex trafficking. However, framing and addressing specific aspects of a complex, multi-dimensional problem creates limitations and barriers that affects the agencies impact and effectiveness.

**KEYWORDS:** Sex Trafficking; Social Constructionist; Social Problems; Agencies.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEX TRAFFICKING AMONG THREE AGENCIES  
SEEKING TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

ALEXIS LANGE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEX TRAFFICKING AMONG THREE AGENCIES  
SEEKING TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM

ALEXIS LANGE

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to take a moment and thank all those who have supported me throughout this long journey.

I first would like to thank Dr. Chris Wellin. Thank you for your wisdom, kindness, and never-ending support. You have been in my corner since day one and never gave up on me, even when I wanted to give up myself. You kept pushing me and encouraging me, and I will forever be grateful. Alongside Chris, I also want to thank Dr. Maura Toro-Morn and Dr. Intan Suwandi. Thank you for supporting and guiding me throughout this process.

I want to also thank my family and friends (and my cat Lucy Lu) for their constant moral support, encouragement, and patience with me during graduate school and while I was completing my thesis. I definitely had my struggles, but you all kept me going and pushed me to do my best. I am proud of my work and what I have accomplished. I hope I made you all proud as well.

Finally, I thank my informants who took time out of their busy days to talk to me about themselves and the agency they work for. Without my informants, I would not have the thesis I have today. Your viewpoints and perspectives were enlightening and informative, and made this thesis exciting to do. Working for a social service agency can be overwhelming, stressful, and tiring but what you do is amazing and essential. So, thank you for all your hard work, dedication, time, and effort to addressing the issue and helping/supporting victims/survivors of sex trafficking- either directly or indirectly.

A.L.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the last couple of decades, the sensationalized and exaggerated images and stories surrounding the issue of sex trafficking have increased. The increased exposure to the matter has brought enormous awareness to governments, law enforcements, scholars, researchers, advocates, and the general public. The increased awareness has guided monumental steps across the globe to acknowledge the problem, declare it as a crime, and create steps to combat it.

For example, both the U.S. and the U.N. have created legislations to address the problem: the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) by the United States in 2000, and the Palermo Protocol (the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime) by the UN in 2000. The two legislations from the U.S. and the U.N. enabled multiple national and international agencies and task forces to be established. The two legislations and the agencies/task forces have pushed and advocated to expand efforts to prevent trafficking by: bringing awareness about the problem; providing prevention education; protecting victims/survivors by identifying them and providing services; and/or advocating for effective criminal justice (law enforcement) efforts and prosecution of traffickers. Despite the significant steps being taken, “there are still critical gaps between the human trafficking narrative, reality, and policy, which inhibit our ability to prevent new crimes, prosecute offenders, and protect survivors” (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017, p. xvi).

Human trafficking is a very broad and complex problem. Human trafficking is an umbrella term for multiple different forms of trafficking: sex trafficking, labor trafficking, and organ trafficking. Each form of human trafficking often overlaps and intersects with one another because of similar natures, patterns, and definitions. Despite the similar natures, patterns, and

definitions of the different forms of trafficking, each deserves its own acknowledgement and its own research dedicated to it. Human trafficking is so complex with so many intersecting layers. So, for the sake of my research, I primarily focus on one form of human trafficking: sex trafficking- and how it is identified, framed, defined, and approached as a social problem.

### **Research Idea**

I sought to understand how different agencies' construct their perception of what sex trafficking is and how they address it through their goals, missions, services, and approaches. To do so, I interviewed three informants from three different agencies in Illinois. I interviewed Stephanie from Agency A, Amanda from Agency B, and Mary from Agency C. My goal is to understand how each agency framed their own definition of sex trafficking as a social problem, and how they approach the problem through the services/programs they provide. There are multiple ways for an agency to address the problem:

- Providing victims/survivors with direct or indirect services;
- Advocating for legislations/laws/policy changes from federal, state, and local levels;
- Trainings law enforcement about how to identify victims and how to properly support victims/survivors;
- Advocating for effective criminal justice responses (e.g., prosecuting and sentencing traffickers successfully);
- Spreading awareness about the problem to local communities and the general public; and
- Providing educational prevention to schools, businesses, local communities, and other locations.

## **Problem Statement**

Throughout my journey of researching about sex trafficking, I learned a great deal about the problem. I learned about the history of sex trafficking, the different perspectives and arguments surrounding the problem, multiple ways to address/approach the problem, and ways to properly help and support victims/survivors. However, one major issue that stuck out during the research phase were the multiple perceptions and definitions of the problem by different authors, governments, agencies and organizations, and the general public.

The literature and the discourse on sex trafficking, illustrated the lack of a collective, shared definition. Majority of governments, agencies and organizations, research studies, and individuals have constructed their own viewpoints and understandings of what sex trafficking is and what are the “best” actions and solutions to combat it. The variations of constructions about the problem are based on personal experience and personal knowledge about the problem. This is problematic because it makes it difficult to fully comprehend and study:

- The problem's nature and scope;
- Lack of adequate data;
- How many are affected (who is considered a victim/survivor or not);
- The overlaps and intersections with other forms of trafficking (e.g., labor and organ) or other social issues (e.g., immigration, human smuggling, gender-based violence, sex work, domestic violence); and
- Create misconceptions, misunderstandings, and biases about the problem and towards the victims/survivors.

Now, how am I going to address this issue with my research? I have conducted a qualitative, comparative, small-scale case study of three different social service agencies in

Illinois. I studied Agency A, Agency B, and Agency C and each have a different approach to the problem. Each agency have constructed their own conception about what sex trafficking is and how to address/approach the problem. Agency A takes a law enforcement approach, Agency B focuses on prevention education, and Agency C prioritizes protecting and supporting victims/survivors. It should be noted, I used aliases for the names of the agencies and informants. The agencies' and informants' information is accessible to the public. So, it is important to maintain their privacy and confidentiality to make sure no one can identify them and/or receive any retaliation for participating in this research.

I hoped with my research, to understand how each agency constructed their conception of the problem and how it influenced their approaches through their goals, missions, and services/programs.

### **Research Questions**

The proposed study intends to explore three different agencies, and how they defined and framed their efforts to address sex trafficking. The main research questions are:

1. How do the agencies centered around sex trafficking define the problem and how do they shape their agenda?
2. How and to what extent are these agencies' actions, regarding to their definition of sex trafficking, successful in addressing the problem?
3. How do the agencies' compare and/or contrast in their construction of defining and addressing the problem of sex trafficking?
4. Finally, how do these agencies' perceive and address their impact regarding sex trafficking?

## **Research Significance**

Within the research and literature of sex trafficking, there is a lack of a shared, collective definition and conception of what sex trafficking is. As stated earlier, this is problematic, because it makes it challenging to fully comprehend the problem and it makes it difficult provide the best course of actions to address it-and possibly, stop it from occurring in the first place.

Sex trafficking is a social problem, but it was not always recognized as a social problem that needed to be addressed. It first started as a social condition until it was claimed to be a social problem by governments, agencies and organizations, researchers, and the general public. My research sought to fill in a gap, and explain the development of how sex trafficking became acknowledged, defined, and addressed as a problem by the participating agencies in this study.

## **Organization of the Thesis**

This paper will be organized as follows: Chapter II discusses the social constructionist/social problem perspective. In the field of sociology, the social constructionist/social problem perspective proposes that certain concepts, ideas, and social problems (e.g., sex trafficking) arise from a collaborative consensus through human interaction instead of “objectively” existing in reality. The social constructionist/social problem perspective provides the foundation surrounding this paper. The social constructionist approach explains how different agencies construct and define sex trafficking, and then how they plan to address it based on their definition.

Chapter III discusses the bodies of literature that are relevant to my research. First, I address in the literature are the definitional and methodological issues surrounding sex trafficking, and how it can create empirical and policy-making challenges in addressing and combating the problem. Next, I address the concept of coercion. Coercion is often used within

the sex trafficking narrative and varying definitions. However, the use of “coercion” can cause misconceptions and misunderstandings about the problem and how it impacts victims/survivors. Following, I explain the overlapping connections of sex trafficking and sex work. This overlap of sex trafficking and sex work can influence and constrain laws and regulations, peoples’ perceptions and understandings of the two topics, how agencies and organizations help victims and survivors, and scholarly research. Finally, I discuss how different agencies focus on a certain element about the problem, and how it reflects in their impacts and efforts to address the problem. Also, in this section, I briefly talk about anti-trafficking policies that can influence the efforts being made by agencies and organizations.

Chapter IV contains the methods that were used during this research. I layout the methodological background of this research. I talk about my participants and the process of picking my participants. I specified how data was collected and analyzed. Finally, towards the end of the chapter, I highlight some ethical considerations and limitations.

Chapter V provides a little biography of the three agencies (Agency A, Agency B, and Agency C) I interviewed for this research. In this chapter, I use the interviews and the agencies’ online resources to go into detail of: the overall background of the agencies; the goals, missions, and services/programs; funding; their approach to the problem; and barriers and limitations.

Chapter VI discusses how each agency does their work, in practical terms, to address the complicated, multidimensional problem of sex trafficking. I reiterate how the agencies’ identified, defined, and framed sex trafficking as a social problem and how they approach the problem. Later in the chapter, I discuss two main themes that were mentioned within all of the interviews and how it impacts sex trafficking and the agencies: collaboration vs. competition and the impacts of the internet (social media).



have dedicated time, energy, effort, and resources to address sex trafficking.

Chapter VII serves as the conclusion of this paper. The conclusion contains the essential findings and takeaways from the interviews and from this research. The last sections of the conclusion, poses question for future research and limitations of this research.

## CHAPTER II: THEORY

### **Social Constructionist/Social Problem Theory**

What conditions determine social problems? Who determines what a social problem is? Who decides what social problems are more noteworthy for discussion than others? How should social problems be treated? What is a social problem? And how is it created? These questions come to mind when thinking about the construction of social problems. There is no single definition or explanation of social problems, and in sociology, it is no different. The discussion of social problems in sociology is still relatively new, especially through the lens of the constructionist viewpoint. In sociology, social problems are usually defined as "that social problems are trouble spots within society-social arrangements that do not work properly" (Best, 1995, p. 3). Social problems are conditions or behavior in society that are deemed to be harmful by a majority of people and need to be acknowledged and addressed. An example of a social problem is domestic violence. Domestic violence has been acknowledged and identified as a social problem by society- from governments creating legislation to agencies/organizations being created to address the problem. However, there are various ways domestic violence can be constructed and addressed by those at the center of combating the issue. The "question of just what 'social problems' are is a sociological concept, and how we might study such phenomena have been at the center of the dilemma surrounding this topic since its emergence" (Schneider, 1985, p. 210).

One of the primary debates about social problems construction is about objectivity vs subjectivity. From an objective perspective, a social problem "exists as a significant number of individuals are adversely affected by a phenomenon related to social factors, even if no one recognizes it" (Henshel, 1990, p. 8), meaning a social problem is not considered a social problem

until it is defined as such. In the case of domestic violence, the objective elements in the reality of the conditions: gender-based violence, gender roles, patriarchy, or insufficient access among women to economic and political roles and power. Objectivity is part of sociological research and part of the discipline because it wants the researchers to remain unbiased and not get emotionally attached to what they're researching. Objectivity is part of the scientific method, and since sociology, historically, has been a discipline to follow the scientific method of the hard sciences, it pushed subjectivity aside to remain objective in practice. Hence, in the construction of social problems, objectivity is often used to define social problems in terms of their social conditions. However, there are two flaws with defining social problems from an objective perspective, according to Best (1995); first, "they minimize or even ignore the subjective nature of social problems" (p. 4), and second "the objective conditions that people define as social problems have relatively little in common" (Best, 1995, p. 4).

The opposite of objectivity is subjectivity. From an interpretive constructionist approach, subjectivity accepts "that there is a reality but argues that it cannot be measured directly, only perceived by people, each of whom views it through the lens of his or her prior experience, knowledge, and expectations. That lens affects what people see and how they interpret what they find" (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 15). Some researchers who support subjectivity declare that social problems are not defined and maintained by the event that made them a problem, but how the public perceives the event and defines it as a social problem. In other words, the perception of a situation or behavior, causes the action-which is illustrated by the Thomas Theorem. The Thomas Theorem, by William Isaac and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, is a theory that states "if men [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" ("Thomas Theorem," 2023). Herbert Blumer (1971) emphasized the role of subjectivity in defining social problems,

"social problems are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition instead of existing independently as a set of objective social arrangements" (p. 298). The subjective element of domestic violence is the level of concern by those in society about the objective conditions- and who want to address and solve the problem.

Another way to look at the subjective approach to the construction of social problems is to understand that the approach focuses on the processes people go through to promote some social conditions as social problems. "What is or is not a social problem is a product" (Best, 1995, p. 6) of when an organization/agency is created to address a social condition or when legislation from the government introduces a law or new policy about some social condition- they are constructing that social condition as a social problem and become claim-makers.

The development of a social problem begins when the maker of a claim claims that a condition or behavior is harmful. The claims-maker then tries to convince others why a certain condition or behavior must be identified and what actions are needed to address it. Claims-makers can "range from people with first-hand experience with the problem (e.g., victims or the relatives of victims) to those with little to no direct experience" (Best, 2015, p. 19). Identifying, defining, framing, and constructing a social problem is fundamental to the development of making a social condition a shared reality, and constructionists are interested in this process. Social constructionists value and document how people create and develop knowledge of the world in a social context, not individually.

Constructionists, from this approach to social problems theory, claim that "social problems are claims-making activities" (Best, 1995, p. 6), meaning that social problems are defined as "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977, p. 75). In other words,

constructionists focus on what the claims-makers say about the conditions because it matters how people understand and interpret the conditions. Constructionists argue that "our views of social problems are social constructions" (Best, 1995, p. 7), and every social condition can be constructed in multiple forms as social problems. The problem can be viewed differently by those who are defining it. Depending on how one defines it, they will have different interpretations of how to tackle or develop solutions for the problem. In another sense, claims become ways of seeing or not seeing a problem, and if the problem should be declared as such. When a claims-maker draws attention to some social condition, they are bound to focus on one particular aspect of the condition. After they focus on one aspect of the condition, they will put a name to it, and by naming the condition, claims-makers are typifying the social problems. Claims-maker take different dimensions of a problem and typify it by framing the problem through a particular lens. "Typification occurs when claims-makers characterize a problem's nature" (Best, 1995, p. 8), which will allow the claims-maker to determine the orientation of the problem's cause and will recommend specific solutions based on their construction of the problem.

All this information about the social constructionist perspective of social problems is exciting, but how does this connect to sex trafficking? Well, that is a good question. If the constructionist's approach to social problems focuses on how people claim a certain condition as a problem, how is sex trafficking defined as a social problem? What societal conditions shaped the construction of sex trafficking as a social problem? Why, for example, did the U.S. produce The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000? What conditions led the U.S. to claim that trafficking (sex trafficking) is a problem? And lastly, why is sex trafficking defined more as a prevalent problem than other forms of trafficking, such as labor trafficking or organ

trafficking? These are the type of questions I have explored in this research. I explored how different agencies, who are trying to address the issue and help sex trafficking victims and survivors, seek to understand how they define the problem of sex trafficking. Also, how do these agencies' definitions determine their methods to address the problem, and how do they help and support the victims and survivors they declare to serve based on their construction of the problem?

### **Example of Social Constructionist Research**

To give an example of research that utilized a social constructionist approach is discussed in Petonito and Muschert's (2018) research on how claims-makers typified the Silver Alert program. The Silver Alert program, an adaptation of the AMBER Alert system, is designed to "engage the public in helping locate missing adults and return them to their loved ones" (Petonito and Muschert, 2018, p. 134). Constructionists of social problems are interested in studying how claims-makers argue a "particular condition, person, or group is problematic and in need of a specific remedy or solution" (Petonito & Muschert, 2018, p. 134-135); in other words, claims-makers want to know and understand how a problem develops, how it is typified, and what solutions are created to address the problem.

In Petonito and Muschert's article, the authors discussed that social problems often go through a "natural history of emergence, vigorous claims-making, and the hammering out and implantation of a solution" (Petonito & Muschert, 2018, p. 135), which is usually the result of collective behavior of individuals. However, not all social problems follow the same path through the natural history process. Some social problems follow the "valence issue" (Petonito & Muschert, 2018, p. 136) because some issues are already on the radar of governments, legislators, media, and the general public. Petonito and Muschert explain the Silver Alert

program is an example of the valence issue and does not follow the natural history process of social problems because it was a fully formed 'solution' to the problem of missing adults with the use of piggybacking the AMBER Alert system. The piggybacking off the AMBER Alert system is an example of "domain expansion," which allows the claims-makers of the social problem of missing adults to claim that the policies and clientele are typified similarly to one another (Petonito and Muschert, 2018, p. 136). However, the claims-makers typically center the focus and voice of the caregivers rather than the missing adults (and, according to the article: people with dementia and Alzheimer's disease), taking away their agency as individuals. The context for the emergence of the problem was a fast-aging society.

Similar to other social problems (e.g., sex trafficking), there is a definitional issue around missing adults. According to Payne (1995), the definition of a missing person is: "someone who appears to have gone missing when they do not fulfill their normal patterns of life and responsibilities because they are absent from where they are expected to be" (Payne, 1995, as cited by Petonito & Muschert 2018, p. 138). However, this definition limits the scope of a "missing person" as someone healthy, but what about adults with cognitive impairments like dementia or Alzheimer's disease? Definitional confusion about the problem of adults missing or wandering off makes it difficult to understand the scope of how many adults (particularly ones with cognitive impairments) are affected by this and what are the best solutions to combat it.

In conclusion, this article explains that the Silver Alert system challenges the natural history of social problems because it was a fully formed solution to the problem of missing adults, despite questions about its effectiveness or definitional concerns. Now, how does this correlate to my research topic of sex trafficking? Well, for my research, I am utilizing the social constructionist research approach. Sex trafficking has been labeled by many: claims-makers, the

media, policymakers, governments, advocates, and the public, as a social problem. However, there is a lack of discussion about how sex trafficking was claimed as a social problem by different claims-makers and what solutions should be created to address the problem. It's important to note that some people who address or work to prevent, protect, and prosecute may expand their scope or piggyback other discourses ("domain expansion") similar to sex trafficking (e.g., sex work, violence against women, and child abuse) to have better understanding and knowledge about the problem and create the best solutions. For an example of piggybacking one social problem on another, Agency B (National and Local level) is a great example. Agency B is discussed in detail in Chapter V, but Agency B primarily focuses on prevention education of domestic violence and abuse piggybacks on their broader mission. The broader mission is address and educate about gender equity and women's/girls' empowerment.

The overall goal of this research is to ask and document how the informants from agencies or programs that address sex trafficking, including those involved in prevention and/or addressing the needs of those who are affected, define the nature and the scope of the problem of trafficking.



## CHAPTER III: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Definitional and Methodological Issues**

In the past couple of decades, there is a growing interest in the study of human trafficking, and more specifically in the trafficking of girls and women for the sole purpose and demand for sex. Despite the rise of interest in human trafficking (sex trafficking), the study and research of trafficking is hindered by the absence of a clear, shared definition or response to the problem. The lack of a proper, shared definition among different governments, organizations/agencies, law enforcement, and scholars results in different explanations of what the phenomenon (sex trafficking) is, how it should be measured, whom it include or excludes, and creates “empirical challenges for researchers but also has important impacts on policy making and implementations” (McCarthy, 2014, p. 223). For reference, the most internationally popular definition of human trafficking in research and scholars is from the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (known as the Palermo Protocol) which came from the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, and it states:

“human trafficking is defined as 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 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 labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UN Protocol, 2000).

However, as states and nations criminalize human trafficking, many “have included elements beyond the requirements” (McCarthy, 2014, p. 223) of the UN Palermo Protocol. As an example, the U.S. State Department definition of sex trafficking in their *Trafficking in Persons Report*: “sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age” (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2020, p. 10), it includes minors in their definition and scale of the problem. With the multiple definitions of trafficking, it’s hard to understand how prevalent the issue is, how many people it affects, and in what acts of trafficking the victims are performing. Additionally, it is important but challenging when defining the problem of human trafficking in past research and discussions to separate this phenomenon from “other similar violations, such as migrant smuggling, forced labor, and slavery” (McCarthy, 2014, p. 224). According to Nawyn, Birdal & Glogower (2013), it is more important for human trafficking research to “understand how trafficking happens, and most important, to create effective interventions to ameliorate it” (p. 56).

Due to the deficiency of a shared definition of trafficking, the estimates and scales of how many people are affected by trafficking globally vary drastically. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that there are approximately 40.3 million people were victims of modern slavery (forced labor and human trafficking) in 2016, including an estimated 4.8 million (almost exclusively female) who were victims of forced sexual exploitation (ILO, 2017). The numbers provided by ILO show that more than half of trafficking victims are not involved with forced sexual labor/exploitation. This contradicts other organizations/agencies, media, and governments, who promote that sex trafficking is the most problematic issue under the human trafficking umbrella.

## **Coercion**

In reading the UN Palermo Protocol's definition of human trafficking and the U.S. State Department's definition of sex trafficking, there is variation in how one interprets human/sex trafficking. One key element in many definitions of human/sex trafficking is the focus on coercion from perpetrators to the victims. Coercion is usually defined along the lines of an act of persuading/convincing someone else to do something by using some force or unethical methods.

In the realm of trafficking, it is often assumed that the victims are coerced with many different acts, including emotional manipulation, debt peonage, promises of a better life financially, withholding documents, death threats, threats of physical violence, and rape, into trafficking, especially in sex trafficking. However, in research on trafficking, "researchers commonly do not include details of the type of coercion used or the severity of the coercion" (Nawyn, Birdal & Glogower, 2013, p. 58).

The lack of detail about the concept of coercion in other studies calls into question what constitutes coercion in dealing with human/sex trafficking and how it should be punished. Sabon (2016) conducted a study about the victimization of Latinos in the sex trafficking network and studied what force, fraud, and coercion means in her context. Sabon states the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 and the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 were "created to criminalize the severe forms of trafficking (labor and sex) involving force, fraud, and coercion" (Sabon, 2016, p. 457). With the different forms and severity of coercion in trafficking, "there is a conundrum of limiting what belongs or what an experience or trauma should be called" (Snajdr, 2013, as cited by Sabon, 2016, p. 457) or what levels of recognition and legal assistance a victim gets.

## **Sex Trafficking vs. Sex Work**

Since the emergence of trafficking being constructed as a social problem, many people, activists, nations, organizations/agencies, and researchers have blurred the lines between sex trafficking and sex work. Many believe there is a strong connection between sex trafficking and sex work, and this connection has a major influence on how some define, conceptualize, and understand the issue of sex trafficking. There are multiple debates surrounding this issue of sex trafficking and sex work: the patriarchal influences of women's agency and autonomy; whether, if sex work is legalized, it will increase or decrease the trafficking of individuals for sexual labor, and how the blurring of the two issues may impact sex work policy reform?

There are a lot of patriarchal assumptions that no one (mainly women and girls) will willingly choose to do sex work, which reveals the controlling of women's and girls' bodies and traditional values of sexual purity/virginity of females. It is practiced in many countries and societies that men control a woman's sexuality and body because the men's honor is dependent on the women's sexual purity because they are protected and are the man's property. The controlling of women's bodies and sexuality by men has resulted in limiting women's economic opportunities and education or the use of violence on women (like honor killings of women), and it is claimed that these events can cause a woman to become a trafficking victim. The stigmatized notions of women having multiple sex partners and even commodifying their bodies in sex-for-money exchanges conclude that sex work is coerced. Although some women and girls who are sex workers are coerced and are being exploited, even so, "researchers consistently find that many of the assumed victims of trafficking have not experienced coercion, particularly among people doing sex work" (Nawyn, Birdal & Glogower, 2013, p. 58-59).

Continuing the discussions about sex trafficking and sex work, there is a debate surrounding the question of whether, if sex work is legalized, sex trafficking will increase or decrease. The scholars who side with the criminalization and abolition of sex work cite "feminists who view prostitution as a form of violence against women and highlight the gendered inequality in this tool of the patriarchal global economy" (Swanson, 2016, p. 593). It is traditionally asserted that "men are socialized into more dominant roles, their needs and interests are placed above those of women" (Swanson, 2016, p. 604); the gendered socialization process declared women as inferior and subjected to be trafficked for the men's needs of sex at high numbers. This lens of sex work ignores women's agency of possibly choosing to do sex work because they want to participate in the act and stigmatizes those who are sex workers. The other side of the debate is if sex work is legalized, it will decrease sex trafficking, advance sexual liberation, and "promote prostitution or sex work as a legitimate profession that serves as an expression of women's choice and agency" (Swanson, 2016, p. 593). From this legalization perspective, it will decrease the number of trafficking victims because it would be regulated and monitored, and more women would advocate for themselves and be in safer conditions. In some empirical research, some women enjoy aspects of sex work and declare they have control over their bodies. Also, some women working in the sex industry (using migration scholarship) chose to participate because they are gaining better employment/financial opportunities if they left their home region or country and were willing to be transported or "tolerate trafficking situations" (Nawyn, Birdal & Glogower, 2013, p. 59).

## **Agencies/Anti-Trafficking Policies**

The United States, alongside many other nations, have made human/sex trafficking of people a global problem. By declaring human/sex trafficking as a global social issue, nations have tried to intervene by creating legislation, policies, and even funding different organizations/agencies to help address the problem. One example that is close to home for legislation for combating human/sex trafficking is the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) (TVPA) and later the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (2003, 2005, 2008, 2013, 2017) and this legislation was implemented with reflection from the United Nations Palermo Protocol which developed the “3P’s”: prosecution, protection, prevention and in recent years added a “4<sup>th</sup> P”: partnership.

Prosecution in combating human trafficking, put in effect that governments criminalize trafficking by investigating, prosecuting, and sentencing perpetrators involved in trafficking. Next, protection is essential to a victim-centered approach that helps identify victims, providing and referring to services, and supporting the victims to rebuild their lives. The third P is prevention, through national and international intervention aimed at attacking the problem head on by providing/using accurate information. All communities/nations do their part to stop the problem. By using public and private sectors of society, it provides greater awareness and “better” solutions to address the problem. Lastly, the more recent “P” added is partnership in which acts all elements and agents in a society do their part to end human/sex trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2021).

According to the Polaris Project (2023) who cited the Global Modern Slavery Directory (2017) which is a database of organizations around the world that focus on the issue of human trafficking, forced labor, and exploitation, stated that there are a total of 2400 organizations

(currently) that are working to eradicate human trafficking. However, it is important to point out that not all organizations focus on the same topic of human/sex trafficking and as stated earlier in the theory section. Different agencies/organizations focus on different dimensions of the problem. The different typologies determine how the organizations construct the definition of the problem (human/sex trafficking) and develop different solutions to the problem based on the definition. Some of the typologies that fall under the construction of human/sex trafficking “fall along axes of movement (domestic vs. international), type of labor (sexual vs. nonsexual), and age (minor and legal adult)” (Nawyn, Birdal & Glogower, 2013, p. 57). Once a typology is picked, it is the first step in shaping the problem. For example, stated by Shih (2016)

“research found that a growing contingent of American evangelical Christian organizations co-opt the antitrafficking movement to promote the sexual politics of ‘new abolition’- reframing a long-standing moral objection to sex work and prostitution within the newer lens of human trafficking” (p. 69, as cited by Bernstein, 2008).

The perception of the problem and typology of human/sex trafficking as a moral problem will shape how the organization is run and how it plans on solving the problem. One way these agencies might do to address the problem is to promote and advocate for the abolition and criminalization of sex work. This perception illustrates the idea that women or girls who do sex work are victims of sex trafficking, and are not there willingly. Other agencies may disagree with this typology and definition of the problem of human/trafficking because these type of anti-trafficking “narratives have affected the sex worker rights movements” (Lerum & Brents, 2016, p. 21). That movement supports the rights of women/girls or anyone in sex work to have agency with their own bodies, and the rights to be safe during it.

An example of how the typology and construction of definition and understanding of sex trafficking by nonprofit organizations can influence actions to address the problem is in Shih's article "Not in my 'Backyard Abolitionism': Vigilante Rescue against American Sex Trafficking" in 2016. The article starts by discussing that in 2008, a nonprofit organization named *Not for Sale* "launched a campaign advocating 'backyard abolitionism,' training citizens to seek out and identify victims of human trafficking as part of their everyday activities" (Shih, 2016, p. 67). The goal of the "backyard abolition" was to use American citizens to help identify victims in trafficking in the U.S., and specifically in this article: Southern California. The citizens were not trained properly to identify victims and did not have any formal authority in the efforts, but their "strategies are justified through state, nonprofit, and mass-mediated claims of human trafficking's prevalence" (Shih, 2016, p. 67). Shih collected data through ethnographic methods with participant observations and some interviews. Shih's work, "asks how such 'vigilante rescue' efforts reveal a carceral extension of neoliberal U.S. state power through human trafficking's urban governance" (Shih, 2016, p. 67).

Since 2000, policies made to confront human trafficking, have led to public awareness of trafficking, specifically sex trafficking. The prevalence of more public awareness of trafficking helped create a "moral sex panic" surrounding issues of trafficking and "anxieties about immigration, politics of border control, race, class, and gender inequalities" (Shih, 2016, p. 68). With these anxieties, Christian organizations took up a mantle in the antitrafficking movement to reframe "a long standing moral objection to sex work and prostitution within the newer lens of human trafficking" (Shih, 2016, p. 68). One of the down sides of this moral panic and moral obligation to help is to frame only sex trafficking and not any other form of trafficking, like labor trafficking, despite researchers indicating the latter being more prevalent. An example of this



taking place, is the human trafficking visas (T-visas) in the U.S. that are granted to sex trafficking victims, which can create consequences for other migrant individuals and exclude “pathways for migration and citizenship for nonvictim categories-typically men and victims of labor” (Shih, 2016, p. 68). This problem creates a definitional issue of what constitutes being a human trafficking victim or a victim of human smuggling and the “hierarchy” of sex trafficking over labor trafficking.

### **Literature Review Conclusion**

As stated previously, there is a widespread increase in awareness and many efforts to combat human trafficking domestically and internationally. However, there is definitional ambiguity about what constitutes sex trafficking and the proper ways to confront them. The absence of an adequate definition creates "empirical challenges for researchers" (McCarthy, 2014, p. 223) because it is difficult to understand the full scope of human trafficking. Still, it also has "impacts on policymaking and implementations" (McCarthy, 2014, p. 223), making it hard to create national and international ways to regulate, prevent, and punish those involved.

Two main issues with existing definitions of human trafficking are the role of coercion and the blurring between sex work and sex trafficking. Most definitions, like the U.S. definition: "sex trafficking is defined as when commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act had not attained 18 years of age" (Legal Information Institute), includes coercion as a critical factor in trafficking. However, most research excludes what types of coercion and to what extent coercion is used because some victims might be willing to go with the perpetrator because it's the better/only option they have. The debate between coercion and human agency flows into the discussion of sex work and sex trafficking. The "central distinction between consenting prostitution and sex trafficking is the use

of force, fraud, or coercion for exploitation" (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017, p. 1); of course, the keyword used here is *exploitation*. However, since sex trafficking is a deep, underground operation, it is difficult to determine who is a victim of sex trafficking or how to distinguish that from consenting sex work. The blurry distinction between the two "has led to erroneous criminalization of sex trafficked victims and the unsuccessful prosecution of sex traffickers" (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017, p. 2). The forgotten difference has led anti-sex work and antitrafficking activists to blur lines. So, they advocate that all forms of sex work are "inherently exploitative, that sex work is not "real" work, and that few, if any, individuals ever choose to do it" (Lerum and Brents, 2016, p. 19). Shih's (2016) article, "civilian vigilantism" and the organizations they studied also blur the lines between sex work and sex trafficking. It led them to "policing and punishing sex workers and immigrants" (p. 69), making this not an issue of sex trafficking but of stereotypes of immigrants, especially immigrant women's sexuality.

Despite all the essential knowledge I have gained from all these sources, they all left me wondering how one constructs their understanding of sex trafficking. Many articles mention a lack of a proper definition of sex trafficking among researchers, making data and some of the methods to study trafficking unreliable. However, they falter in understanding how these researchers develop their knowledge and definition of the problem. For example, Shih's (2016) article studied two organizations in Southern California about their antitrafficking vigilantism and their actions to help rescue the victims. However, the earlier authors fell short in asking how the individuals in these organizations understood the issue and how they came together to address it. The makeup for these organizations is different: one is a group of young, white middle-class males who used their "identities of potential consumers to penetrate spaces of commercial sex without arousing suspicion" (Shih, 2016, p. 77) and the other is older, white

middle-class females who went to places like Koreatown and MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, to train "sex workers as jewelry makers in the name of human trafficking rescue and rehabilitation" (Shih, 2016, p. 79). It fascinated me how two organizations are combating the same issue, sex trafficking, but have different understandings and ways to address it. So my goal is to fill a gap that will ask organizations specifically how they construct, understand, and define what sex trafficking is and how their construction of the problem influences how they address it.

## CHAPTER IV: METHODS

The objective of this study is to understand how different agencies construct and define the problem of sex trafficking and, based on those definitions, how these agencies try to address the problem. To accomplish this goal, I implemented a qualitative methods approach of data collection and analysis. I have taken a social constructionist approach and evaluate how the agencies become claim makers by defining sex trafficking as a particular kind of problem. By understanding how the agencies construct the problem sex trafficking, I hope to understand how shaping the definition of the problem of sex trafficking coincides with how the agencies develop strategies to address the problem.

### **Participants**

The participants of this research, are three individuals who work for three different agencies (Agency A, Agency B, and Agency C) within Illinois. I reached about to multiple agencies throughout Illinois via email asking if they would like to participant in this research. All three individuals worked at their respective agencies for at least a year and have leaderships roles within them. Each agency and each individual will receive full confidentiality to keep them protected, especially since information for both are accessible to the public. For the first agency, I refer the person I interviewed as Stephanie and the agency as Agency A. The second agency, I named it Agency B and the interviewee as Amanda. Lastly, the third agency is referred as Agency C and the interviewee is Mary.

### **Conceptual Sampling**

For my research, I conducted a small-scale qualitative, comparative case-study of three agencies within Illinois. Due to conducting a qualitative study, it allows researchers to “focus less on a sample’s representativeness or on detailed techniques for drawing a probability sample”

(Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2013, p. 29). In my research, I used a nonprobability sample. The nonprobability sample method allowed for the selection process of the population for this study to be subjective, and focus “on how the small sample or small collection of cases, units, or activities, illuminates’ social life or the phenomenon being studied” (Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2013, p. 29). I created a list of agencies/organizations within Illinois, and then reached out by email if they would like to participate. I chose to focus on regional agencies/organizations in Illinois “to collect specific cases, events, or actions that can clarify or deepen researchers understanding about the phenomenon under study” (Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2013, p. 29); which was to understand how agencies defined and approached the problem of sex trafficking.

The three agencies that have been chosen in this study represent the multiple dimensions and approaches to the problem of sex trafficking. The approaches that are reflected by the three agencies within this research are law enforcement, prevention education, and support for survivors. The three approaches from the agencies reflects the greater, broader efforts that are being made to combat this complex, multi-dimensional problem of sex trafficking. Each of the three agencies and their approaches captures the major goals, dimensions, and broader efforts that can be seen by other agencies/organizations, institutions, campaigns (e.g., Blue Campaign), and even internationally.

For example, the Blue Campaign, which is a “national public awareness campaign designed to educate the public, law enforcement, and other industry partners to recognize the indicators of human trafficking, and how to appropriately respond to possible cases” (Blue Campaign, 2023). The Blue Campaign objectives for educational awareness “consists of two foundational elements, prevention of human trafficking and protection of exploited persons” (Blue Campaign, 2023). To accomplish their objectives, Blue Campaign works closely with the

Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Center for Countering Human Trafficking (CCHT) to "develop general awareness trainings, as well as specific educational resources to help reduce victimization within vulnerable populations" (Blue Campaign, 2023). Blue Campaign addresses the all three approaches (law enforcement, prevention education, and support for survivors) that my individual participants do, but do it a macro-level way. They address the larger, broader issues surrounding human trafficking. Blue Campaign partners with private and public agencies/organizations, law enforcement, and other institutions to address human trafficking at all levels to have better knowledgeable about the problem and how to be the most impactful.

My small-scale sampling may call into question how relevant or generalizable or impactful my research is at a macro, broader (even international) level. However, from a qualitative research approach, "the individuals or cases are selected as participants for a qualitative study not because they represent their population (and therefore, the issue of generalizability) but owing to their relevance to the research topic" (Ishak & Abu Bakar, 2013, p. 30). The agencies in this research, do reflect the range of approaches (law enforcement, prevention education, and support for survivors) and efforts within the complex, multi-dimensional problem of sex trafficking.

### **Data Collection**

To collect data, I conducted semi-structured interviews of the informants from the agencies. Each interview can last approximately 60-90 minutes from each informant. The interviews were conducted via video-call (Zoom) because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I analyze how the agencies define sex trafficking as a problem and their solutions to the problem, making interviews crucial to this research. The interview's provide the best insight in how these different

agencies understand and construct their definitions of sex trafficking and develop an agenda to address the problem as they define it.

As stated earlier, the interviews are semi-structured with a list of preset questions but allows for “open-ended” responses and the introduction of topics and issues that I cannot anticipate. By conducting semi-structured interviews in this format, it allows the participants to provide more information about what is important to them as well as the agency they work for. It is also important to point out that I have a gate-keeper who is knowledgeable about this topic and is willing to help refer other informants to this research. With the gate-keeper, resulting in a snow-ball sample of informants.

Alongside conducting interviews, I conducted a media content analysis of the agencies’ internet presence: social media accounts and their websites. The agencies’ websites and social media explains their mission statement and goals, whom they help, volunteer options, and specific programs. By evaluating each agencies websites and media presence, I planned to understand how accessible they are, and how the agencies’ define and address the problem and its relation to their efforts and goals.

### **Data Analysis**

For the analysis of my data collection, I have audio-record and then transcribe the interviews verbatim. After I transcribed the interviews, I identified themes and statements, inductively, according to the interpretive approach. The interpretive approach research “how people view an object or event and the meaning that they attribute to it are what is important” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 19). This approach allows me to understand the “people look at matters through distinct lenses and reach somewhat different conclusions” (Rubin and Rubin, 2012, p. 19). In terms of the agencies I interviewed, each agency (hypothetically) has a different

understanding about sex trafficking and what solutions are best to address it. Following the initial compare and contrast analysis, I clustered the interviews I “feel are similar or different” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 310); then ask myself “what things, ideas, or factors make for similarity or difference” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 310). The clustering the interviews, provides insight as to how each agency understand and approach the problem of sex trafficking

Alongside doing a compare and contrast of the interviews, I created memos. Memos are “the beginnings of analysis and interpretation of what it is you found through a given analytical procedure” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 311). The memos provides summaries and descriptions of what the interviewees mentioned in their interviews and will be able to link up similar or different ideas of how the agencies constructed their views of sex trafficking. After creating memos, I coded them by assigning meaning to what my interviewees said.

### **Research Reflexivity**

It is essential to point out that I have never been a victim of sex trafficking or have worked/volunteered at an agency that focuses on this issue. So, I kept in mind that my participants and I will have different backgrounds, values, and beliefs, and these differences will impact the interviews and the research process. I have always be aware of those differences and any other differences that come to light during my discussions and research process between my participants and myself. I remained as objective as I can to make sure my biases are not influencing me throughout the research process. I want my participants’ voices and construction of the social problem and their solutions to sex trafficking to be the main narrative and represented adequately in this research.

With my background, it would be beneficial to understand how I got interested in my topic of study: human/sex trafficking. I first got interested in studying human/sex trafficking



when I watched the movie *Taken* in 2008 when I was ten. The film centered around Liam Neeson, a father of a daughter who went abroad for vacation and ended up getting kidnapped to be sold for sex. The movie *Taken* and other television programs (like the news) and advertisements gave the impression that girls are being kidnapped and sold for sexual purposes. However, for my undergraduate anthropologist senior thesis, I wanted to truly understand how the public understands what human, especially sex, trafficking is and how some become victims. I wanted to understand if others were adapted into a particular way of thinking (the myths) about the issue of sex trafficking because of movies like *Taken*. My small sample was 30 individuals within the Midwest who answered an open-ended questionnaire in 2020. For the majority of the respondents, assumptions/understanding of sex trafficking did come from movies like *Taken* and the media's exaggerated claims. About half of the respondents thought that sex trafficking was the only form of trafficking, and it happened abroad and did not occur in the U.S., and if it did, it was foreigners being brought over. Of course, trafficking (in all forms) occurs domestically and internationally, and the U.S. is not excluded from that. Many also didn't know any laws or agencies that deal with the issue of sex trafficking and had no complete understanding of what sex trafficking is. From my small sample, it was interesting to me how little people know or understand the issue of sex trafficking (and human trafficking in general), and what little they know came from questionable sources.

After my analysis as an undergraduate, I wanted to expand my knowledge of sex trafficking (and human trafficking) as a graduate student in sociology and possibly do my master's thesis on it. However, it should be pointed out that studying the topic of human/sex trafficking is quite tricky because of the range of empirical data on it. Of course, the best people to ask about the issue of human/sex trafficking are the people involved, victims, and perpetrators;

however, for more insight into the construction of the problem and countermeasures. I turned to talk to agencies who are currently operating to address the issue of sex trafficking, and hopefully, going this route will provide me with a better understanding of the issue and what solutions are being made to address it.

## **Ethics**

In any research, researchers should always consider the ethical issues within their own study. For my study, I provided informed consent letters to all of my interview participants before I conducted any interviews to make sure that they all have “been informed about the nature of the research project” (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 73). The informed consents provides a detailed explanation about the project, what the informants role and contribution is to the goal in the study, list any potential risks to the informants or the agency they work for, how the data collected will be used, and my personal contact information (Hesse-Biber, 2017). All my informants have participated voluntarily and will be able to opt-out of the study at any given time.

In ethics, confidentiality is vital to keep informants identity safe and protected. In this project, I interviewed broad members and paid staff. Each individual’s identity is protected from the public. It is important to have full confidentiality because I do not want my participates or the agencies to receive any retribution from the information they provided during the interviews. In my research, the identities of my informants and the agencies will not be named, so I am using aliases instead. Since I am recording my interviews, I made sure the audio recordings are safe and protected on my personal computer that is password protected.

It should also be mentioned that my project will be reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) who are “responsible for carrying out U.S. government regulations proposed for

human research (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 71). IRB will look over my proposed study and will evaluate if there are any major risks or unfair treatment to the participants and will make sure consent procedures like the informed consent form is provided and reviewed properly.

### **Conclusion of Methods**

Since 2000, numerous steps have been taken forward to address human trafficking within the United States and globally. With the increase of awareness of human trafficking, much research has taken place to understand why it is occurring, the scope of human trafficking, and the proper steps to prevent and help victims who are being trafficked. One of the significant difficulties to researchers, policymakers, and organizations is the scarcity of a formal, shared definition of what human trafficking is, what victims are included or excluded, what punishment should be, and what solutions should be created to prevent it.

For this research, I have taken a social constructionist approach to how different agencies form their understanding and construction of defining human trafficking, specifically sex trafficking, and that construction influences their work to address the problem. It is crucial to understand how different organizations come up with their construction of defining sex trafficking and how they address it. It will give insight into the issue's complexity and maybe reveal solutions to have a shared, proper definition of sex trafficking (human trafficking in general) so good policies, prevention, and punishment can be created and implemented domestically and internationally.

## CHAPTER V: THE THREE (PARTICIPATING) INFORMANTS AND AGENCIES

The following chapter goes into depth of the participating informants and agencies for this research. As stated previously, I interviewed three informants from three different agencies about the work they do at the agency, and what the agency itself does to define and address the social problem of sex trafficking. This chapter contains three small biographies of each informant and agency, and two barriers and limitations each informant has acknowledged within the interview. *Table 1* (below) illustrates a brief overview of the research participants and their positions and responsibilities. *Table 2* (below) portrays a brief overview of the agencies and their approaches to the problem, goals, missions, approaches to help victims/survivors, services, and funding.

### 1: Research Participants Brief Overview

	Stephanie	Amanda	Mary
Agency	Agency A	Agency B	Agency C
Roles/Positions	Task Force Coordinator	Director of SS Program	Director of Operations and Development
Responsibilities	Conducting trainings; Collaborating with other task forces and agencies; Supporting the members of the task force/agency	In charge of oversight and training of the team and program; Create and manage content of violence prevention; Oversee a 24-hour survivor hotline	Handles money and budgeting; Maximize the agency's workflow, efficiency, and effectiveness; Improves day-to-day operations

2: Agencies Brief Overview

	Agency A	Agency B	Agency C
Typification and Approaches to Address Sex Trafficking	Law Enforcement	Prevention Education	Protecting//Supporting Victims/Survivors
Goals	Increase the identification of victims  Successfully prosecute the traffickers	Support survivors of sexual assaults and address gender-based violence  *Future goals: incorporate sex trafficking survivors into program	Raising awareness  Rescue victims  Restoration  *All goals and work is motivated by faith and through God
Missions	Raising awareness; Providing education; Training to combat all forms of human trafficking	Eliminate racism; Empower women; Promote justice	To reach and serve women survivors of sexual exploitation; sex trafficking; severe abuse
Approaches to Helping Victims and Survivors	Victim-centered approach  Trauma-Informed approach	Trauma-Informed Care approach  Survivor-Centered approaches	Long-term housing  Holistic-Care programming approach
Services	<u>Victim side</u> - Comprehensive Case Management; Crisis Intervention; Counseling  <u>Education side</u> - Training Law Enforcement	<u>Victim side</u> - Counseling; Advocacy Services; Prevention Education  <u>Education side</u> - Trainings and Presentations within the community	<u>Victim side</u> - Provide a residential community house for women to live (up to 24 months)  <u>Other side</u> - Engage with local community to bring awareness; Collaborate with others to rescue those who are oppressed

Table Continues

Table Continued

Funding	Federal Grants from Office for Victims of Crime  *Needs to work with Law Enforcement and Center for Prevention of Abuse to receive the funding	Federal Grants State Grants	Gets funding through donations from churches; businesses; community; individuals  *Currently does not receive any federally funding
Barriers/Limitations Discussed from Interviews	Law Enforcement Itself  Overlap of “Sex Trafficking” and “Domestic Violence”	Confronting Gender-Based Violence and Inequality of Women  Individuals with Disabilities	Biases and Links between Sex Trafficking and Sex Work  Lack of Resources

## AGENCY A

### **The Informant: Stephanie**

The person I interviewed for Agency A is the task force coordinator. For Agency A’s participant, I will refer the person as “Stephanie,” to reiterate the importance of confidentiality by providing pseudonym names for my participants.

Stephanie’s background is in victim services, where she “operated two emergency shelters, as well as, did outreach case management and therapy” (Stephanie, 2022) for victims of domestic violence and sexual assaults. During their work, it became apparent that the victims who came to the shelters were not just victims of domestic violence or sexual assault. According to Stephanie (2022), their agency “were seeing more and more survivors of sex trafficking at the time,” however, the “individuals who came in for services were presenting themselves as either a victims of domestic violence or sexual assault.” After sitting down and talking to the individuals and “hearing more about their stories, we started seeing that there were other bigger issues, and we came to find out that it was sex trafficking” (Stephanie, 2022). After these discussions, “it

became apparent that we needed to have someone fully focused on that issue” (Stephanie, 2022), and Stephanie decided to take it upon themselves and “just dived in to learn as much about as I could” (Stephanie, 2022).

Stephanie helped create a division in the organization that focused primarily on human trafficking. According to an online source of a brief interview with Stephanie, it was asked what she was most proud of and she responded,

“of the support that is allowing my team to make real change in the anti-trafficking movement. Sixty-five victims of human trafficking have connected with us and 2,500 people have received our training” (Agency A Website, 2020).

With the work she found herself doing, Stephanie joined forces with the Illinois State Police to write grant to fund the task force that previously had been unfunded since 2018. In 2020, the task force got the grant and the funding to continue its work with the issue of human trafficking, with specific interests in sex and labor trafficking. At the time of receiving the grant, Stephanie switched roles and became the task force coordinator.

As their work as the task force coordinator, Stephanie have been conducting trainings throughout the state and collaborating with other task forces and organizations. One example of their work, Stephanie was invited by the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police to discuss about human trafficking to “law enforcement from around the state and learn about the realities of sex and labor trafficking” (Agency A Social Media, 2022). Another example of Stephanie’s work, she attended the International Association of Human Trafficking Investigators (IAHTI) Conference. The IAHTI is a nonprofit organization

“combating human trafficking by arming law enforcement officers, prosecutors and crime analysts around the world with the training, technical support, resources and

members forum they need to identify and rescue victims and prosecute their traffickers” (IAHTI, 2023).

At the IAHTI conference, Stephanie received “classroom instruction from experts in the field, but IAHTI provided numerous networking opportunities to build connections with other anti-trafficking professionals” (Agency A Social Media, 2022). As one of Stephanie’s main roles as the task force coordinator “is to make sure that I am supporting our memberships...so if there are training opportunities that I come across, I make sure that I relay that information to them,” (Stephanie, 2022) it is important to “make sure they’re aware of any changes in best practice when working with victims and survivors” (Stephanie, 2022).

For the last couple of years, Stephanie has been working closely with the issue of human trafficking. Stephanie has been working with law enforcement, other task forces and agencies to come together to learn, train, and bring awareness of the issue to the community and to better understand how help victims and survivors.

### **Background of Agency A**

In 2017, the US Attorney of the Central District of Illinois created an initiative with the Illinois State Police and the Center for Prevention of Abuse to establish a collaborative approach to the issue of human trafficking. The initiative between the Illinois State Police and the Center for Prevention of Abuse led to the creation of Agency A to provide services to survivors of human trafficking within Central Illinois. Agency A is one of many regional task forces within Illinois that work together to provide services to survivors of human trafficking. There is a statewide task force as well that collaborates with the regional task forces, but they primarily focus on legislative change and "looking at professional development, networking, and best practices across the state" (Stephanie, 2022).



Agency A, in 2020, received funding from the Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime. The funding from the Office for Victims of Crime is split between two entities, the Illinois State Police and the Center for Prevention of Abuse, and to receive this funding, one must have "a partnership between law enforcement and victim service providers" (Stephanie, 2022). Agency A, for obvious reasons, works closely with the Illinois State Police and the Center for Prevention of Abuse. With the partnerships, they are granted the funding to help pay for the education and training they provide for law enforcement and the services for victims, like housing, healthcare, transportation, clothing, and many more.

Now, let's talk more about the services that Agency A provides. On the victim services side, they provide comprehensive case management, which consists of "working with a case manager one on one to identify short-and long-term goals" (Stephanie, 2022). The short-term goals can include "emergency housing, it might be food, clothing, or medical care," (Stephanie, 2022) and the short-term relies on "identifying those needs and then providing them directly, through one of our service providers, or providing a referral to a community resource, if it's not something that we're able to assist with" (Stephanie, 2022). For long term goals for the agency, one example can be helping victims and survivors that

"are requesting assistance with getting their record expunged or sealed for some prior convictions...we've got a lot of folks who have prostitution related charges...or some with forgery convictions, some with fraud convictions, but also many with drug offenses." (Stephanie, 2022).

Agency A also has crisis intervention which is connected to their crisis hotline, which individuals can call if they are seeking help, support, and/or information. Hotlines are able to provide a

“central point for victims and survivors of human trafficking...it connects the victims to referral like medical care, shelter, and legal assistance, and also fastens the response to human trafficking cases” (HTCourts, 2023).

According to the 2021 report by the National Human Trafficking Hotline, “Illinois is among the states with high levels of reported human trafficking activity...the report cites 243 cases and identifies 355 victims.” The agency also conducts safety planning which allows them to "identify some strategies that a victim might be able to use to keep themselves a little bit safe," (Stephanie, 2022) and that could include

“taking alternative route home from work or school...it could be identifying a code word to share with a friend or family member so that if you were to say that code word on the phone that they would know that you were in danger...it could be providing resources on how people might track you through your cell phone or how they might install spyware or apps” (Stephanie, 2022).

Lastly, Agency A does provide therapy and counseling, either individually or conduct group therapy sessions, to provide support to victims and survivors. Now, for the other services Agency A provides, they arrange training and technical assistance to law enforcement, “schools, businesses, healthcare programs...just anybody who wants the information," (Stephanie, 2022) and that includes the agency’s own members. Many of the member organizations

“don’t have specific human trafficking programs...for example they might be a domestic violence shelter who is willing to provide emergency shelter to a survivor of human trafficking, but that’s not their primary population, so we’ll provide some technical assistance and some training to those organizations” (Stephanie, 2022).

It is important to have specific training related to human trafficking. Hence, if any of these entities come into contact with someone who is a victim and/or a survivor of human trafficking, they understand how to handle the situation and provide the proper assistance and/or service. Moving the discussion away from the services, every organization and agency usually center their work (services) around specific goals and missions they hope to accomplish and achieve and Agency A is no different. Agency A has two primary goals they wish to accomplish,

"one is to increase the identification of victims, and then the second goal would be to prosecute the traffickers successfully...we want to hold the offenders criminally accountable for their actions" (Stephanie, 2022).

Agency A are completing their goal for identification through spreading awareness of the issue of human trafficking and by doing this, they are "providing a lot of trainings across the state, making sure that people know what indicators to look for, making sure that they know that there is a task force and that we have member organizations that can assist with the investigations (on the law enforcement side) or we have folks who can provide emergency housing, case management, and therapy sessions" (Stephanie, 2022). According to Stephanie, Agency A is doing a great job in accomplishing their first goal of identification, "we're getting referrals in...we're getting tips in...survivors are reaching out...we're providing those resources and services to them" (Stephanie, 2022).

The second goal, according to Stephanie, "in terms of investigations and prosecutions...we're not doing as good on that" (Stephanie, 2022). Majority of the prosecutions have been on the federal level, so that means that the trials for the offenders (traffickers) have been conducted by the U.S. Attorney's Office and Stephanie (2022) states that Agency A "had great success in having successful prosecutions with folks getting quite a bit of jail time."

However, since human trafficking is very complex, and prosecuting and sentencing offenders properly has been difficult. According to the Trafficking in Persons Report (2022), in the FY (fiscal year) 2021, the United States Department of Homeland Security opened 1,111 investigations related to human trafficking compared to the 947 cases in FY 2020 (57). The Department of Justice formally opened 603 human trafficking investigations; 577 cases were predominately sex trafficking, and the other 26 were primarily labor trafficking (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2022, p. 57). The DOJ "initiated a total of 228 federal human trafficking prosecutions in FY 2021, an increase from 210 in FY 2020 and 220 in FY 2019" (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2020, p. 57), and the traffickers that were convicted to human trafficking-related charges received a wide range of sentences, from six to life imprisonment, probation-only, or had a suspended sentence (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2022, p. 57). As explained by Stephanie for a reason why it is difficult to prosecute and sentence traffickers,

“I think that is occurring because a lot of the times these crimes are charged as other offenses, so maybe kidnapping, sexual assault, aggravated sexual assault...so it’s not being tried as sex trafficking or an exploitation crime” (Stephanie, 2022).

### **About the Center for Prevention of Abuse**

The Center for Prevention of Abuse was established in 1975 as a Rape Crisis Hotline, and the hotline was created to serve people in sexual assault situations. Throughout the years, the Center for Prevention of Abuse has added departments, services, and programs to its rhetoric to help the community. The mission of CFPA (Center for Prevention of Abuse) is to help men, women, and children to be able to live a life without violence and/or abuse by providing services for individuals and conducting prevention education. Starting in 2018, the CFPA added the human trafficking services department, becoming one of the first federally granted and trained

providers of shelters and services for human trafficking. According to the CFPA's 2022 Annual Report (2022), "36 victims of labor and sex trafficking received comprehensive care and services" (p. 1) and conducted "31 trainings to law enforcement, first responders, medical providers, utility workers and more about human trafficking indicators (p. 1).

### **Findings and Discussion of Agency A**

Throughout the interview, Stephanie highlighted the collaborative efforts of the Center for Prevention of Abuse and the Illinois State Police to create task forces across the state to bring awareness, and provide education and training to address the issue of human trafficking. Stephanie, during the interview, discussed the services and the goals of Agency A. I learned through this interview that despite the best efforts of Agency A, there are some barriers that arose that should be discussed. One barrier has to deal with law enforcement itself, and their perceptions of sex trafficking and the perceptions community has towards the police. Another barrier that could affect the work of Agency A are the overlapping lines between "sex trafficking" and "domestic violence."

#### **Barrier One: Law Enforcement Itself**

The Center for Prevention of Abuse, which houses Stephanie's position and the task force, is framed by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA). In 2000, the 106th U.S. Congress enacted the TVPA which "equipped the U.S. Government with new tools and resources to mount a comprehensive and coordinated campaign to eliminate modern forms of slavery domestically and internationally" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022). The TVPA created the 3 P's framework: protection, prevention, and prosecution, to fight and address the topic of human trafficking. Protection is centered around helping victims, and this could be done by getting foreign victims immigration status ( T visas or U visas) or providing health and services to

victims. Prevention is to strengthen the U.S. Government's efforts to the cause of stopping the crime of human trafficking by working with other countries to deter the use of trafficking or creating the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report that ranks countries based on their efforts to address human trafficking. Lastly, the prosecution is to prosecute traffickers more effectively for their crimes, and this can be seen by the strengthening penalties for trafficking crimes and "adding new criminal provisions prohibiting forced labor, trafficking with respect to peonage, slavery, involuntary servitude, or forced labor, and sex trafficking" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2022).

With the TVPA established, there is a very strong law enforcement emphasis on addressing the problem of human trafficking. As stated above, one of the goals of Agency A is "to successfully prosecute the traffickers, so we want to hold the offenders criminally accountable for their actions" (Stephanie, 2022). To accomplish this goal, law enforcement plays a significant role in helping identify cases of trafficking, assisting victims and survivors, and prosecuting traffickers. Suggested by Farrell, McDevitt & Fahy (2008)

"local law enforcement may be in the best position to identify cases of human trafficking because they know their own communities and are involved in routine activities which bring them into contact with local criminal elements where human trafficking may be occurring" (Clawson, et al, 2006b, p. 42, as cited by Farrell, McDevitt & Fahy, 2008, p. 26).

Despite the efforts and commitment of law enforcement to the issue of human trafficking, depending on their location they might prioritize other crimes and problems and certain communities biases towards the police. For example, during the interview, Stephanie mentioned Chicago and their task force. Stephanie (2022) commented that

“one of the challenges that we have, that kind of hinder our efforts, is just the divide between Chicago area and then the rest of the state...Chicago and our rural communities have different demographics and we’ve got different makeup of traffickers and trafficking victims, so I think sometimes when we’re talking about trafficking within our state, sometimes it looks very different depending upon what area or region you’re coming from...and so, I think that sometimes, it can cloud the waters with what we’re doing or how effective we could be.”

When dealing with places like Chicago, Stephanie implies that the views and responses by law enforcement may be different than rural communities within the state. What Stephanie did not mention about why that may be the case. Chicago is a big city, with approximately 2 million people), law enforcement may prioritize other forms of crimes (e.g. violent crimes, drug related, gang related activity) rather than sex trafficking. Law enforcement may direct their attention and prioritize other types of crimes (e.g. violent crimes, drug related, gun violence, gang related) because those crimes are more of a pressing issue, and investigating and prosecuting offenders are far less difficult than a complex organized crime like sex trafficking. Stephanie also did not mention certain communities might have biases towards law enforcement because of law enforcement’s history of discrimination and prejudices (race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, sexuality) towards those communities, and it could make it difficult to identify victims and traffickers within those areas (communities).

As a requirement to receive the federal grant, to further the emphasis of law enforcements role of combating human trafficking in the TVPA, Agency A conducts trainings for law enforcement. The trainings are conducted to inform law enforcement about the best practices and strategies to identify victims and survivors, how to investigate human trafficking cases, and how

to overall understand and address the issue of human trafficking. Stephanie has conducted many trainings and they are “proud of our for law enforcement...we’ve got great training in identification and interdiction for law enforcement” (Stephanie, 2022). Stephanie continues to say,

“everything else really goes does relate back to identifying victims...we have to be able to identify victims and more people will be prosecuted for this crime if victims are identified and if the victims are treated respectably and with understanding” (Stephanie, 2022).

It is necessary for law enforcement to be able to identify victims of trafficking because often times there are misconceptions about this crime. Stephanie states that law enforcement need to

“stop looking at victims of sex trafficking as prostitutes or sex workers or willing participants...and make sure that they understand that prostitution or commercial sex, when there are elements of force, fraud, and coercion-that is human trafficking...they [law enforcement] need to understand that this is not a victimless crime” (Stephanie, 2022).

Hence the importance of the trainings Agency A conducts. The trainings are designed to teach law enforcement how to look for key indicators (e.g., not allowed to speak for themselves, refusal to make eye contact, no control of important documents, showing signs of physical/sexual abuse, appears malnourished or under the influence of drugs or alcohol, appears to be anxious or paranoid, needs permission for simple decisions or needs, etc.). Being able to identify red flags or indicators can help potential trafficking victims and arresting their trafficker.

The trainings also help put away any misconceptions or biases law enforcement might have towards sex trafficking and prostitution. Many victims have been misidentified and treated



negatively by law enforcement because they might perceive the individual as a sex worker and not a victim of trafficking. Resulting in victims getting arrested, charged for prostitution, and then released right back into the same situation instead of getting help and support to get away from the situation. Law enforcement is essential to help protect, prevent, and prosecute in human trafficking cases. Human trafficking is a complex crime and its usually under the radar and it is often hard to prosecute; law enforcement can be the stepping stone to recover victims and properly investigate to put traffickers away.

### **Barrier Two: Overlap of “Sex Trafficking” and “Domestic Violence”**

When discussing about sex trafficking, it is necessary to recognize the overlap between sex trafficking and domestic violence. Sex trafficking and domestic violence do not occur separately all of the time but often there is “a marked overlap in the pattern of behaviors that both abusers and traffickers use to exert power and control over a victim” (NNEDV, 2017).

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) definition of sex trafficking is:

“the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such acts has not attained 18 years of age” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

The federal definition of domestic violence is:

“a pattern of abusive behavior in ant relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner...it can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, psychological, or technological actions or threats of actions or other patterns of coercive behavior that influence another person within an intimate partner relationship” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

Domestic violence perpetrators and traffickers often use similar tactics to display power and control over their victims, and that can include the psychological manipulation, physical and sexual abuse, and withholding important documents and finances. Other ways domestic violence and sex trafficking intersect are in forms of intimate partner trafficking and familial trafficking.

Intimate partner trafficking is:

“spouses or intimate partners may compel their partner to engage in commercial sex, forced labor or involuntary servitude...the abuser may tell their partner that this exploitation is for the benefit of their family, the relationship, for financial support or to support an addiction” (Bullard, 2012).

Familial trafficking is:

“family members, often adults or older individuals, may compel their relatives to engage in commercial sex, forced labor or involuntary servitude...the abuser utilizes existing power dynamics and vulnerabilities to exploit the family member” (Bullard, 2012).

Before working at Agency A, Stephanie previously worked for an organization that specialized in domestic violence work and operated emergency shelters for women in abusive relationships. Stephanie stated the organization noticed an increase of victims and survivors of sex trafficking coming to seek shelter and services, “we were seeing more and more survivors of sex trafficking at that time...individuals who came in for services, presenting as either a victim of domestic violence or sexual assault” (Stephanie, 2022). During the interview, one of the questions that were asked by the interviewer was the similarities and differences between the sex trafficking and domestic violence organizations since Stephanie had work experiences with both types of organizations. Stephanie stated,

“there were tons of similarities with basic case management, crisis intervention, counseling...some of the differences though, were the types of tactics that were being used to manipulate or coerce individuals, the fact that there wasn’t always an existing relationship. So, with domestic violence, its abuse within an intimate partner relationship or a familial relationship, and with many of our sexual assault clients there was some sort of pre-existing relationship in many of those cases but not all. With our trafficking survivors, we were seeing quite a few who had relationships with their traffickers, but we were also seeing many who did not have those existing relationships” (Stephanie, 2022).

When discussing the two concepts, Stephanie seems to overlook the intersection between sex trafficking and domestic violence. For years, advocates have distinguish the links between sex trafficking and domestic violence. It is common in research and discussions that sex trafficking can occur alongside domestic violence, and domestic violence can occur alongside sex trafficking. As mentioned before, sex trafficking and domestic violence victims and survivors often experience similar forms of abuse: physical and sexual violence, control of documents and finances, psychological and emotional manipulation. The intersection of sex trafficking and domestic violence can transpire in multiple cases, such as

“traffickers are also domestic violence abusers; traffickers utilize complex history of victims with complex histories pf abuse to further other forms of abuse in trafficking; domestic violence abusers use a victim’s history of trafficking to intimidate, control and further abuse the victim; or domestic violence and human trafficking are separate phenomenon in the life of a victim, however, impact the survivor’s ability to trust institutions, state structures, and people in general” (Freedom Network USA, 2015).

An individual who is experiencing domestic violence can be vulnerable to traffickers, particularly when the abuser has control and power of the victims finances. Many of the victims are willing to take a ‘risky’ job or employment to better their lives and their families lives or take risk because it might be better than the dangers of staying at their home or country. Similar to domestic violence victims, sex trafficking victims can be vulnerable to domestic violence if they escaped their trafficker without assistance or support. Traffickers usually take away the rights, freedoms, financial resources, and important documents of their victims to isolate them and to increase their power and control over them.

Sex trafficking and domestic violence have been historically normalized as violence against women and girls. Gender-based violence (GBV) is:

“violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex or gender identity...it includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life” (Ott, 2021).

Victims and survivors of sex trafficking and domestic violence often experience the systematic gender inequality: geographical location, race, religion, socio-economic background, lack of resources, and sexuality. Taking away their fundamental human rights leave women and girls vulnerable to be exploited and manipulated, which can lead them to be in trafficking or violent situations.

When discussing about sex trafficking it cannot be ignored its overlapping nature with domestic violence, and under the umbrella term of gender-based violence. Women and girls are often the ones targeted for sex trafficking, “women and girls represent 65 per cent of all trafficking globally...more than 90 per cent of detected female victims are trafficked for the

purpose of sexual exploitation” (Bahous, 2022). Similarly, women experience intimate partner violence more often than men,

“1 in 4 women and 1 in 9 men experience intimate partner physical violence, intimate partner contact sexual violence, and/or intimate partner stalking with impacts such as injury, fearfulness, post-traumatic stress disorder, use of victim services, contraction of sexually transmitted disease” (NCADV, 2020).

With the similarities sex trafficking and domestic violence victims and survivors, both require similar kinds of trauma-informed services- housing, health care, drug and alcohol abuse treatment, mental health services, and employment to achieve security, independence, and healing. Domestic violence organizations and its victim-centered approach are a model for supporting trafficking victims since it promotes empowering the individuals, respecting their choices and decisions, and give them a sense of control to be able to meet the needs of the victims and survivors.

### **Summary of Agency A**

Agency A are dedicated to raising awareness, and providing education and training to the local community and law enforcement within Illinois to address the issue of human trafficking.

The agency values a victim-centered approach which

“is a way of engaging with victims that prioritizes listening, avoids re-traumatization, and systematically focuses on their safety, rights, well-being, expressed needs and choices...the purpose is to give back as much control to victims as feasible and ensure empathetic delivery of services in a non-judgmental manner” (UNHCR, 2020).

By using the victim-centered approach, Agency A is enlarging their efforts of identifying victims by increasing awareness throughout the state, so

“providing a lot of trainings across the state, making sure that people know what indicators to look for, making sure that they know that there is a task force and that we have member organizations that can assist with the investigations (on the law enforcement side) or we have folks who can provide emergency housing, case management, and therapy sessions” (Stephanie, 2022).

Also through the victim-centered approach, Agency A are educating and training law enforcement to be able to recognize and identify key indicators of victims of sex trafficking, be able to build rapport and build trust with a victim, and how to be sensitive and empathetic towards a victim. It is necessary for law enforcement to be able to understand certain behaviors, identify indicators, and act accordingly with a victim, so the victim feels supported, understood, and would be able to help the investigation be able to prosecute the perpetrator successfully.

Agency A is a

“federally funded grant, federally funded task force, we follow primarily the federal definition of sex trafficking from the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)...so when we provide education or resources to the community we are always referring back to that federal definition” (Stephanie, 2022).

The TVPA legislation gave the U.S. Government the ability to create a comprehensive and coordinated campaign to address and combat the issues of human trafficking domestically, as well as, internationally. The U.S. Government made it a priority to address and combat the issue of human trafficking, and one way to do this is to provide grants and funding to agencies and organizations with similar missions. The government and TVPA set out “to hold traffickers accountable, provide support to victims, and to try to prevent this crime from occurring in the first place” (Stephanie, 2022), hence the importance to Agency A to follow the federal definition

of sex trafficking. To be able to properly protect, prevent, and prosecute, it is important to follow certain definitions and guidelines to be successful in protecting, preventing, and prosecuting.

Since the establishment of Agency A (2017), it has been educating, conducting trainings, and spreading awareness of sex trafficking to law enforcement and the community. Agency A is committed to combat the issue of sex trafficking. With the backing from the government by providing funding and grants, Agency A will continue providing and supporting the victims and survivors of sex trafficking, and its trainings for law enforcement and community.

## **AGENCY B**

### **The Informant: Amanda**

The individual I interviewed for Agency B is the director of the SS program at one particular location. Throughout this paper, I will refer the person I interviewed as “Amanda” to provide confidentiality by using a pseudonym name.

Amanda has a bachelor’s degree in sociology and a master’s degree in international relations. Amanda got her master’s at a graduate school in Thailand, where she lived for about twelve years. It was during their time in Thailand where “my interests began about the surrounding complexities of human trafficking” (Amanda, 2022). For example, as part of their research, Amanda was a part of MTV Exit (End Exploitation and Trafficking) which is a campaign that

“aims to increase awareness and prevention of human trafficking through television programs, online content, live events, and partnerships with anti-trafficking organizations” (Business & Human Rights Resource Center, 2008).

Another part of Amanda’s research focused on males who were being trafficked because on

“the human trafficking part of it, in Thai law, it only been about 10 years (by the time I was doing my research) that is could be defined and possible for a male to be a victim of human trafficking” (Amanda, 2022).

Men and boys are often not mentioned when discussing about human trafficking but it does happen to men and boys;

“numbers on the trafficking of males are challenging to estimate and considered underreported; however, the United Nations estimates that boys account for 15% of global trafficking victims, and adult men account for 20%” (The Orphans Hands, 2023).

After finishing their research and receiving their master’s degree, Amanda moved back to the United States and started working for an organization that supports people with developmental disabilities. Amanda’s mother used to work for a similar organization, so she “grew up around supporting people with both mental health challenges as well as developmental disabilities” (Amanda, 2022) which prompted Amanda to also work in human services. After working a few years at the agency focusing on developmental disabilities, Amanda transitioned to the director position for the SS program. When it was asked how the transition from one agency to another agency, Amanda stated “it’s just part of the journey...it’s just really understanding lots of different populations, and I think that’s true across the board for human services” (Amanda, 2022), and Amanda continued their statement by linking it to human trafficking:

“I think it does even fit in a little bit with the idea of human trafficking, because there are cases, as well, where there are folks who may not have the full abilities that some folks do and face those challenges and may be more vulnerable to the risk of trafficking. But as I worked with that population again, it was a real learning experience. It was really



learning more about communication styles, which I think is also important when you're looking at human trafficking because it can involve people who are local, but it can also involve people who are coming in from foreign countries...like there is just a lot of complexities, so the more you know about people in general, the better I think you are able to support" (Amanda, 2022).

As the director of SS Program, Amanda stated that in this role,

"I work with a team of professionals to provide education, advocacy and counseling services to create a foundation for a safer community. From providing prevention education and support for children to adult services that include counseling for survivors as well as those close to them, practices are in place to support people over their lifetimes to live lives free of violence. I am charged with the oversight of a team of advocates, counselors and violence educators and I create and manage content around violence prevention and abuse of all forms. I oversee a 24-hour survivor support line as well as the training and developmental needs of the team of counselors, educators, interns, and volunteers who dedicate their time and talent to supporting the educational and assistance needs of our community" (Amanda's LinkedIn, 2023).

As part of their role, Amanda creates content, trainings, teachings that advocates for prevention education surrounding sexual harassment, sexual assault, domestic violence, and (currently in discussion for future projects and being part of the program) sex trafficking. One example of Amanda's and Agency B's work, during the spring semester (2022) at a state university, she coordinated the Clothesline Project. The Clothesline Project was developed to break the silence of sexual violence against individuals and according to the Local Agency B, it is a simple concept

“to let each person tell their story in their own unique way, using words and/or artwork to decorate their shirt. Once finished, they would then hang their shirt on the clothesline.

This very action serves many purposes: it acts as an educational tool for those who come to view the Clothesline; it allows those who are still suffering in silence to understand that they are not alone; and it becomes a healing tool for anyone who makes a shirt- by hanging the shirt on the line, survivors, friends and family can literally turn their back on some of that pain of their experience and walk away” (Local Agency B, 2023).

Amanda helped coordinated the Clothesline Project on the campus to educate and bring awareness of sexual assault. A project like the Clothesline is important because

“it was showing a survivors’ message and their feelings... it was over a 20-year period where students who have experienced sexual violence come and put that experience out there...for them to be strong and to be able to show that, I think it impacted us all in a lot of ways and for the people passing by” (Amanda, 2022).

### **About the National Agency B**

The National Agency B was first established in "England in 1855 when two groups met to aid women: one group formed a Prayer Union to pray for women, and the other founded Christian homes for young women" (Britannica, 2023). Then in 1877, the two groups merged to form the National Agency B. The National Agency B as an organization aimed to "advance the physical, social, intellectual, moral, and spiritual interests of young women" (Britannica, 2023), when in the 1800s, the women's main role was to marry and care for the household. In the United States, a group of women in New York City (and later Boston) formed the first Ladies' Christian Association, which provided for the "temporal, moral, and religious welfare of young women who are dependent on their own exertions for support" (Britannia, 2023). In 1866, a constitution

was formally written to create the National Agency B, which had multiple locations across the United States.

The National Agency B became a national organization in 1906. The National Agency B mission is dedicated to "eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom for all" (National Agency B Website, 2023). To accomplish this mission, Agency B combines programming and advocacy in three areas: "racial justice and civil rights, empowerment and economic advancement of women and girls, and health and safety of women and girls" (National Agency B Website, 2023). Through National Agency B's commitment to racial justice and civil rights, they are pushing that everyone has equal protection under the law and pushing women to help eliminate the oppression of different groups of people, especially people of color.

The National Agency B recognizes the intersectionality and the overlapping of identities that could cause groups of people and individuals to be discriminated against and oppressed within our laws and policies and by larger institutions. By recognizing the oppression and discrimination of certain groups of people and individuals, National Agency B "demands a world of equity and human decency" (National Agency B Website, 2023) and will continue to push for any injustice to be eliminated. Next, National Agency B is committed to women's empowerment and economic advancement with a "particular focus on the reality of the way race impacts women's economic opportunities" (National Agency B Website, 2023).

One example of empowerment and economic opportunities at National Agency B is their YW Women's Empowerment 360 Program, which supports all women wanting to be entrepreneurs and start and grow their businesses. Then the last area of commitment, health and safety, the National Agency B "seeks to improve the lives of women and girls by providing high-

quality health and wellness programs that are too often not available to communities of color" (National Agency B Website, 2023). The National Agency B is one of the largest organizations that advocate, provide services (e.g., health care), and supports gender-based violence such as domestic violence and sexual assault.

### **About the Local Agency B and the SS Program**

Over 100 years, the National Agency B has served millions of individuals and has over "200 local associations" (National Agency B Website, 2023) across the United States. Each local association will provide its own "programming to meet the needs within their communities and advance National Agency B's mission" (National Agency B Website, 2023); this means services and demographics may differ from one region to another. The Local Agency B was established to address

"primarily the violence against women and inequality...it recognizes that, especially the women in our society, have not had an equal voice, have had experienced violence, and have experienced inequality" (Amanda, 2022).

The Local Agency B wanted to address those concerns. The Local Agency B

"at the time was the young women Christian organization, so it was a more religious space at the time, but it is still the same essence of recognizing that women need support because the law wasn't supporting them in the same ways that they were supporting white males" (Amanda, 2022).

The Local Agency B "has been a constant force in the lives of families in our community. We serve women, children, and families, offering a variety of programs and services" (Local Agency B Website, 2023), and the person I interviewed (Amanda) is the director of one of the programs they provide at the SS program.

The Agency B/SS program is a nonprofit organization that receives most of its funding from federal grants and some state grants. According to the National Agency B federal funding overview from 2017,

"almost 50% of funding for Agency B programs and services is from government sources, including \$206 million from the federal government and \$102 million from state, local, and county agencies. Agency B also receive support from foundations (\$23 million), businesses and corporation (\$6 million), and private contributions (\$10 million)" (National Agency B Website, 2017).

One important grant Agency B receives is from the Illinois Coalition Against Sexual Assault (ICASA, 2023). The ICASA (2023), "is the unified network of rape crisis centers, envisioning a world free of sexual violence," and in connection with Agency B "it helps us manage those funds and helps us to make sure that the funds are distributed equally depending on the needs throughout the state" (Amanda, 2023).

The SS program is "a program that specifically supports survivors of sexual assaults and offers counseling, advocacy services, and prevention education" (Amanda, 2022). The program started because a group of individuals became highly passionate about helping and supporting women in challenging situations. These individuals recognized the prevalence of sexual violence, especially towards women, in our society,

"one in three women have experienced some form of sexual violence, so it's an awareness that for a long time it had been tabooed to talk about. So, there needed to be some safe space to deal with the trauma and everything that comes along with that and form a way of countering it, countering the culture. It's not just countering the act; it is countering the culture that is such a part of what we do and has always been...the SS Program piece of

this is that we want to stop the rape culture in our society. So, we try to go deeper. We do things that are direct services, and we do the prevention" (Amanda, 2022).

The Local Agency B and the SS program provide direct services for the children, women, and families they serve, and they also do a lot of work for prevention education throughout the community. Some of the direct services provided by Agency B/SS are counselors,

"we have a counseling team...we have group counselor so we can run group sessions, and then we provide individual counseling. We have a bilingual counselor, which is exciting as well. Then, in general, we're looking to address more facets of our community in our society, so we're looking at getting better translation services and things like that to allow us to support more people and in a culturally sensitive way" (Amanda, 2022).

The counseling sessions run throughout the week. They are open and accessible to those who need it. The Agency B/SS highly promote inclusivity throughout the agency and its programs,

"inclusivity is a huge part of what we do, it is part of our strategic plan as well. We want to make sure the LGBTQ+ folks know that we are here. We support groups of people who have experienced violence, and that includes men as well...We realize that trauma affects us over a lifetime. So, one thing that I'm really happy about is that we're able to provide services for folks, no matter when that happens" (Amanda, 2022).

Other than counselors, the Agency B/SS program has advocates that do a variety of things and one being legal advocacy, "the main thing is they are there to help with civil no contact orders (CNCOs), and then we also do stalking no contact orders (SNCOs)" (Amanda, 2022). Civil no contact orders can

"protect you and your family or household members from an abuser if you are the victim of non-consensual sexual conduct or non-consensual sexual penetration...These orders

offer protections, including 'stay-away' provisions and no-contact provisions. Judges can also order the abuser to not engage in any other actions that they believe would harm you" (Office of the Illinois Attorney General, 2023).

Stalking no contact orders can

"order a stalker to stop following or monitoring you, threatening you, talking or writing to you, including electronic communication, interfering or damaging your property, or coming near you, your workplace, and/or your property. An SNCO can be requested by you as a victim, or on behalf of a child, or disabled or elderly adult who is a victim of stalking" (Office of the Illinois Attorney General, 2023).

According to Amanda, the agency and the advocates working closely with victims who are in the process of getting CNCOs and/or SNCOs are there "to be able to just support the person, and help them know their choices" (2022). In these situations, victims and survivors of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking often have their choices taken away. So, when working with the victims and survivors, it is important to give them back their ability to make decisions and choices for themselves. Another part of the advocate's job for the agency/programs is to help out with medical advocacy. The Local Agency B/SS staff and volunteers,

"can accompany survivors to the hospital to provide advocacy and support. A medical advocate acts as a liaison between you and healthcare professionals to ensure your needs are met, and you are treated with dignity and respect. We are here to provide information about your concerns and your rights to treatment as well as to assist with any other needs you may have. Medical advocacy continues after the initial medical contact to ensure your rights are being kept intact and to handle any medical bills or other issues that may arise" (National Agency B Website, 2023).

Often, victims and survivors have difficulty understanding the information and their choices and options involving medical, law enforcement, and the court system. So, advocates, especially at the Agency B/SS program, will be with them to help them understand what is happening and provide the most accurate information to choose the best path for themselves. Alongside some of the services Agency B may provide, they also focus a lot of their work towards prevention education about sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual violence, and domestic abuse, and in some locations, they are taking steps to include sex trafficking as well.

"We know an important piece to the elimination of sexual abuse, and assault is through education beginning at a young age. To that end, we are on a mission to provide education throughout C County to children starting in pre-kindergarten through high schools and college-age students, as well as civic groups and employers" (National Agency B Website, 2023).

An example of an Agency B/SS program conducting prevention education is when they go to colleges/universities and teach about Title IX and sexual harassment to student-athletes or in classrooms. Another example of Agency B taking steps with their prevention education training and presentations, recently, they have been having discussions with the local police department about working together to better support victims and survivors of sexual assault, sexual violence, and even sexual exploitation.

After discussing the services and prevention education that Agency B and the SS program provide, we discussed the main goals this agency and program aim to strive for. As stated by Amanda, one of the main goals of the agency and the SS program is to provide greater access, "we know there are populations within our community that we are not serving or those that we are serving but aren't as large of a portion as they might be" (Amanda, 2022). An



example of promoting more access and the ability to reach out to more populations, Agency B has a 24-hour Rape Crisis Hotline for sexual assault and sexual abuse victims and survivors and their families to use. The hotline is a

"free, confidential service that also serves as the central sexual assault resource for C county. Services focus on empowering survivors, their families, and their friends on the path of healing, building relationships with professionals and agencies that will be part of the process, and educating the community about sexual assault" (National Agency B Website, 2023).

### **Findings and Discussion of Agency B**

For hundred years, Agency B have been dedicated to eliminate racism and violence against women through their direct services, prevention education, and the programs they have created to expand their ability to help support victims and survivors. One of the programs, SS Program, just celebrated its twentieth anniversary of providing counseling, advocacy work, and prevention education to specifically support the survivors of sexual assault, sexual violence, domestic abuse, and maybe in the near future sex trafficking. During the interview with Amanda it opened my eyes how much dedication and work it is to stop violence against women within the local community and throughout the nation. However, no one agency can do everything and there will be barriers or topics within sex trafficking that are ignored during the conversation. One barrier I noticed during the interview with Amanda was confronting and dealing with gender-based violence and inequality of women in society. The other barrier, which is a topic not often discussed with this issue, are the individuals who are disabled.

## **Barrier One: Confronting Gender-Based Violence and Inequality of Women**

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women (2022) defines violence against women

“means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life” (UN, 2022).

This declaration introduced the term ‘gender-based’ which emphasizes the deeply rooted in equality between men and women in society. Gender-based violence (GBV) is

“violence that is directed at an individual based on his or her biological sex or gender identity...it includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation, whether occurring in public or private life” (Ott, 2021).

The terms ‘violence against women’ and ‘gender-based violence’ are often interchangeable because both definitions focuses primarily on gender inequality for being a reason of the violence towards women.

Within the past few decades research and advocacy efforts towards sex trafficking, and human trafficking as a whole, have increased. However, there is still a lack of research, connection, and perception between sex trafficking and other forms of gendered violence and how it links to the structural gender-based violence of women in society. It is essential part of combating the issue of sex trafficking by recognizing that it is a form of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence often stems from the gendered social order and hierarchy between men and women. To reaffirm this idea, the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence stated that

“recognizing that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men” (UN, 2022).

In other words, It is the unequal power relations between men and women that leave girls and women vulnerable to violence, and stated by Amanda

“when there are biases related to gender norms...that is the root of most violence. And not just sexual violence, but all types of violence. It is like the inability to see one another as humans and as equals that perpetuates the violence” (Amanda, 2022).

When it was asked during the interview with Amanda about why the founders of Agency B/SS Pro thought it was necessary to establish this type of organization, Amanda stated because it is

“primarily violence against women and inequality. You know, in recognizing that, especially women in our society, have not has an equal voice and have experienced violence and have experienced that inequality” (Amanda, 2022).

The hidden purpose of violence against women from men is to control them economically, politically, and socially. When females are victimized by gender-based violence (e.g., sex trafficking, sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape), often times they are vulnerable due to their lack of economical, political, social opportunities and be unsupported by the justice and legal system. These lacks of opportunities and lack of support leave women to be victimized and re-victimized in society. Hence one of the reasons why Agency B opened its doors, it recognized “women need support because the law wasn’t supporting them in the ways that they were supporting white males” (Amanda, 2022).

Violence against women is an important issue to discuss and according to the national statistics from the National Statistics Domestic Violence Fact Sheet:

“on average, nearly 20 people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States. During one year, this equates to more than 10 million women and men;” “1 in 3 women have experienced some form of physical violence by an intimate partner;” “1 in 5 women in the United States has been raped in their lifetime;” and “72% of all murder-suicides involve an intimate partner; 94% of the victims of these murder-suicides are female” (NCADV, 2020).

At the center of all this violence against women and inequality is the concept of power and control traditionally men had over women. The power relations and struggles are constantly at play when men and women interact, especially when it involves with sex.

### **Barrier Two: Individuals with Disability**

Individuals with disabilities can be a victim of sex trafficking. “There are cases where folks who may not have, you know, the full abilities that some folks do, and they face those challenges every day. They may be more vulnerable to the risk of trafficking” (Amanda, 2022). There is a lack of research and discussion about the connections and links between human trafficking and individuals with disabilities. It is also not discussed when survivors of human trafficking acquire disabilities due to being trafficked and how agencies may or may not be prepared to provide the services needed.

It was asked during the interview if Amanda can discuss more in depth about the links between individuals with disabilities and sex trafficking and/or sexual violence, unfortunately not much was said. Amanda expressed that this population (people with disabilities) “are more

vulnerable to sexual abuse and assault” (Amanda, 2022), and for Agency B/SS Program prevention education it

“is very important to be able to provide information, and to help everyone to be able to identify who safe adults are and to be able to say no. Even for people who are nonverbal. This is one of the trickier parts, so, it’s going to take a little while to create a curriculum that is going to be totally accessible” (Amanda, 2022).

Sexual violence and victimization of disabled people is a silent epidemic, and it is even more silent when disabled people are being trafficked. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics’ 2009-2014 National Crime Victimization Survey, individuals with disabilities were three times more likely to experience violent crime (e.g., rape and sexual assault) than their nondisabled counterparts (Harrell, 2016). Under the umbrella of gender-based violence, women with disabilities are more often victimized and undervalued in society because of the imbalances of power between men and women and ableism in society. According to the International Health Organization “more than a billion people are estimated to live with some form of disability, or about 15% of the world’s population (p. 7),” and commented that “while disability correlates with disadvantage, not all people with disabilities are equally disadvantaged. Women with disabilities experience gender discrimination as well as disabling barriers” (p. 8).

Individuals with disabilities, just like with sexual violence, are more likely to experience sex trafficking. From the Office for Victims of Crime,

“sex traffickers deliberately target individuals they know they can isolate and control and both individual and systemic conditions increase the risk for people with disabilities. Specifically, people with disabilities often live in relative isolation, may rely on assistance from others to get to work and to access basic services and may be denied

information about trafficking. Compounding these individual risk factors are barriers within our systems to identifying and supporting survivors with disabilities. This includes barriers to reporting or seeking help, a lack of disability-centered victim responses, and a lack of economic resources due to the devaluation of people with disabilities and their labor” (OVC, 2023).

Traffickers scout potential victims often from vulnerable populations because they can be more easily controlled and manipulated by them. People with disabilities may experience social exclusion, limited or no mobility, lack of support, and/or have communication barrier, and the traffickers will use them for their advantage. It should also be noted and discussed that women who have been trafficked may obtain illnesses, injuries, PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), and physical and mental disabilities during their time as a trafficking victim.

Women with disabilities deal with constant discrimination, violence, trafficking, victimization, and lack of support. Often times, women with disabilities find

“the process for reporting violence (and trafficking) is often inaccessible of inadequate policies and standards, negative attitudes, physical access, information availability, communication, lack of service provision, inadequate funding, and lack of involving women with disabilities in decisions that directly affect their lives” (UN Fact Sheet, 2013).

The stigma and negative perceptions of people with disabilities, particularly women with disabilities, make it difficult for victims to come forward and report their experience. It is essential for law enforcement, the whole criminal justice system, and agencies/organizations that specializes in this type of work to be educated and to be able to properly support the needs of victims of sex trafficking (all gender-based violence) with disabilities. The National Agency B

within the past few years have been advocating for survivors with disabilities. Agency B acknowledges

“that not all violence is acknowledged or responded to equally and that some victims go unrecognized altogether. Women and girls with disabilities are often left out of the mainstream dialogue about gender-based violence altogether despite their heightened risk” (National Agency B Website, 2017).

Agency B advocates that nonprofits can help support people with disabilities by “partnering with disability rights and service organizations in your community to ensure survivors with disabilities are able to physically and conceptually access your services;” “ensure that your safety planning measures include considerations for disability, service animals, and medical needs;” and “invest in recruitment, training and leadership development of people with disabilities on your boards, on staff and in advisory roles” (Local Agency B Website, 2017).

### **Summary of Agency B**

The National Agency B has been around for over a hundred years across the nation, and the SS program is celebrating twenty years of being

“dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women and promoting peace, justice, freedom and dignity for all. Its strategic framework is the culmination of consultation and exploration with Agency B across the country and reflects our legacy as a pioneering organization that squarely confronts social justice issues to make lasting, meaningful change” (National Agency B Website, 2023).

Agency B focuses a lot of their attention to providing direct services to victims and survivors of sexual assaults, and prevention education by going to schools and talking with law enforcement. Agency B utilizes a trauma-informed care approach and a survivor-centered model

to better support and help victims and survivors. The trauma-informed care approach prioritizes the need to understand a victims'/survivors' experiences in order to provide the most effective and informative care and support needs. The other approach, survivor-centered model, shoots to give back the victims' and survivors' their rights and ability to make choices and decisions for themselves, and to make sure they are treated with respect.

Agency B, currently does not include sex trafficking victims and survivors into their program, however, Amanda commented that there are current steps being taken to include them. Despite, the agency itself does not work directly (or indirectly) with a whole a lot of sex trafficking victims and survivors, it enriches my research because it addresses gender-based violence- which includes sex trafficking. Gender-based violence reflects into sex trafficking because of the patriarchal power and control men have over women. Women, based on the gender hierarchy, is inferior to men which makes them more vulnerable to be victims of violence and trafficking. It is important when discussing sex trafficking, is to discuss bigger issues that intersect with it-and that is gender-based violence.

## **AGENCY C**

### **The Informant: Mary**

The person I interviewed for Agency C is the director of operations and development. To maintain confidentiality of the person I interviewed, I will refer to them as Mary.

Before Mary worked at Agency C, she used to work for an insurance company for eighteen years. Mary held many different roles and leadership positions while she worked at the insurance company until she was laid up because of an injury. During the time they were laid up with an injury, Mary had a feeling God was leading her towards a different path in life with her gifts. The founder of Agency C reached out to Mary in 2018, when they were moving to Texas,



and asked if Mary would be interested in providing local leadership at the ministry. At the time, Mary did not know much about sex trafficking so she got more involved with the ministry and going to conferences and trainings to learn more about the topic. After, Mary learned more about the topic, the more invested they got, and decided to take the leap and leave the insurance company and take the leadership position that was offered to them at the agency. Agency C's social media page posted about Mary and stated,

“Mary joined our team a little over a year ago as Director of Operations and Development and is a huge blessing to the agency. Their kindness, strong work ethic, joy and faith are just a few of the many characteristics that Mary brings to her role and to Agency C's family” (Agency C Social Media, 2020).

During the interview it was asked how it was learning about the topic of sex trafficking. Mary explained that

“the work is hard but also very rewarding, especially in that residential setting where you can see women and where they come in and where they are at in their healing journey. It is also rewarding when you can see what happens they're surrounded by the right professionals and people who just love them and are willing to walk along their side. And when you have individuals that are graduating from the program and now working and married and healthy, even though it's going to be a lifelong journey of healing that part is super rewarding” (Mary, 2022).

Furthering the conversation, Mary started discussing how their skills from their former career translated into their work at being the director of operations and development at Agency C. Mary said,

“it’s still like a small business. So, there is things you need to grow and expand, and so you ask people to walk along your side and support the work that you’re doing. There is certain things that you need to have in place to do that well. So, I’d say a lot of those from the insurance company world have been more of the business side of things like processes and accounting, and how do you make sure you’re stewarding your dollars wisely. You need to have a system that can reflect that, you know, and putting teams in place, and there is coaching and hiring the right people. So, it’s a lot of those things that are outside of the realm of the specific work at the agency” (Mary, 2022).

Mary, even before becoming the director of operations and development of Agency C, has always been involved in the church and ministry work. Mary has dedicated their life to help and support and care for others through their faith, and since joining Agency C, Mary has been able to expand their dedication even further. On the social media page of Agency C, they asked Mary about what does freedom mean to you, and she stated,

“freedom-as Christ followers, to live a life free from the constraints of sin; to live, to serve, to love with choices; freedom to seek God’s will while living a life with an overwhelming peace and assurance of God’s love and eternal plan for His children” (Agency C Social Media, 2021).

### **Background of Agency C**

In 2014, Agency C opened its doors to serve women survivors of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Agency C is a faith-based ministry, meaning they are affiliated with a religious group, or certain moral and social religious beliefs. Agency C are a Christian-based organization who are “Christ-followers who believe that Jesus is the Catalyst and apart from him, we can do nothing” (Agency C Website, 2023). Through this lens, the values and the

mission of Agency C is connected through their faith and it is what drives them to serve women who have been sex trafficked and sexually exploited. Also, by being a faith-based organization, majority of the activists (e.g., leaders, staff, volunteers) are from the same religious affiliation and have a calling to be part of the work at Agency C.

The founder of Agency C had a passion for helping women and children through the ministry lens and have created multiple events and groups to help a variety of women and children in difficult situations. One example, the founder (I will name them Christina) became aware of the burden that single mothers carry, so they created an event “where single mothers and their children could be ministered to in a myriad of ways by volunteers from the church and the community” (Agency C Website, 2023). Through their experience and passion, Christina became aware of the need for local and global ministries need to be connected and work together, hence Agency C being created. Christina’s goal of Agency C was “to glorify God and to lean in Him as The Catalyst and change agent in the lives women at risk-both locally and globally” (Agency C Website, 2023).

Since opening its doors in 2014, Agency C

“has a mission to reach out to women and children in the most difficult of circumstances and to lift them up with a new hope. Women are the group most victimized by the scourge of human trafficking, and Agency C is working at home and abroad to rescue and restore these women” (Agency C Website, 2023).

Agency C mission “is to reach and serve women who are survivors of sexual exploitation, trafficking, and serve abuse” (Mary 2022); and one of their main goals us

“to meet them (survivors) where they’re at when they come to us, but it’s really walking along their side with a group of professionals and volunteers that can provide them with

their needs to hopefully graduate and live a healthy, independent life when they leave the ministry” (Mary, 2022).

To accomplish their mission and goal, Agency C focuses on three major pillars: raising awareness, rescue, and restoration. On Agency C’s website, they go into a little more detail about their three pillars. For raising awareness, “we educate and engage the local community to understand the realities of human trafficking and sexual exploitation and to help strengthen, support, and advocate for the vulnerable” (Agency C Website, 2023). The second pillar, rescue, “we partner with individuals, local churches, organizations, and law enforcement to reach and rescue those who have been oppressed” (Agency C Website, 2023). Then lastly, the third pillar, for restoration

“we work locally to provide a residential community for women in recovery from sex trafficking, exploitation, and extreme abuse. This safe-haven is called Faith Farms. An array of Christ-centered support services are provided for foster healing, recovery, and an opportunity to begin a new life” (Agency C Website, 2023).

The restoration pillar for Agency C is one of their most important contribution and work for survivors of sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse. Agency C currently has two opened restorative homes, one in the Illinois and one in Texas. The home in Texas is very recent since the founder of Agency C moved to Texas and opened an office in 2018 to continue their work for the ministry. The restorative homes “provide long term housing and holistic programming for survivors, that’s where individuals can come to Agency C, and they can stay in the home for two years” (Mary, 2022). The homes are for women who are ready to take the next step in their healing journeys and gain more independence. The homes create a community amongst the women living there and the members/volunteers of the agency,

“we think about restorative, restorative homes, and how some of that healing takes place because they’re living in a community. So, that community is important. It is part of that healing journey when they can lean on their house sisters” (Mary, 2022).

Agency C only serve women and allow women in the restorative homes. A reason for justifying why they only serve women, Mary (2022) stated along the lines that “it’s important to have the majority of our women who have experienced or been victimized from something that is similar,” so in other words, it helps the healing process if the survivors they are serving have similar demographics and have been in similar situations.

However, it should be stated that Agency C’s restorative homes are for everyone. Not every women will want to live with other women for two years, so in these type of cases, Agency C

“will have individuals call us here in the community and we can help them get connected with services. Not everyone is going to want to or be at a place in their life where the answer, or the solution for them, is a program where they’re living in a home with other survivors for 18 to 24 months. That’s not for everyone. So, that’s one thing we really try to make sure that we’re vetting because we want to make sure they’re ready to take those steps. Also, we want to make sure they’re in the right place because we are not the right solution for every young lady or individual above the age 18 who may be a candidate” (Mary, 2022).

Despite only serving women, Agency C will not turn a blind eye for any survivor. If the survivor is not a woman, but a man or even transgender, they will assist them by connecting to other agencies who can help. Mary (2022) thoroughly stated if “we have somebody that reaches out to

us, and let us say it's a transgender or a young man, we would work with other agencies to help them get connected with individuals that can serve them.”

To financially support the restorative homes and all the work they do, Agency C relies heavily on donations from the community, “over 90% of our funding does come from individual donors or business organizations here in the community” (Mary, 2022). Agency C does events throughout the year, and the one they do every year is their annual dinner,

“just in the last three to four years, we've realized that one way that we can secure most of the resources as well as helping educate the community is through an annual dinner...it probably makes up one fourth of our funding” (Mary, 2022).

Mary (2022) further explains about the annual dinner,

“it's where we bring in outside speakers. Speakers who can validate the issue because I think many in our community still think, well, how can it be happening here, or I think many people are now understanding that it does occur here in the states, but they just don't think it happens in our backyards. So, I think bringing just some outside validation to the topic and, you know, bring in a speaker in that others may be interested in hearing. Also, during the annual dinner, we can show our appeal for the people and hopefully have them come along and join us in this work and help us provide these services to individuals that find Agency C being a place they can heal...And it's good because sometimes we're planting seeds, other times it's a significant source of our funding but it's also a way we can get other volunteers. So, sometimes people may not be able to support financially, but they can give their time and share their skills and gifts.”

As of currently, Agency C have not done much with getting and receiving government funding and grants. According to Mary (2022) about why they do not have government funding is because

“we are faith-based and it becomes tricky in separating that faith component and meeting the requirements of a federal grant... We do holistic care and that includes physical care, mental care, emotional care, and spiritual care and we do feel that’s an important part of it.”

For being a relatively new and small agency, Agency C currently only has six employees. Due to having a small number of employees, the agency relies heavily on volunteers. Volunteers often play a vital role among social service agencies and community development projects. According to Unruh (2010) at the NACSW Convention of 2010,

“many nonprofits simply could not do what they do without volunteers. Beyond these overarching practical considerations, volunteers from the faith community offer other unique benefits to nonprofits as well: they can promote agency visibility and legitimacy within religious institutions and networks, help reinforce an agency’s connection with its historic religious roots, strengthen the religious component of an organization’s mission, and provide opportunities for leadership development” (p. 1-2).

Like many nonprofit organizations, Agency C utilizes volunteers to help and assist them in their work to support survivors. Volunteers at faith-based organizations and ministries seek to serve because their faith often leads them to care about others and their well-being. For Agency C,

“we value volunteers because they are essential to accomplishing our mission and vision. We want a partner with volunteers to fill positions where God can work through them in the unique ways He has gifted them. Today, over 100 volunteers support the ministry at

Agency C. Volunteer opportunities include positions at the office and our restorative homes” (Agency C Website, 2023).

### **Findings and Discussion of Agency C**

During the interview, Mary was very informative about who and what Agency C is. Mary explained the three main pillars of Agency C and how it works towards its goals and mission in the name of God. However, just like for the other two agencies, Mary brought up some barriers or issues that affects Agency C’s work and its mission to “ reach out to women and children in the most difficult of circumstances and to lift them up with new hope” (Agency C Website, 2023). Those barriers includes the biases and links between sex trafficking and sex work, and the lack of resources to effectively support the victims and survivors and combat the overall issue of sex trafficking.

#### **Barrier One: Biases and Links between Sex Trafficking and Sex Work**

The terms of “sex trafficking,” “sex work,” and “prostitution” are often misidentified and misused in research, media, criminal justice system, and everyday conversations. Sex trafficking is often simply defined if it involves any force, coercion, and fraud, and one definition of sex work is

“when adults choose to offer sexual services in exchange for something of value, usually money. People engage in sex work for numerous reasons. Many feel empowered by their work and participate even when other options are available to them. Others turn to sex work because of poverty, family circumstances, immigration status, drug use, or discrimination” (Decriminalize Sex Work, 2023).

Prostitution and sex work are in constant debate within research, among activists, media, social services, and criminal justice system about if all forms of sex work is a form of exploitation and



is never a choice or is it a choice and people find the work empowering. Those who are against prostitution and sex work advocate for the criminalization of sex work, as stated by Swanson (2016),

“scholars have formed two camps arguing the legalization of prostitution. One argument holds that where prostitution is legal, human trafficking rates increase to meet the open demand for sex. This abolitionist view advocates for the criminalization of prostitution, citing feminists who view prostitution as a form of violence against women, and highlights the gendered inequality in this tool of the patriarchal global economy” (p. 593).

On the other side of the argument, those who believe by decriminalizing prostitution and sex work will help lessen sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, “another argument promotes prostitution or sex work as a legitimate profession that serves as an expression of women’s choice and agency” (Swanson, 2016, p. 593).

Not all individuals who are sex workers or work in the commercial of sex are trafficked, despite sex work abolitionists or other sources claim the opposite. The anti-sex work bias can create complications for victims and survivors of sex trafficking and agencies who work with them. One of the most common complications is misidentifying sex trafficking victims as sex workers. The victims are arrested and prosecuted under prostitution charges. Since many of the victims are arrested and prosecuted as sex workers, they have difficulty accessing social resources and help from agencies and organizations due to their criminal charges. Victims are also victim blamed and shamed because of their exploitation and criminal charges. Those who work in the sex industry, mainly sex workers, are treated terribly by law enforcement, so many are afraid to go to the police. Sex workers experience violence and abuse and often do not go to

the police in fear of being arrested and not taken seriously. Law enforcement interactions with sex workers can affect those who are being trafficked, and so can laws. Laws and the criminalization of sex work can overlook basic human rights of sex workers which can leave them vulnerable to more violence and abuse and in trafficking situations, and lacking proper social services and resources.

During the interview, it was asked about some of the challenges Agency C faces when working with victims and survivors of sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Mary stated that one of the challenges is the biases people have regarding prostitution and its links to sex trafficking. Mary quoted,

“one of the tricky things about trafficking is there are people who will hear that term and think of prostitution, and they have biases against that...I think there’s a bias where people put that blame on the person (victim). I think many people who have suffered and they have been victims of prostitution, they will be the first to say that they made mistakes along the way. There was something that made them vulnerable, or they were just vulnerable because of what something that happened to them early on...and I think that is what is hard for people to understand because they do have this bias” (Mary, 2022).

Mary (2022) continues elaborating,

“that they think because of their actions that got them to that place and it’s helping people understand that nobody wants to be doing this. There is not one person that we have ever worked with that wanted to do this for their profession. People don’t want to sell their bodies willingly for profit. They may try to convince themselves that this is their choice, but it’s not a choice that was made freely by the majority of people we work with.”

Mary exclaims that women do not go into any form of sex work voluntarily. Women may be facing poverty, gender inequality, low socioeconomic status immigration status, discrimination, substance abuse, and lack of basic human rights that can lead them down the path of sex work. Mary also briefly mentions that prostitution leads to trafficking in most cases, especially if there is force, fraud and coercion involved. It should be mentioned that in some cases that those in the commercial sex industry can be trafficked or a victim of trafficking, but that is not always the case. Individuals can be in the commercial sex industry, as a sex worker, without being a victim of sex trafficking. Some individuals do choose to work in the sex industry because its empowering to them but other may do it to support themselves (and families) financially.

### **Barrier Two: Lack of Resources**

“You know, when I think externally...it’s always support. I mean, we have more things that need to be done than we have the resources that are available. So, that’s always a challenge. As we continue to grow and get more resources, it’s just figuring out how do we prioritize that has the greatest impact” (Mary, 2022).

One of the biggest challenges and struggles for nonprofit agencies and organizations is the limited amount of resources and support. Many nonprofits struggle financially because they rely heavily on grants for funding that may not support them fully. Nonprofits usually have to one or more grants plus receive donations to be able to support their community and the organization as a whole. Nonprofits can be restricted with the funding they do receive, because grant makers prefer to support direct services or programs which leaves out the costs to deliver the services and operate the programs. Then the nonprofits have to use the funds to deliver the services and

run the programs, so they often do not invest in infrastructure that could benefit them in the future.

As mentioned before, Agency C currently doesn't receive government grants and funding because of the blurred lines being a faith-based ministry organization. In the past, faith-based organizations may not use direct government support (funding) to support inherent religious activities: "religious organizations were required to secularize their services and premises, so that their social service activities were distinctly separate from their religious activities, as a condition of receiving public funds" (GAO, 2002). The faith-based organizations could only use the government funding to support the social services provided if they separated the religious aspect from it. In 1996 and heavily supported by President Bush's administration, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act was enacted to allow faith-based organizations to compete on the same level as non-religious organizations:

"Congress enacted "charitable choice" provisions, which authorized religious organizations to compete on the same basis as other organizations for federal funding under certain programs without having to alter their religious character or governance" (GAO, 2002).

This registration has allowed for more faith-based organizations to receive funding without having to separate their services and programs from their faith, however, there is still some stigma to separate the two from each other. Mary illustrated this stigma by stating,

"we are faith-based and it becomes tricky in separating that faith component and meeting the requirements of a federal grant... We do holistic care and that includes physical care, mental care, emotional care, and spiritual care and we do feel that's an important part of it" (Mary, 2022).

Since, it is difficult for Agency C to receive the proper funding and support from the government because of incorporating religion into the work and services they provide, Agency C relies heavily on donation. According to Mary (2022),

“it takes a lot of time to develop your donor base and engage and bring people along with this kind of work. When you’ve got a home and you’re serving women. It can be the needs that the women have that are so great that sometimes it’s hard to spend time engaging with the community, especially you have individuals that are hurt and need so much attention. So, you only have a finite number of hours in a day, or a finite number of individuals that are involved in this work. So, I think finding that balance between spending time in what’s important in the donor engagement piece as well as supporting the work and the actual work of the ministry.”

It is essential that agencies, like Agency C, received proper support and resources because it takes a lot of work to support the needs of victim and survivors of sex trafficking. Many women will experience similar situations and may have similar needs to be addressed, but not every women’s experience or needs are the same and it requires social services organizations to adapt to those variety of scenarios. However, without the proper support and resources it can be difficult to adapt and provide the appropriate services for every victim and survivor that comes to the door for help. Besides financial concerns, there are other challenges and barriers Agency C may encounter when trying to meet the needs of their victims. One can be lacking of knowledge and understanding of the issue of sex trafficking, especially if they rely on volunteers. The volunteers may not fully comprehend or be unintentionally biases towards situation or the victims which can lead to victims not receiving the help and care they need.

Another barrier for an agency is their accessibility of their services, and often the greatest barrier in getting access to services is the language barrier. Sex trafficking is an international issue and victims can be transported from one country to another. Agency C may not encounter many international victims of trafficking but even in the US, not everyone's first language is English. It is important that agencies, like Agency C, to have access to translators or have the proper resources to assist non-English speakers get the help they may need.

In the past few decades, steps were taken by the government to support, provide funding, and resources to social service agencies and organizations. The grants and funding allows for agencies and organization to support their work and be able to assist individuals who are in need. Unfortunately, the reality is that there is just not enough support and resources to adequately help all individuals and victims and survivors.

### **Summary of Agency C**

Agency C is a recently new organization that started in 2018 by Christina who became dedicated to reach out to women and children who have been victimized, and help and lift them up with new hope to live a better life. Agency C is a faith-based ministry that dedicates all the work and services they do in the name of God. Agency C is dedicated to a holistic care approach that is not only the physical, emotional, and mental health of the women in their care but also focuses on the spiritual health as well.

To be able to produce the holistic care at Agency C, the organization prioritizes three main pillars: raising awareness, rescue, and restoration. Under the raising awareness, Agency C "is working in the communities and working with organizations and helping raise awareness around the issue" (Mary, 2022). An example of the agency raising awareness is their annual dinner, where they often bring in speakers to talk about sex trafficking and how as a community

they can help support the cause and become more knowledgeable about the topic. The second pillar, rescue, “we don’t have any, what I would call boots on the ground or on the streets working with women. But we do work with law enforcement and other agencies who may have that as kind of one of their core focus areas’ (Mary, 2022). Lastly, the third pillar is restoration. For the restoration side, Agency C has a “residential home...where we provide long term housing and holistic programming for survivors” (Mary, 2022). Women can stay in the home for two years where they can live and grow with their house sisters to overcome their trauma and become independent individuals. As stated above, one of the main goals for Agency C

“is to meet them (survivors) where they’re at when they come to us, but it’s really walking along their side with a group of professionals and volunteers that can provide them with their needs to hopefully graduate and live a healthy, independent life when they leave the ministry” (Mary, 2022).

Since Agency C is a faith-based ministry, when working with women who are survivors of sex trafficking, they tend to focus more on the individuals themselves and their experiences. Agency C does rely and uses the federal TVPA (Trafficking Victims Protection Act) understanding and definition of sex trafficking, however, with their holistic care approach their main concern are the women and their experiences of exploitation. The TVPA definition of sex trafficking is a useful tool to help understand the topic and to be able to identify victims, but it some perspectives it could be restrictive and can limit agencies and organizations ability to help victims. As commented by Mary (2022),

“I think most women would not see themselves as victims of trafficking because they see trafficking as what has been defined and portrayed by the media, and that’s what makes this hard for people to reach out and get the services that they need. So, they may see or

think of trafficking as somebody who is physically abused or physically bound or locked up in a room. Does that happen? Yes, it does, but majority of the cases, people are coming and going, or mental or psychological uses are being used. And so, when they see ads or hear about trafficking portrayed a certain way, individuals may not think themselves as victim.”

It is part of the essential work from Agency C that, yes, they would always go back to how sex trafficking is legally defined but “when we’re working with the women, it’s really individuals that had their vulnerabilities exploited and their freedoms have been exploited for profit” (Mary, 2022). Mary (2022) continues to say,

“that’s part of what our team does when they’re working with women, it is helping them understand and help them realize that what they experienced was not normal...and when one uses those three words (force, fraud, and coercion) it looks different for every person, so, the work is really just helping women understand what they experienced is something that no one should experience. And helping them realize that and understand that it is important part for them to move on and realize, yes, I do need time to heal, I do need services, and I need to take the steps to get to a healthy place.”



## CHAPTER VI: ANALYSIS AND BROADER ISSUES

The last few chapters were all about three different agencies that specializes in addressing the issue of sex trafficking, in one way or another. Each agency has dedicated its time, effort, and resources to provide services and support to the cause and pushed for legislation and change in the judicial system, or directly helping and taking care of the needs of victims and survivors of sex trafficking. It was fascinating for me to talk too three individuals from each of three agencies and hear them discuss about the goals, mission, and background of the agencies and about themselves. The three individuals (Stephanie, Amanda, and Mary) were highly informative and dedicated to help and provide leadership within their roles and positions at their respective agencies.

Stephanie, Amanda, and Mary all expressed their passion and dedication to their roles and responsibilities at each of their respective agencies. Stephanie, Amanda, and Mary provided great detail about themselves, the work they do, and the work the agencies do to address the issue of sex trafficking. Between the three of them, there is at least 20 years of experience working for nonprofits and social services, including their current agencies. Stephanie, from Agency A, is the Task Force Coordinator. Their work primarily focuses on the conducting trainings throughout the state of Illinois, most specifically with law enforcement. Amanda who is the Director of the SS program at Agency B, mainly is in charge of the overseeing and trainings of their team (advocates, counselors, and educators) for the SS program. They also oversee the 24-hour crisis hotline. Lastly, Mary is the Director of Operations and Development. Their role prioritizes making sure the agency runs smoothly and efficiently, as well, as developing improvements opportunities. All three came from different backgrounds and stages of their lives

but all have similar goals and passions to help support victims, survivors, and services of sex trafficking.

Each of the agencies have expressed why they started, why they are needed, and what they aim to accomplish. Since all three address or includes the issue of sex trafficking (in one shape or another) within their work, they share some overlapping similarities. All three agencies value putting the needs of the victims and survivors first. The three agencies all do some type of direct services and care for victims and survivors of sex trafficking. Agency A provides counseling and case management, Agency B's SS program provides counseling and advocacy services, and Agency C provides a home for survivors to heal and teach them to reenter the world. All three agencies in some shape or form highlights the importance of ensuring the safety, rights, overall well-being, needs, and support of the victims and survivors they care through their direct or indirect services.

Agencies A, B, and C have organized themselves to provide services and resources in order to respond to the social problem of sex trafficking. Everyone who works and volunteers at these agencies are dedicated to improve the quality of life of victims and survivors of sex trafficking. However, Agencies A, B, and C do run into barriers and limitations that effects their work and impact on their effectiveness to help victims and survivors.

The U.S. government in 2000 created the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) which acknowledged and claimed sex trafficking as a social problem that needs to be addressed. Social problems defined by Best (1995), "social problems are trouble spots within society-social arrangements that do not work properly"(p. 3). In other words, a social problem is any condition or behavior that is recognized to have negative effects on a large number of individuals and it needs to addressed by society. However, it should be noted that not all negative conditions or

behaviors are recognized and labeled as social problems. Sex trafficking, and human trafficking in general, has always occurred in human history. The taking, transporting, and exploiting individuals against their will, and forcing them into roles servitude has occurred throughout history across the globe. However, it wasn't until the late 1900s and early 2000s, that governments and the greater public recognized trafficking as a social problem and a crime. Social problems "are fundamentally products of a process of collective definition" (Blumer, 1971, p. 298). When the U.S. government created the TVPA legislation, they collectively defined, constructed, and framed sex trafficking in a certain narrative. Within this narrative, sex trafficking is recognized as a major social problem that will require a certain understanding from the public and certain solutions to address and solve the problem.

Identifying, defining, and framing a social problem are fundamental elements for constructionists, however, constructionists are also interested in the process of claim-making by claims-makers. Constructionists are interested in how claim makers define social problems through "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector and Kitsuse, 1997, p. 75). If social problems are social constructions, there can be multiple ways to understand, define, and address the problem. Claim makers will typically take different aspects of a problem and typify it. "Typification occurs when claims-makers characterize a problem's nature" (Best, 1995, p. 8), which will allow different claim makers to focus on specific aspects of a problem and use specific actions to address it.

In this study, the claim makers are the three agencies. The agencies all have chosen to identify the problem of sex trafficking and seek to address specific aspects of it based on their typification and understanding of sex trafficking's nature. Agencies A, B, and C plan their goals,

missions, approaches, services, and use of their resources based on their constructed perception of sex trafficking. The agencies also choose the best methods and course of actions to address sex trafficking based on their typification of the problem. Agencies A, B, and C all have gone through the typification process which allows them to identify with and address specific dimensions of the problem of sex trafficking. In the case of this study: Agency A focuses on a law enforcement approach; Agency B prioritizes prevention education; and Agency C values protection and/or recovery of survivors of sex trafficking. And, despite all their valuable efforts to address the problem with their respective approaches, each will experience barriers that will influence efforts and impact.

Agency A acknowledges that sex trafficking is a social problem and defines sex trafficking from the U.S. federal definition within the TVPA legislation. Agency A pushes to “increase the identification of victims” (Stephanie, 2022), and to “successfully prosecute the traffickers” (Stephanie, 2022). To accomplish their goals, Agency A frames the problem of sex trafficking from a law enforcement perspective. The agency dedicates most of its time, energy, and resources to provide trainings for law enforcement. Stephanie (task force coordinator) is often in charge of conducting the trainings for law enforcement, they “teach law enforcement how to spot the crime, how to identify it, and then how to respond in a trauma-informed and victim-centered way” (Stephanie, 2022).

The importance of these trainings as commented by Stephanie, is to increase law enforcement’s knowledge about the topic of sex trafficking, how to identify victims, and best approaches to help and assist victims. Stephanie does an excellent job of highlighting their agency and their efforts to identify victims and prosecuting traffickers from their law enforcement approach. Stephanie also acknowledges barriers and limitations that they face,

especially when it comes to their law enforcement approach. The law enforcement approach can be difficult to implement because of the public perceptions of law enforcement and law enforcement perceptions of sex trafficking and its victims. Certain communities have developed a negative perception and a bias towards law enforcement because of law enforcement's history of discrimination and prejudices towards them. When a community or a group of people do not trust law enforcement, it might make it difficult for law enforcement to identify victims because no one will cooperate with them- or will not go to them for help. Law enforcement also have a history of discriminating and having biases towards victims of sex trafficking and gender-based violence. Law enforcement have misidentified and arrested victims of trafficking thinking they were sex workers and have discredited women's experience and trauma that has contributed to women not going to the police for help. Agency A works with law enforcement to help eliminate any biases and misconceptions that may lead them to revictimizing a victim and the best practices of handling sex trafficking situations.

Agency B is a special case within this research. Agency B does acknowledge sex trafficking as a social problem but as an agency, they currently do not directly work to address it. They currently are taking steps to address sex trafficking by incorporating it into their current services and programs. A reason why Agency B is working towards addressing sex trafficking is because of the interwoven elements that fall under the gender-based violence umbrella. Agency B frames gender-based violence as a social problem that needs to be addressed through prevention education. Agency B centralizes providing prevention education about gender-based violence and inequality: sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual violence, and domestic abuse. Amanda plays role in providing prevention education as the director of the SS Program with Agency B, and according to the National Agency B website (2023)

“we know an important piece to the elimination of sexual abuse, and assault is through education beginning as a young age. To that end, we are on a mission to provide education throughout C County to children starting in pre-kindergarten through high schools and a college students, as well as civic groups and employers.”

The prevention education approach does a wonderful job at teaching and bringing awareness of gender-based violence in their community. A limitation that Agency B can experience within their approach and efforts is the broader complexities of gender-based violence. Gender-based violence covers a wide range of violence and situations (e.g., domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, sex trafficking, and sexual exploitation) that is often directed towards women. Throughout history, women have been subjected to violence and inequality by men and society. Women are often in lower positions of power politically, economically, and socially that leaves them vulnerable to be subjected to violence. If Agency B wants to have a greater impact with their prevention education approach. They need to be aware, and should address the greater political and social institutions that contributes to the ongoing suppression and violence against women.

Agency C, the newest agency among the three, understands and defines sex trafficking as a social problem that needs to be addressed within their local community. Agency C frames their understanding and efforts from faith-based ministry perspective that reflects in their efforts to protect and recover survivors of sex trafficking. The agency recognized that survivors of sex trafficking may need a “permanent home” to help them recover and gain back their independence. To address this specific aspect of the problem, Agency C has built two homes where women survivors can live and be protected to recover from their traumatic experiences. Mary, the Director of Operations and Development, mentions being a faith-based ministry allows

them to provide a “holistic care” (Mary, 2022) for the women in the homes. The holistic care includes “physical care, mental care, emotional care, and spiritual care” (Mary, 2022); the spiritual care is what separates Agency C from other agencies like A and B. The spiritual care connects to the values, morals, and teaches from the ministry (church) and is engrained into Agency C’s efforts to address sex trafficking and helping survivors.

A barrier or limitation that can limit Agency C’ impact, and ability to protect and help survivors recover is the lack of resources. Multiple social service agencies rely on government (from federal, state, and local levels) funding and resources to be able to provide the services and support victims/survivors of sex trafficking. Agency C, however, because of its faith-based orientation makes it difficult to get government support and funding, so they rely on donations from the community.

The three agencies and their informants are very passionate, dedicated, and committed to their work and efforts to combating sex trafficking. Agencies A, B, and C have chosen to identify, address, and approach different elements surrounding the problem of sex trafficking. When the agencies determined and defined a particular aspect of the problem and centralize it as the main focus- it allows the agencies to get funding; direct staff and leadership; create and promote central goals and missions; and build an organizational identity. However, when the agencies chose to define and address the problem through a certain lens, they might be limiting their perspective and they may lose sight at the broader picture of the problem. Sex trafficking is very complex problem that often have interrelations with other contributing factors (such as gender-based violence: sexual violence, sexual abuse, gender inequality, and overlapping boundaries between sex work, domestic violence, and other forms of trafficking) that are so deeply engrained that the overall problem continues on despite the agencies best

effort. It is also difficult, with the complexity and interrelation with other factors, to be able to fully assess, study, and measure how much the agencies are being impactful on the broader scale.

### **Collaboration vs. Competition**

While conducting the interviews, an overarching theme among them was the gray area between collaboration and competition. Collaboration is when two or more agencies with different viewpoints (typification of the problem of sex trafficking) come together to explore their differences and create solutions to go further than their own limited capacity. Competition among agencies often stems from the lack and scarcity of resources and they compete with one another to achieve those limited funds. The competition among agencies and organizations to compete for funding and resources have stemmed from neoliberalism. Over the past couple decades, the neoliberal ideology has risen and it has altered economic and political legislation policies that have affected agencies and social services. Neoliberalism

“is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012, p. 301).

This shift in ideology, require agencies to move from a collaborative, community-based, collective environment to a more market-based, individualistic environment. The shift to neoliberalism also promotes agencies to move towards to a business-like management model where they prioritize adapting corporate management strategies, seek for cost-efficient services, produce a product (services) of interest, and compete for funding, and be incorporated within the market. Neoliberalism and neoliberal policies have diminished agencies and organizations



capacity to fully fulfill their goals and missions and their overall impact of addressing social problems.

One way to go against the competitive nature of neoliberalism policies among agencies is through collaboration. Collaboration can be more beneficial for agencies than competing against one another. A little competition is ok, it is healthy, but it should not be disruptive or limit an agency's impact and effectiveness to do their work.

In all three interviews, Stephanie, Amanda, and Mary all emphasized the importance of collaboration among other agencies and organizations. Stephanie (2022) stated it best,

“one organization can't do all the services, one organization can't do everything...if we collaborate, if we build partnerships, and if we are not afraid of inviting people in. I think it goes back to what I said originally when you asked the question about funding and that these grants are very competitive. I think that a couple years ago people came from the perspective of, well, 'I don't want to share all my resources with other people because they will use them or they will slap their name on it, and then they will get the funding and I won't.' But what I have learned from this, that serving this population [sex trafficking victims and survivors] really works better if you are willing to collaborate.”

Stephanie highlighted that it is less common to work and collaborate with other organizations and agencies because of the competitive nature to receive grants and funding, however, some organizations are trying to push past that barrier and work together.

In hindsight, collaboration is important to have among different agencies because one agency cannot do it all. Agencies like Agency A, B, and C all have similar goals and strive to always do more: raise money, have more donations, support more victims and survivors, expand their trainings and education prevention programs. However, despite the passion to do more,

there is a limited capacity for all agencies. All agencies have limitations that will make it difficult to address all aspects of the social problem of sex trafficking. That is where collaboration is necessary. According to Stephanie, Amanda, and Mary, they all have taken steps to expand their collaborative efforts with other agencies to be more effective and impactful within their communities and improving the overall efforts to address sex trafficking. Some benefits of agencies and organizations working together are improving the range of services, expand their programs, bring new ideas and strategies, improved efficiency, and be more inclusive, just to name a few.

Now, what would this look like? How can agencies collaborate with one another? Collaboration among agencies can come about multiple ways. The simplest first step is to talk and reach out to other agencies and open up that line of communication, and just start the discussion. Stephanie mentioned during the interview a time she reached out to a variety of different agencies and groups when they were asked to conduct a training session about child trafficking and youth sexual exploitation.

“I could have just done that training and been the only expert...but instead I was really pushing myself to collaborate more. So, I extended the invitation out to other task forces and other organizations and said ‘I’ve been approached to do this training. I think it would be great if we all collaborated together and it worked out great.’ When you collaborate with other people it broadens the amount of people that you can reach because they have their contacts, they have their friends, they have their organizations, and they have the networks that they work with” (Stephanie, 2022).

Collaboration opens up doors and opportunities for agencies to grow and increase their development. It is also beneficial to collaborate and open networks with other agencies because

not every agency is equipped or works with certain populations. For example, Agency C only works with women survivors of sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, and domestic abuse.

However, if a male or transgender victim or survivor comes to them, they are not just going to just turn them away. They will contact their networks and other agencies, and refer the victim or survivor to those agencies who can help them.

Agencies and social services play a vital role in history of advocating that

“each citizen is entitled to an acceptable standard of living, that this standard is protected from market forces, and that it is guaranteed as a matter of rights, not through some assessment of deservingness” (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012, p. 296).

Nevertheless, with the rise of the neoliberal ideology, social services and agencies are having to adapt to the changing environment to keep up with the new changes and policies that emphasizes privatization, free trade, and a free market. One change that agencies need to adapt to is the government spending cutbacks that minimizes funding and resources for social services. Even before the new neoliberal policies, agencies already had an “extensive dependence on government funding but subjects to greater competition” (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012, p. 303), and at the same time,

“contracts for human services grew as a growth to state and local governments, which increasingly relied on Medicaid as a source of funding of social services. Reductions in federal social-welfare spending (e.g., on social, employment and training services, as well as on community development) also fueled the nonprofit sector’s dependence”

(Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012, p. 303).

The government cutbacks on resources, funding, and support for social services are limited. With the government (and public) funding and support being limited, the issue rises for agencies to

both compete with each other for funding and, also, the need to collaborate in addressing a complex problem-like sex trafficking.

In a perfect world, we would have government programs, funding, resources, and support to address problems like sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is a major problem that affects everyone across the globe. It is going to take a lot of time and resources to properly solve this problem. Agencies and social services are doing the best they can to address and create short-term solutions, but they are held back from barriers and lack of funding/resources.

### **The Influence and Varied Impacts of the Internet**

Another overarching theme that became apparent during the interviews is the growing rise of technology and internet, and its role within the sex trafficking narrative. Since the development of the internet in the late 1900s, it has revolutionized the impact of communication through email, instant messaging, texting, video calls, and social networking. Humans are able to communicate with one another across the globe and have accessibility to a whole range of information at their fingertips. Technology, specifically the internet and social media, have allowed people to express themselves and use their voice. However, not only has the internet has connected us all, it has also divided us. One example is sex trafficking. The growing rise of technology, the internet, and social media has played a vital role within the topic of sex trafficking. The role of the internet and social media within the discourse of sex trafficking have both positive and negative influences. The growing use of the internet has also changed the nature of sex trafficking and how it needs to be addressed in the modern day.

The internet and social media has allowed for sex trafficking and sexual exploitation to become one of the fastest growing crimes in the world. Sex traffickers have access to multiple individuals and have direct contact with them. Traffickers will use online platforms, like social

media, to identify and exploit certain victims and populations (e.g., children). As stated by the Polaris Project (2018),

“social media has been used by traffickers to recruit victims, to proliferate their trafficking operations, and to control victims through restricting their social media access, impersonating victims, or spreading lies and rumors online.”

Potential victims of sex trafficking will get coaxed and entrapped by traffickers who may offer fake relationships (romantically or friendships), fake employment opportunities, or other fake scams. Traffickers are experts at finding those who are vulnerable and able to manipulate them, and the use of internet has made it easier for them.

The use of the internet and social media not only help traffickers find potential victims, it also can be used to portray misconceptions and perceptions about sex trafficking. The images that are most commonly used by those in the media when discussing about sex trafficking is a girl or woman in a locked, dark room, malnourished, possibly drugged, and showing signs of physical constraint or abuse to control their victims. Now, this can happen to victims, however, that is not the always the case. Traffickers may use or threaten physical violence but some may use psychological methods to control them, or withhold legal documents and finances, or groom them enough for them to be compliant. The stereotype images draw the most attention to the public and made to pull on their heartstrings, but it can be damaging to victims and survivors. For example, Mary mentioned that victims may not view themselves as victims based on what the media portrays as a victim of sex trafficking;

“I think most women would not see themselves as victims of trafficking because they see trafficking as what’s been portrayed by the media....they may see or think of trafficking as somebody who is physically bound or physically locked up in a room, and does that

happen? Yes, it does happen. Majority of the cases, people are coming and going, and people wouldn't even know what's going on and in their life. So, they see ads, they see in movies, and they hear the word trafficking and base it off of what they see. And they think that's not me because I can leave this home, I can get in a car, I can go where I need to go. So, I'm not a victim" (Mary, 2022)."

Stephanie (2022) also points out how social media can shape our misconceptions of what sex trafficking is,

"please be mindful of what images you choose to put on this or what picture or what video clip you use, because I don't want them to further perpetuate the images of females being chained up or locked up. Or the fact that a lot of people only think that is an issue with foreign nationals and that it's not happening to U.S. citizens. So, I think we just have to be really careful about when we do talk about it. If something is going to be produced just be mindful that the images and the language that we use doesn't continue to perpetuate those misconceptions, and that we're talking about all victims, and anyone quite frankly could become a victim of this crime."

Now, the internet is not all bad. As mentioned earlier, the development of the internet has allowed us to connect with anyone in the world and have access to large amounts of information. In the case of sex trafficking, the internet and social media has allowed for more awareness of the problem. The internet and social media has helped increase the public awareness of sex trafficking, mobilize public support, and increase public involvement to help prevent and create solutions to address the problem. Bringing awareness about sex trafficking is very important because it makes people aware and the ability to recognize indicators of trafficking, how to

identify potential victims, and learn how to respond accordingly and appropriately. The U.S. Department of State (2023) illustrates that

“increasing public awareness about the risks and signs of human trafficking is an important piece of any anti-trafficking strategy. Effective public awareness and outreach efforts can lead to the detection of human cases, build public support for governments and communities to act, and ultimately help prevent human trafficking.”

All three agencies that participated in this study do work that involves bringing awareness and educating the public, law enforcement, service providers, businesses, and the community about sex trafficking. Mary (2022) simply stated, “we all have more awareness of different things that are taking place just because we are connected and interconnected across the world. So, I think that has helped. To bring the awareness.”

The internet and social media can also be beneficial for survivors: “survivors are embracing social media as a way to reach out for help or build a support network that allows them to engage with each other, build a community, and work as survivor leaders” (Polaris Project, 2023). Another role of social media does to help survivors is helping them have create safety plans while in trafficking situations, planning escape and exit plans, and what paths and services are available. According to the Polaris Project’s survivor survey (2018),

“19 percent of survivors stated that social media played a role in their exit and 20 percent disclosed that they utilized private messages on social media apps to communicate with service providers” (p. 28).

With survivors seeking help and assistance during or after their trafficking situations, it is important for agencies and social service providers to be accessible. Accessibility can be through the agencies websites and their social media platforms, or providing 24-hour hotlines, or if they

cannot help personally they have the means and network to find someone who can. Agencies A, B, and C all have accessible websites and social media platforms that are easy to use and provides great information for those seeking assistance. All the three agencies also have their own or connects to a larger nationwide hotlines that are available 24/7 for anyone who needs assistance and for any sex trafficking situation.



## CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

Sex trafficking, within the last few decades, has been a major topic of concern for governments and the general public across the globe. To address the growing concern of sex trafficking, governments have taken steps to define what the problem is and a plan of action to deal with it. For example, the U.S. government passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000. The U.S. Government identified and acknowledges sex trafficking as a social problem and a crime, and it needs to be addressed- hence the passing of the TVPA legislation. The TVPA approach to addressing sex trafficking is through the three P's: prevent, protect, and prosecute.

Alongside governments and the general public, scholars and researchers have taken an interest of the topic of sex trafficking as well. One of the bigger topics discussed by researchers and scholars are the overlapping dimensions between sex trafficking and sex work. Many scholars (and the general public) debate if sex work should be criminalized and abolished or should it be legalized. Swanson (2016) perfectly describes the two sides of the debate, on one side, "feminists who view prostitution as a form of violence against woman, and highlights the gendered inequality in this tool of patriarchal global economy" (p. 604). According to this perspective, women never willingly choose to be in sex work because of the patriarchy suppression and oppression of women. On the other side of the debate, Swanson (2016) stated that sex work liberation "promotes prostitution or sex work as a legitimate profession that serves as an expression of women's choice and agency" (p. 593). Some women chose to work in the sex industry for multiple different reasons, and they advocate that for the industry to be more regulated and monitored for the safety of the women who participate in it. This debate often interlaces with sex trafficking. Sex trafficking and sex work both are issues under the umbrella of

gender-based violence and inequality. Both deal with underlying patriarchal value of men controlling women's bodies and sexuality because women are inferior and submissive to men and both can lead to women being targeted and victims of violence and abuse.

From my previous research, majority of the sources included the voices and expertise from those who are deeply involved in seeking to address the problem of sex trafficking. It became prevalent there is an absence of a shared definition. The definition of sex trafficking varies from government to government, state to state, agency to agency, and individual to individual. A reason why the definition varies from one source to another is based on how a source's perception and understanding of what the problem of sex trafficking is, and then constructs a definition based on those perceptions. The absence of a shared definition of sex trafficking creates conflicting views of what sex trafficking is, how to address it, how to properly help victim and survivors, and how to properly prosecute traffickers of this crime. Not having a shared, collective definition of sex trafficking can cause conflict when separating sex trafficking with "other similar violations, such as migrant smuggling, forced labor, and slavery" (McCarthy, 2014, p. 224); because all these problems share similar elements and are frequently discussed together. It is important for those who study and research sex trafficking to "understand how human trafficking happens, and most important, to create effective interventions to ameliorate it" (Nawyn, Birdal & Glogower, 2013, p. 56).

The purpose of my research was to understand how different agencies constructed their own definition and understanding of what sex trafficking is. Each agency have claimed that sex trafficking a social problem that needs to be solved. Each of the agencies have chosen to identify and frame a specific element of the problem, and constructed their own approaches to address it. Agency A focuses on law enforcement, Agency B prioritizes prevention education, and Agency

C values protection and/or recovery of survivors. Each agency does a wonderful job at addressing certain aspects of the problem of sex trafficking and ensuring the safety, rights, and well-being of victims and survivors with their direct or indirect services. The efforts made by these agencies do create a positive impact on their communities and addressing specific concerns about the problem, even as they struggle to increase efficacy: through collaboration, uses of the internet (social media), and other strategies. Despite their best efforts, each informant (Stephanie, Amanda, and Mary) acknowledged barriers and limitations that their particular agency and approach (law enforcement, prevention education, and protection/support for victims/survivors) struggles against. These barriers and limitations range from law enforcement themselves, lack of resources, and intersecting relationships between sex trafficking and domestic violence and sex work.

Again, the informants do an exceptional job at assessing their agencies' impacts and how their efforts are necessary in addressing the problem. However, it's difficult to effectively assess the impact, because the data sources, categories, and analyses are both unavailable to the public and, also, difficult to evaluate, given all the different definitions. It is also difficult to effectively assess the impact of these agencies, because of the lack of awareness and acknowledgement of the broader, underlying problems within sex trafficking. Some of the broader, underlying problems that are deeply rooted into the problem of sex trafficking are: patriarchal power and control, poverty and lack of employment or economic security/opportunities, mental illness and substance abuse, gender-based violence, and lastly, immigration policies and exploitation of immigrants. All these underlying problems contribute, in some shape or form, to the vulnerability of women and girls (and boys and some men) to sexual exploitation. From federal and policy level to cultural and societal level, we are failing to: assess the severity of the problem

due to lack of adequate data and variation of definitions; addressing the broader, underlying problems; and the successfulness of the responses towards the problem.

### **The Collaborative, Multi-Agency Approach**

One way to strengthen the response to sex trafficking and address the underlying problems, is to develop and support a collaborative, multi-agency approach. The collaborative, multi-agency approach:

“must include victim and social service providers, law enforcement and prosecution personnel, survivors, and a range of other governmental and non-governmental partners what can work together” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2023).

No single agency or organization can respond completely to all the different elements of sex trafficking, especially with the overall complexity of the problem, limited resources, limited funding/support, inadequate data, and varied definitions. Hence, a collaborative, multi-agency approach, can be an effective response to sex trafficking. The multi-agency approach allows agencies to form partnerships with one another. The partnerships should include agencies with different perspectives and approaches to the problem: local, state, and federal law enforcement; rape crisis centers/hotlines; domestic violence shelters and providers; immigrant-serving agencies, hospitals and care clinics, faith-based organizations; and the list goes on.

Together, agencies can acknowledge the varied definitions and approaches to the problem, and understand the intersecting risks, needs, and barriers/limitations from each agency involved. Also, agencies can collectively take responsibility to help, support, and protect the victims, survivors, and anyone else involved in sex trafficking. A collaborative, multi-agency approach engages agencies to recognize the barriers and limitations of each agency involved and create viable solutions to address them. However, it also empowers for the recognition and

discussion, by the agencies, of the broader, underlying problems that intersect with sex trafficking- and how these problems impact their efforts of significant change or elimination of sex trafficking.

### **Questions for Future Research**

I hope future researchers continue to explore and expand how sex trafficking is constructed and defined by different agencies or claim-makers, and how these different constructions reflect on their impact and efforts to address the problem. For future research, I raise some potential questions that could be used:

1. How can having a shared, collective definition of sex trafficking be beneficial to addressing the problem of sex trafficking?
  - a. What are some disadvantages if there were a shared, collective definition of sex trafficking?
2. How do we account all the efforts being made, while the larger problem remains serious?
  - a. How do we actually assess the severity of the problem? And create the “right” solutions to address it?
3. How can agencies expand their impact and efforts with neoliberal policies, and lack of proper funding and support?
  - a. What kinds of collaboration are actually possible or effective, among the agencies involved?
4. How does internet/social media impact sex trafficking?
  - a. What are the benefits of the internet?
  - b. What are the risks of the internet?

## **Limitations of the Study**

While there are significant benefits to my research and analyzation from my project, there are limitations that are worth noting.

One limitation is the small sample size. I was only able to interview three agencies from one state within U.S. This small sample size limits the reliability of the findings and cannot make the findings generalizable to all agencies across the U.S. addressing the problem of sex trafficking. The small sample size also reflected the lack of response from other agencies and organizations. I possibly have sent out 20 emails (and follow-up emails) to agencies and organizations across the state and sister states, and majority never responded. Which leads me to question of how accessible these agencies and organizations actually are to the public and victims/survivors.

The second limitation could be the research methods, qualitative interviews, themselves. Qualitative interviews of data collecting is very time consuming from the interviews, transcribing, and coding- hence another reason for a small sample size. Despite the qualitative interview method being time consuming and limits the quantity of the sample, it allowed me to have in-depth discussions with Stephanie, Amanda, and Mary about their roles and the agencies they work for.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview with me. Before I get to it, I wanted to go over a few things: I'm doing this work as part of graduation requirements for my master's degree. Since my undergraduate career, I have been committed to researching human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking. In expanding my knowledge about the subject, my approach is to explore and document how various agencies, committed to combating this complex issue, define and seek to address it. I will be recording this interview and later transcribing it and will only share this with my committee chair, if needed. Once the study has concluded and we've written up the report, I will destroy any recordings and documents to provide full confidentiality. If at any time you would like me to stop recording and/or end the interview, please let me know and I'd be happy to do so. Do you have any questions for me before we start.

### Introductory Questions:

1. What is your position at [agency's name]?
  - a. How did you come to join the agency?
  - b. How long have you been at this agency?
  - c. What drew you to this work and mission?
  - d. What if any previous experience—roles or training—did you have in preparation for this position?

### Questions about the Agency:

1. How and when did your agency come into being?
2. How do you receive funding for your agency?
  - a. Do you receive donations? How do you get donations? Who usually donates your agency?
  - b. What kind of grants, if any, do you apply for?
3. What kinds of services or advocacy do you provide at your agency?
4. Would you describe, please, your general staffing structure? (E.g., what are the major roles or positions in the agency, which may include paid as well as volunteer staff.)

### Questions about addressing the issue:

1. What are your agency's central goals in addressing the problem of sex trafficking/sexual exploitation?
2. What would you identify as key sources of this problem (may be multiple)?
3. What steps has your agency taken or are taking to address the overarching issue of sex trafficking/sexual exploitation?
4. How does your agency define the problem of sex trafficking/sexual exploitation?
  - a. Would you add or include anything to that definition to make it stronger or more detailed?
5. What laws or regulations do you see as especially important, either as barriers to meeting your goals or as resources that are helpful?

6. How, if at all, has your agenda of your agency changed over time, in its mission or focus?
  - a. What do you see as among the most current objectives or issues for agencies that share your mission of addressing sex trafficking?
  - b. How have you adapted, in your mission or staff, to address these newer challenges?

Questions about alliances you may have with others, in advancing your goals:

1. Does your agency have any alliances with other agencies or service providers, or even government agencies, in advancing your mission either locally or nationally?
2. Within the larger network of agencies that have related goals—locally or nationally—how do you see your mission and activities to be distinctive or unique?
3. What if any other/future alliances would you hope to develop?

In concluding the interview, what if any issues or points would you like to add, which were not covered earlier?

If I have any follow up questions, am I allowed to email you about them?

Thank you kindly for your time and contribution to my project.

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT LETTER

NAME | POSITION  
AGENCY  
4800 N. Marine Drive

Dear NAME,

My name is Alexis Lange, and I am completing my master's degree in sociology from Illinois State University. I am conducting my research project as part of the requirements to earn my degree, and also a part of my professional development. I am writing to the AGENCY to ask permission to interview individuals within your agency for my project.

Since my undergraduate career, I have been committed to researching human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking. In expanding my knowledge about the subject, my approach is to explore and document how various agencies, committed to combating this complex issue, define and seek to address it. This has value for research and policy.

It is clear to me that different agencies have different agendas and roles in addressing sex trafficking—either in preventing it, or educating the public, or supporting those who have been affected directly. I am interested in how your agency defines issues related to sex trafficking and/or exploitation and seek to address it.

I plan to conduct a small number of semi-structured interviews. These will not be closed-ended surveys, but a more conversational and flexible exchange. The interviews will provide insight into how your agency defines and seek to address dimensions of sex trafficking or exploitation.

This email aims to make you aware of my project and to ask you to consider having members of your agency contribute through a one-time interview. Because of lingering concerns about Covid-19, I plan to conduct these interviews online, over Zoom. Could you please direct me to the most appropriate person or persons to discuss this project? We see that Ms. Taylor is a key team member, but she may opt to direct us to others.

I have secured IRB approval from Illinois State University. Any/all informants will be given a consent form, to sign, and I will be glad to address any questions that informants may have regarding the consent process.

My faculty advisor in this project is Chris Wellin, Ph.D., an associate professor of sociology at ISU. His email is: [cwellin@ilstu.edu](mailto:cwellin@ilstu.edu); his phone # is: (309) 808-0875. He, too, is available to answer any questions that arise.

We look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your willingness to contribute to this project.

Thank you for your time,  
Alexis Lange  
([aklange@ilstu.edu](mailto:aklange@ilstu.edu))

Chris Wellin, Ph.D.  
Chris Wellin

## APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Alexis Lange who is currently a graduate student and Chris Wellin who is an associate professor both in The Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Illinois State University. The purpose of this study is to conduct a small-scale, comparative case-study of how different agencies define the nature and scope of sex trafficking and what solutions your agencies are taking to address the issue.

### Why are you being asked?

You have been asked to participate because you are currently working in an organization focusing on the topic of sex trafficking or in a similar domain. Your participation would provide insight on how your particular organization comes to understand what sex trafficking is and how your specific organization addresses this issue and creates a solution.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You will not be penalized if you choose to skip parts of the study, not participate, or withdraw from the study at any time.

### What would you do?

If you choose to participate in this study, we'll conduct a semi-structured interview via video-call e.g. Zoom. The interview will be recorded and then later transcribed for analysis. In total, your involvement in this study will last approximately 60-90 minutes, with the possibility of a follow-up, if needed.

### Are any risks expected?

We do not anticipate any risks beyond those that would occur in everyday life. To reduce any chance of risks, the interview will be conducted on a secure, private video-call for confidentiality of the participants.

### Will your information be protected?

We will use all reasonable efforts to keep any provided personal information confidential. All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence. I will use pseudonyms for both your name and the name of the agency you work for. Since, the interview will be done via video-call, and recorded (with your consent), your data will be safely stored on password safe computer. Any information that may identify you or potentially lead to reidentification will not be released to individuals that are not on the research team. When this research is completed, all documents and recordings will be destroyed to maintain full confidentiality.

However, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by authorized individuals.

We need to make you aware that in certain research studies, it is our legal and ethical responsibility to report any life-threatening situation to appropriate authorities. However, we are not seeking this type of information in our study nor will you be asked questions about these issues.

### Could your responses be used for other research?

We will not use any identifiable information from you in future research, but your deidentified information could be used for future research without additional consent from you.

Who will benefit from this study?

I believe this study will fill in a gap on how sex trafficking is defined as a social problem through the lens of different agencies.

Whom do you contact if you have any questions?

If you have any questions about the research or wish to withdraw from the study, contact Alexis Lange at [aklange@ilstu.edu](mailto:aklange@ilstu.edu) or Dr. Chris Wellin at [cwellin@ilstu.edu](mailto:cwellin@ilstu.edu).

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If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, contact the Illinois State University Research Ethics & Compliance Office at (309) 438-5527 or [IRB@ilstu.edu](mailto:IRB@ilstu.edu).

Documentation of Consent

Sign below if you are 18 or older and willing to participate in this study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your signature below indicates that you agree to be recorded.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

You can print this form for your records.