

FORCED SEXUAL LABOR IN THE UNITED STATES

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Human trafficking involves the exploitation of an individual, including for sex and other forms of labor or services (e.g., debt bondage, forced labor). Forced sexual labor is a form of human trafficking involving the exploitation of an individual for commercial sexual acts (The Polaris Project, 2021). The exploitation of an individual for commercial sex may be referred to in various ways, such as sex trafficking, domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), and commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC) (Haney et al., 2020; O'Brien & Li 2019; TVPA, 2000). While many documents and papers refer to the exploitation of individuals for commercial sex as sex trafficking, many advocates for sex worker rights advocate for referring to it as forced sexual labor to prioritize the people rather than the product of sexual acts (Lerum & Brents, 2016). As such, the present report utilizes the term of forced sexual labor rather than sexual exploitation. Furthermore, the present report utilizes the term victim to refer to individuals who are currently being exploited for sexual labor.

This report discusses the differences between sex workers and forced sexual labor as well as myths of forced sexual labor. This paper will also touch upon risk factors for individuals and how to recognize forced sexual labor. Lastly, information on what to do if forced sexual labor is suspected will be provided.

Definitions

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA, 2000) defines forced sexual labor as: “The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act....induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age”. When the individual is under the age of 18, this is often referred to as DMST or CSEC, and it does **not** require the commercial sex acts be due to force, fraud, or coercion (TVPA, 2000).

Sex Workers vs. Forced Sexual Labor

It is difficult to determine the number of individuals in the United States currently being forced to engage in sexual labor due to the underground nature of sex work. It is also crucial to differentiate between sex work and forced sexual labor when advocating for victims. Grant (2014) discusses the stigmatization and discrimination that sex workers face in her book *Playing the Whore*, emphasizing that sex workers are often viewed as individuals lacking autonomy and needing “rescue”. The view that individuals need “rescue” often overlaps with the portrayal of individuals who are victims of forced sexual labor. The narrative of a helpless victim is problematic as it strips sex workers of their independence while pigeonholing victims of forced sexual labor into a view of the “ideal victim.” When an individual does not meet this narrative of an “ideal victim” that both the media and anti-sex work advocates have created, they are often not identified and are unable to receive services. It is crucial that sex worker advocates and forced sexual labor victim advocates work together to help provide safe working environments and conditions as well as increase the identification of victims that need services and support.

Myths of Forced Sexual Labor

Along with the false equivalency of sex work and forced sexual labor, there are also many myths contributing to the problem of identification (The Polaris Project, 2021). One myth is that girls and women are the only ones victimized by sex trafficking, however, that is not true. Men, boys, trans- and gender-expansive individuals are also victimized within forced sexual labor. Additionally, although many people may believe that individuals are exploited by people they do not know well, it is common for individuals to be exploited by their romantic partners and parents.

One of the most commonly spread myths about forced sexual labor is that it is always or usually a violent crime. While there are instances of violent forced sexual labor, most exploiters use others means such as tricking, manipulating, or threatening the individual into providing a commercial sex act. Furthermore, Gonzales-Pons et al. (2020) mention how believing myths about human trafficking impedes one's ability to identify a victim, demonstrating how important it is to be well-aware and informed about human trafficking and specifically forced sexual labor.

Risk Factors

While every gender identity is susceptible to forced sexual labor, certain risk factors make individuals more vulnerable. These risk factors include but are not limited to - substance use disorders, adolescent sexual victimization, child abuse, mental health concerns, running away, involvement with child welfare, and emergency medical visits (Haney et al., 2020; O'Brien & Li, 2019). If you work in a setting where you may encounter individuals who have any of these experiences, you must be aware of what constitutes forced sexual labor. There is often resistance and reluctance to self-identify as victims or seek services for many reasons including fear, shame, and stigma. It is important to keep this in mind and understand the complexities of forced sexual labor and its victimization when working with vulnerable populations.

While there are many benefits of the internet in daily life, the internet also provides an effective method for exploiters to identify and groom potential victims of forced sexual labor. The identification of victims often occurs via various social media outlets, so identification and prevention must happen in this domain as well (O'Brien & Li 2019). As we shift to a society increasingly on the internet and social media, especially during COVID-19, we must all be aware of the potential for abuse within that realm.

Recognizing Forced Sexual Labor

Recognizing forced sexual labor is inherently difficult due to some of the reasons discussed already such as the myths surrounding forced sexual labor and the distinction between sex work and forced sexual labor. Furthermore, personal biases that result from these myths or from elsewhere can block someone from recognizing an instance of forced sexual labor (Haney et al., 2020).

Because much of the healthcare victims receive comes from the emergency department (Gibbons & Stoklosa, 2016), Mumma et al. (2017) decided to test the effectiveness of utilizing screening

questions in an emergency department setting in recognizing victims of forced sexual labor. Mumma et al. (2017) found that a single question was answered as a 'yes' for all victims ("Were you [or anyone you work with] ever beaten, hit, yelled at, raped, threatened or made to feel physical pain for working slowly or for trying to leave?"), suggesting that this single question may be enough to identify victims of forced sexual labor. Consequently, being aware of the myths and facts about forced sexual labor and also asking the straight forward question may aid in recognizing forced sexual labor in multiple places.

Action Items for Suspected Forced Sexual Labor

Chisolm-Straker and Stokolsa (2017) discuss the complexities of human trafficking and forced sexual labor as well as note the number of individuals thought to be affected by forced sexual labor in the United States. Forced sexual labor is affecting tens of thousands and potentially hundreds of thousands of individuals living in the United States of America. Just one victim of forced sexual labor is one too many and we must work together to identify and provide services to all of them.

It is crucial that everyone recognizes forced sexual labor when it occurs and knows how to seek help for themselves or others they may know in this situation. Below are some resources/hotlines that should be used when encountering a potential situation where forced sexual labor is occurring, or if you are or know of someone who is a victim of forced sexual labor:

1. Call the U.S. Department of Homeland Security directly (**1-866-347-2423**) to report suspected human trafficking activity and get help.
 - This phone line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.
 - You may also submit information online at www.ice.gov/tips.

Note: The Department of Homeland Security, and especially I.C.E is full of racial and xenophobic prejudice and may not be the safest option for some people
2. National Human Trafficking Hotline is a national hotline that connects victims and survivors of forced sexual labor with services and supports to get help and stay safe.
 - To talk to someone, you can reach out via their toll-free phone (**1-888-373-7888**; **TTY: 711**), SMS text lines (**233733**), or online chat function, which are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.
 - <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>
3. 1800Runaway is an organization focused on supporting and listening to youth and teens and serves as a communicating agency for runaway and homeless youth.
 - This phone line operates 24/7 and can be reached at (1-800-786-2929).
 - Someone is also available via live chat or email at <https://www.1800runaway.org/youth-teens/get-help#get-help-text>.
4. The Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime has further human trafficking information and resources for victims and survivors of human trafficking.
 - For victims and survivors: <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/human-trafficking/victimssurvivors>

- For more information on human trafficking: <https://ovc.ojp.gov/program/human-trafficking/victimssurvivors>

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