

# How sex trafficking trauma affects the way its survivors parent

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Mother and child in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico. Credit: Obed Esquivel on Unsplash

A study of young immigrant mothers who are survivors of sex trafficking found that the trauma affected how they parented: It made them overprotective parents in a world perceived to be unsafe, it fueled emotional withdrawal when struggling with stress and mental health symptoms, and was a barrier to building confidence as mothers. Yet, they coped with such challenges through finding meaning in the birth of their children and through social support and faith.

Results of the community-based participatory research study by researchers at Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health, Copenhagen University, and ECPAT-U.S. (End Child Prostitution and Trafficking-U.S.) appear in the journal *PLOS One*.

The researchers interviewed 14 [young women](#) (20-36 years) from Mexico and Central America who were survivors of sex trafficking to understand the effect of that experience on their relationship with their [pre-school children](#). Recruited through the nonprofit Sanctuary for Families, participants had been forced to enter sex trafficking at an average age of 19 years, with one-third trafficked as minors. Most of these [women](#) experienced PTSD symptoms, despite having escaped their victimization 2 to 10 years earlier.

## **Trauma's scars**

The study found that many sex trafficking survivors questioned their ability to be "good mothers." This negative self-perception was linked to participants' experiences of disempowerment from being trafficked for sex. Most noted that their avoidant behaviors and generalized fear often led to overprotecting their young children and foregoing opportunities for socialization with other children or adults. When children are overprotected, their independence may be discouraged, hindering the development of autonomy and increasing the risk for developing anxiety and separation issues. Conversely, mothers also discussed how moments of sadness and emotional numbness led them to feel emotionally disconnected from their children, decreasing their ability to respond to their young children's emotional needs in moments of stress.

Mothers' challenges to be emotionally present during stressful moments appeared to result from the accumulation of stressors before, during, and after victimization: Neglect and abuse, forced separation from their older children, post-trafficking poverty, and migration-related stressors,

rather than directly from the trafficking experiences. Fears of deportation and limited job options appeared to further contribute to their becoming stay-at-home mothers and engaging in overprotective parenting.

## **Finding meaning in motherhood**

Despite these challenges, mothers found ways to cope—by finding meaning in the birth of their child and using [social support](#) and faith to build confidence. All participants regarded their children as the main reason for living, for working towards a better future. Many reported experiencing strong connections to their children, with moments of joy and playfulness. The study showed how the process of reestablishing feelings of happiness and trust through motherhood can help women find meaning in life, increasing their resilience and ability to cope with the consequences of traumatic experiences. Early childhood programs appeared to help mothers experience empowerment and develop stronger bonds with their children.

"We can support mothers' resiliency through government policies and programs aimed at reducing daily stressors and including mental health services, job and life skills training, and stable housing. These will facilitate women to be able to process their pain, while building confidence in their ability to be loving mothers," says first author Maria Martí Castañer, Ph.D., who carried out the research while a post-doctoral researcher at the Columbia Mailman School and is now at the Center for Migration, Ethnicity, and Health at the University of Copenhagen.

## **Policy solutions**

The researchers propose several policies to support mothers who are

survivors of sex trafficking. These include pre- and post-natal mental health and psychosocial support, focusing on parenting-related changes; the provision of parenting and early childhood education programs to facilitate the development of healthier parent-child relationships; measures that improve living conditions and enhance long-term opportunities to regain independence and confidence to accelerate their recovery from trauma. The latter might include English language and literacy as well as job skills. These can help women reconstruct their new identity in addition to supporting their role as mothers.

Anti-trafficking agencies, nonprofit organizations working with sex trafficking survivors, and healthcare providers involved in prenatal and child health care can play a key role in identifying women (and older adolescents) in need, and in encouraging their referral to programs that offering psychosocial, parenting, and early childhood support and education.

"Our project highlights the unique opportunities for partnership across legal and public health disciplines. Ultimately the well-being of these young migrant women and their children benefits from collaboration between legal and healthcare services. Such collaborations can help inform both disciplines and thus facilitate the provision of effective and more holistic care," senior author Manuela Orjuela-Grimm, MD, assistant professor of epidemiology and pediatrics says.

## **Background on sex trafficking**

According to estimates from the International Labor Organization, there are approximately 4.5 million victims of sexual exploitation at any given time, and 98 percent are estimated to be women or girls. An estimated that 15,000-50,000 people are trafficked annually in the U.S.

Central American women are trafficked en route to the U.S. with

smugglers sometimes pass them on to traffickers. Others, especially women from Mexico, are seduced by young men who convince them with promises of a new life in new home towns only to place them in trafficking with threats of retaliation to their families.

Women from Mexico and Central America typically are sold for 15-minute sex acts between 15-20 times per day on a weekday and 25-35 times per day on the weekend. When women fail to meet their quota, their traffickers frequently beat, starve, and threaten them. Survivors of sex trafficking have high rates of comorbid mental health disorders and health problems.

**More information:** Marti Marti Castaner et al, How trauma related to sex trafficking challenges parenting: Insights from Mexican and Central American survivors in the US, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0252606](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252606)

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