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“Got Sold a Dream and It Turned into a Nightmare”: The Victim-Offender Overlap in Commercial Sexual Exploitation

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ABSTRACT

Typically characterized by a patriarchal structure, domestic pimp-controlled sex trafficking in the United States often situates a male trafficker at the top of the organization, with a female “bottom girl” as second-in-command. This victim occupies the position of victim-offender, where she is simultaneously being victimized by a trafficker while also forced to commit trafficking offenses against others in the operation. Legal scholars and practitioners have debated whether or not the responsibilities of this role are more *victim* or *offender*. To date, the modest research dedicated to understanding the victim-offender overlap in sex trafficking has relied solely on data from those involved in the criminal justice system. The present study broadens the scope of this area of work by including a community-based sample of adult women who self-identify as having filled the role of a bottom girl (N = 17) in pimp-controlled, familial, and illicit massage parlor sex trafficking in the U.S. In-depth interviews provide the first empirical definition of a “bottom girl,” including their roles and responsibilities. Results also provide insight into the costs of surviving abusive traffickers, providing context for criminal justice practitioners regarding the complexities of being simultaneously victim and offender in a sex trafficking operation.

KEYWORDS

Commercial sexual exploitation; sex trafficking; bottoms; victim-offender overlap; domestic sex trafficking

Introduction & Background

Research on the victim-offender overlap in sex trafficking has received modest attention in the literature (Serie et al., 2018; Vandiver & Kercher, 2004). Several factors have contributed to this existing gap. First, it is difficult to estimate the number of sex trafficking victim-offenders who have not been convicted or involved in the criminal justice system (Dank et al., 2014; Farrell & Fahy, 2016; Pfeffer et al., 2017), which narrows the scope of many studies with only limited data from just a segment of the total population. Second, researchers are confronted with multiple issues when it comes to interviewing victims and survivors. Victims often feel vulnerable to being retriggered during data collection and may also operate within a culture of disbelief wherein they are reluctant to participate because they feel as though they will not be believed or benefit from participation (Bosworth et al., 2011). Third, the nature of sex trafficking makes it unique from many other forms of criminal activity and most research has focused on how past victimization increases the risk for offending in the future, or vice versa (Broidy et al., 2006; Lauritsen & Quinet, 1995; Maldonado-Molina et al., 2009, 2011).

While these important factors have been well-established in the literature in regard to other crimes, with respect to the crime of sex trafficking, some victims may hold the roles of victim and offender simultaneously. Typically characterized by patriarchal standards, U.S.-based pimp-controlled sex trafficking often situates a male trafficker at the top of its hierarchy, followed by a “bottom” or “bottom

girl” – the street term used to describe female victims of sex trafficking who are the most loyal to their trafficker/pimp and transition into a trafficking coconspirator role (Crocker, 2016; Dank et al., 2014). Because of the structural arrangements surrounding a typically male trafficker and his female “bottom,” these women are simultaneously being victimized by their trafficker while also being forced to perform the duties of a trafficker to other victims. Indeed, the limited work that does exist in this area suggests that, “traffickers routinely employ abuse and manipulation to strip away bottoms’ agency, so that they will perform virtually any act at their trafficker’s command” (Crocker, 2016, p. 756). Yet, when interacting with law enforcement, bottoms often deny victimization for fear of retribution from their trafficker (Crocker, 2016).

Given that the majority of research on the sex trafficking victim-offender overlap has been based on available legal documents and testimony from those being investigated for committing sex trafficking offenses, there is a clear gap in scientific knowledge on this issue. While the legal side of this issue is important to understanding the victim-offender overlap, it does not provide a full picture. How can we accurately understand the sex trafficking victim-offender overlap when relying on data from only those who have been involved in the criminal justice system? What about the sex trafficking victim-offenders who suffered at the hands of their trafficker, and were never arrested or questioned by law enforcement? To answer these questions, it is necessary to first broaden the scope of this area of research to include a more comprehensive population of women who occupy the sex trafficking victim-offender role beyond simply those who are arrested or convicted. The purpose of this study is to investigate the victim-offender overlap among current and former bottoms in various types of sex trafficking.

A Word about Language

Throughout this paper, we have incorporated certain colloquial terms that align with the purpose of community-based research. We are mindful that the use of street terms in academic writing cannot only further the usage of those terms, but validates harmful or stigmatizing rhetoric when talking about commercial sexual exploitation and sex trafficking.

With that in mind, the street terms “bottom girl” and “bottom” will be used throughout this paper to identify a specific group of female victims within the trafficking networks that exist in the United States. Although the term “bottom girl” is not often used in academic or legal scholarship as an identifier, it is a term that is familiar and easily understood by the population of women who previously or currently occupy this role. Over the course of this community-based study, victims were given a platform to speak about their own experiences. We believe a crucial part of this research was allowing our participants to speak openly and freely about their experiences using their own language in how they identify themselves. The terms “bottom girl” or “bottom” will be used interchangeably throughout this paper to identify women who understood their role in the trafficking network as such. The overall purpose of incorporating street terms such as “bottom girl” or “bottom” in this study was to align these identifiers with the term “victim-offender” and initiate thoughtful reflection on the painful experiences of being a trafficking victim while occupying this specific role.

Review of Relevant Literature

The “Bottom Girl”

In the criminal justice system, “bottom girls” present a unique problem of classification: should these women be treated as offenders for purposes of prosecution, or crime victims who ought to be protected? Although the role of the bottom girl mimics the criminal acts of the trafficker, unlike the trafficker, research suggests that the bottom girl does not act of her own volition (Crocker, 2016). Therefore, when she inevitably encounters the criminal justice system, prosecutors should consider her lack of autonomy: she is not a trafficker, however, neither is she seen as a victim of trafficking (Finn et al., 2015; Wilson & O’Brien, 2016). Instead, the bottom girl occupies a unique role in the trafficker-

victim hierarchy; she is a victim of the same crime she is being forced to commit against others. At the same time, she is often still responsible for engaging in commercial sex acts and subject to force, fraud and coercion, which is, by definition, sex trafficking. Below, we propose that bottom girls occupy a unique place in the criminal justice system as a subcategory of “victim-offenders.”

For people unfamiliar with the world of commercial sexual exploitation, the phrase “bottom girl” might evoke images of the least important person in a trafficker’s group of prostituted persons. However, the bottom girl is not the least important person in a trafficking operation; oftentimes, she is the most important, both because she is thought to keep the other prostituted women compliant with the trafficker’s demands and because she serves as a “buffer, intended to protect the real criminals from prosecution” (Blizard, 2017, p. 639). As defined by the Eleventh Circuit in *United States v. Pipkins*, this individual is “a trusted and experienced prostitute or female associate” whose place is “[a]t the top of the pimp’s organization.”¹ This definition, although illustrative of the bottom girl’s place in the hierarchy, is somewhat misleading: it appears to dismiss the bottom girl’s status as a victim of trafficking, who, oftentimes, receives the most severe abuse from the trafficker:

Bottom girls may actually be the most victimized out of all of the prostitutes working for a particular trafficker—they are in the position of bottom girl because they are the most submissive, and the traffickers maintain control over them by delegating power. (Blizard, 2017, p. 639)

When a prostituted person becomes a bottom girl, she takes on a role that looks on the surface less like that of a victim of trafficking and more like that of a trafficker. Bottom girls, generally, are responsible for handling the trafficker’s affairs when he is unavailable, maintaining order, collecting money from the prostituted women, and recruiting new women (Crocker, 2016). Thus, despite her own victimization, the bottom girl commits criminal offenses resembling those committed by the trafficker, including recruiting new victims and managing other victims.

The bottom girl’s position and responsibilities present a significant challenge for prosecutors seeking to file appropriate criminal charges. Should the bottom girl, who is herself a victim of trafficking, sexual exploitation, and abuse, be prosecuted as an offender for the acts she committed, seemingly of her own volition? Levy (2016) argues that only some bottom girls “deserve leniency” while “others are no less autonomous and culpable than traffickers who entered the trade voluntarily” (p. 131). This ambiguity about who is criminally culpable and who is not is one of the most pressing reasons that more research is needed on the sex trafficking victim-offender. Uncertainty about the victim-offender overlap leaves law enforcement officials to determine whether or not it is appropriate to prosecute victims of trafficking as offenders, even if they were forced, coerced, or defrauded into committing the crimes. This complex victim-offender overlap and the challenges faced in both research and prosecution are detailed below.

Victim-Offender Overlap

One means of assessing the bottom girl’s criminal culpability is by examining her role in the trafficking organization through the lens of the sex trafficking victim-offender overlap, which refers to the relationship between the victimization and offending patterns of individuals (Jennings et al., 2012). This framework recognizes the existence of different roles in the commission of an offense: victims (those upon whom the crime is committed), offenders (those who commit the crimes), and victim-offenders (individuals who have been *both* victims and perpetrators of crimes; Finn et al., 2015). Research has established the victim-offender role in the United States as well as other countries, over time, across various contexts, and within various demographic subgroups (Baxter, 2019; Tillyer & Wright, 2014). While we know that victims of crime are at an increased risk for offending (Lauritsen & Laub, 2007), little is known about how these processes operate in sex trafficking. A recent study (Baxter, 2019) reviewed judges’ sentencing remarks in six Australia cases where sex trafficking victims

¹378 U.S. 1281, 1285 (11th Cir. 2004), *vacated*, 544 U.S. 902 (2005), *judgment reinstated*, 412 F.3d 1251 (11th Cir. 2005).

were charged with trafficking offenses. In all cases, the judges used their prior victimization to intensify the victim-offenders' status. Clearly, a more complex understanding of the victim-offender role in sex trafficking is needed for law enforcement officials, and arguably anyone working with victims or researching sex trafficking.

In the U.S., Finn et al. (2015) analyzed secondary data from 1999–2000 and found that trafficked victim-offenders were more likely to be involved in outdoor, or street prostitution, have experienced multiple arrests, and have reported being a victim of a violent crime in the past. Trafficked victim-offenders were also as likely as non-trafficked victim-offenders to be detained following arrest, which “suggests that the police are failing to recognize their victim status” (p. 88). Though this remains one of the only U.S.-based studies on the victim-offender overlap in sex trafficking, it is worth noting that the data are nearly 20 years old. Since 2000, legislation and law enforcement training has changed. As an example, since 2010, all but six U.S. states have passed legislation that offers some form of criminal record relief for sex trafficking survivors (Polaris Project, 2013). Updated data on the victim-offender overlap in sex trafficking are needed.

Taken together, the research presented above has largely drawn from secondary sources; this has included cases reported to or prosecuted by law enforcement, or reports from social service agencies (Baxter, 2019; Crocker, 2016; Dank et al., 2014; Finn et al., 2015; Pfeffer et al., 2017). This is limiting for several reasons, but especially so when investigating the uniqueness of the victim-offender overlap when it comes to sex trafficking. First, some research has only categorized survivors or prostituted persons as victims if they reported their victimization to the police (Finn et al., 2015). The present study emerges out of the first author's larger data set that includes 64 qualitative interviews with both victims (those still working or being trafficked in the sex trade) and survivors (those who had exited prostitution or escaped their trafficker). Of those participants categorized as trafficked due to their experience of force, fraud or coercion (Vandiver & Kercher, 2004), over two-thirds had experienced sexual victimization as children or adolescents, and yet *none* of those instances were reported to law enforcement ($N = 23$). Considering how sexual victimization is underreported on the whole (Planty et al., 2013), this finding is not altogether surprising. However, when it comes to research on the victim-offender overlap, it is important to take into account both reported and unreported victimization, especially given the tendency for sexual victimization to be underreported. This is particularly salient when examining sex trafficking victims who – by definition – are being victimized daily. Yet, due to the difficulties in uncovering evidence of victimization, many sex trafficking victims remain invisible.

It is equally important to consider sampling strategies for studies on sex trafficking and the victim-offender overlap. The majority of work in this area has relied on women who have been incarcerated or charged with a criminal offense (Dank et al., 2014; Pfeffer et al., 2017). Finn et al. (2015) included women in their sample who had been charged with crimes such as drugs, robbery, assault, property crimes, fraud/forgery, and trespassing – but not trafficking. Of course, very few human trafficking cases have been prosecuted; in 2017, the Human Trafficking Institute reported that only 342 federal human trafficking cases had been prosecuted (Feehs & Richmond, 2017), so it makes sense that women involved in trafficking are difficult to find and recruit into a study on the victim-offender. Yet it is still worth noting how these previous studies have been limited by access to a hard-to-reach population. It is clear that this body of work needs reliable data on victim-offenders' experiences leading up to arrest and/or conviction. A significant part of sex trafficking victim-offenders' stories – including the mechanisms by which sex trafficking victims become involved in trafficking as offenders – remain untold. In addition, the limited legal case studies that exist on this issue demonstrate how the defendants in those cases have faced serious consequences for conduct that was likely the result of their trafficking victimization (Levy, 2016). However, there is little research on how prior or simultaneous trafficking victimization and the associated impact of trafficking-related trauma on the

defendant's conduct has, or could have, influenced the criminal justice response to pursuing a case against a sex trafficking victim-offender. Therefore, the present study is guided by the following general research questions:

- (1) How is a "bottom girl" defined by those who occupied the role? What responsibilities are associated with the role?
- (2) What forces lead victims of sex trafficking into the role of victim-offender?
- (3) How do bottom girls experience the victim-offender overlap? Are these women simultaneously victimized while being forced to commit trafficking offenses?

Methods

The researchers on this project partnered with a survivor-led organization in the Rocky Mountain region which offers direct services to both sex trafficking survivors and victims (those still being trafficked) across the United States. With Institutional Review Board approval, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 17 women who either had experienced or were currently experiencing third-party controlled sex trafficking. All participants revealed that they had experienced either force, fraud or coercion as defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). The researchers asked respondents about their experiences becoming a bottom, how and where traffickers recruit, how victims are groomed, how victims' daily lives are structured, including interactions with traffickers, other victims and sex buyers, and what is needed to exit and recover from sex trafficking.

Recruitment

The partnering survivor-led organization advertised the study via social media blasts to a network of 1,600 women victims and survivors of commercial sexual exploitation. The advertisement for participation indicated that the researchers were interested in interviewing survivors or current victims who had served in the role of "bottom" during their exploitation. Twenty-five women confirmed interest and 17 ultimately participated in the interviews. Participants received a \$45 VISA gift card for participating in the study.

Sample

The sample consisted of 17 adult women living in the United States and ranged in age from 22 years to 55 years old. Because the social media outreach came from a survivor-leader, the interviewer was able to build rapport quickly with the women who participated. All participants had at some point during their exploitation identified as serving the role of bottom. The sample included 15 women who had experienced pimp-controlled sex trafficking and two who were trafficked in illicit massage businesses. [Table 1](#) presents the demographic information along with key variables of interest to this study, including whether or not the participants were trafficked indoors (i.e., internet-based, brothel, escort) or outdoors (i.e., street prostitution) or both.

Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted either over the phone or in-person in a private setting. Only two of the 17 interviews occurred in person at a private location. Interviews with the women ranged in duration from 40 minutes to 120 minutes. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their identities; in some cases, participants asked the researcher to choose one for them. Qualitative in-depth interviews offer the opportunity to elevate participant voices, centering their lived experience in the data collection. Semi-structured interviews also provide depth that researchers are unable to access using survey data, secondary data, or other quantitative

Table 1. Sample characteristics (N = 17).

	Age	Race/ ethnicity	Education	Children	Age of Entry/ Exit	Recruitment/ Entry	Type of ST
Alicia	30	White	GED	Yes ^a	24/29	Social media	Pimp/Indoor
Amanda	52	White	AA	No	15/21	Boyfriended	Pimp/Outdoor
Angelina	22	White	9 th grade	Yes ^a	15/22	Survival	Pimp/Indoor
Ashley	28	Black	GED	Yes ^a	18/24	Boyfriended	Pimp/In & out
Ayesha	27	White	High school	No	19/27	Boyfriended	Pimp
Camille	30	White	Some college	Yes ^a	19/24	Boyfriended	Massage business
Cashmere	29	Multi-racial	GED	Yes ^a	18/27	Fraud	Pimp/Indoor
Gwen	49	White	AA	Yes ^a	15/29	Boyfriended	Pimp/Outdoor
Jade	22	Black	GED	Yes	15/not exited	Group home	Pimp/In & out
Keisha	33	Black	Some college	No	14/23	Boyfriended	Pimp/Outdoor
Lara	30	White	MA	Yes	18/21	Boyfriended	Pimp/Indoor
Lei	55	Black	BA	Yes ^a	15/35	Boyfriended	Pimp/Outdoor
Mina	38	White	AA	Yes ^a	19/24	Boyfriended	Massage business
Rosa	30	White	Some college	Yes	16/23	Drug dealer began pimping her	Pimp/Outdoor
Sasha	38	White & Hispanic	Some college	Yes ^a	18/28	Boyfriended	Pimp/Outdoor
Tia	34	Black	Some college	Yes ^a	14/31	Survival	Pimp/Outdoor
Taylor	35	White	8 th grade	Yes ^a	18/21	Turned out by social worker	Pimp/Indoor

^awith trafficker

approaches (Weiss, 1994). A semi-structured interview guide was reviewed prior to data collection by a panel of sex trafficking survivor leaders to ensure the project was survivor-informed. This approach is increasingly supported in studies interested in centering lived experience in sex trafficking research (Rajaram & Tidball, 2018).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed by Rev.com, an online transcription service. All identifying information was removed from the transcript, and the first author on this project conducted thematic analysis on the transcripts. Research assistants also helped to systematically read and code transcripts using a codebook that incorporated descriptive codes based on interview questions and emergent themes.

Results

The majority of the women in this sample (58%) entered the commercial sex trade after engaging in a romantic relationship with a man (trafficker) who posed as a boyfriend. This is often referred to as being “boyfriended” into the commercial sex trade (CST) (Nichols, 2016). Often the romantic relationship will be cultivated over the course of 6–12 months with promises (from the trafficker) of a happy, financially successful life together. This type of trafficker:

establishes trust, and psychologically and physically bonds with the victim through a web of deceit and lies, securing her allegiance – even after the relationship changes drastically into one of violence, torture and abuse. (Smith et al., 2009, p. 8)

Sixty-five percent of the sample also had children with their traffickers. Fifty-eight percent of the sample identified as White, 29% as Black, 6% multi-racial and 6% Hispanic. The average age of women in this study was 34 years old. Average age of entry into CST was 17 years old, and the average duration of time in CST was seven years. Forty-seven percent of the participants in this study had never been arrested for prostitution or related charges. It is also important to note that two of the participants who had been arrested were juveniles at the time. One of the participants was still experiencing commercial sexual exploitation at the time of data collection.

Empirical Definition of Bottom

Daily Operations

The roles and responsibilities of the bottom in this study were consistent with previous work emerging out of legal case studies; the majority of the sample was responsible for daily operations (posting ads), making sure the victims were ready to work (grooming, providing drugs), cooking and cleaning, collecting money, recruiting new victims, and driving victims to appointments. Ashley, a bottom who was trafficked via online ads as well as in an outdoor pimp-controlled setting, described her responsibilities as second-in-command to the trafficker:

I'm the mediator. I'm the peacekeeper. I have to make sure everything runs smoothly. I'm the accountant. I'm the receptionist. I'm the banker. I'm the judge, jury, and executioner. Really at the end of it, I have to make sure, if we had other girls . . . I make sure they've been taking care of themselves. I can be mom. Make sure you guys are eating right. Make sure you're keeping up on your hygiene. Make sure you go out to your doctor's appointment regularly. Make sure you're keeping up on your appearance. I have to make sure everybody has clothes. They got their shoes. We have places to go. I can make sure everybody's ads are posted at the right time. Make sure my appointments are still being made at the same time. And I still have to go, call into my actual life about jobs, while I'm doing this. It's that mother hen position . . . I have to take care of everybody. And at the end of it, I have to make sure that my traffickers are paid. I have to make sure that he's cool. He's being taken care of. In the cases that anything needs to be taken care of, I got to make sure that's done. That's executed.

This description was common among study participants, regardless of the type of trafficking situation they were being exploited in. Mina, who was trafficked in an illicit massage business, describes similar duties and expectations associated with her role as the bottom:

Yeah, to cook, clean, take care of the whole house, laundry. Try to befriend or teach the other girls that would pull in, the rules of the game. He would bring them in and do the whole, manipulation, coercion thing on them, the whole brain, mental mess up thing.

Camille, who was also trafficked in an illicit massage business, described being responsible for placing ads either online or in a "gentleman's magazines." Responsibilities like this were similar across bottoms where indoor prostitution was part of the organization. Lara, who was trafficked in a pimp-controlled setting via online advertisements, described having to get the photos taken for online ads and drive other victims to appointments:

Definitely getting them ready, even helping them pick out clothes for their pictures, taking their pictures sometimes. I ended up taking over all the ads and stuff because this man was the laziest motherfucker ever. He would be laying on his couch all day and he's texting me to do shit, and I'm just like, 'I'm in the middle of other shit.' He was incredibly lazy and great at delegating. Good leadership skills really. Too bad he used them for evil and not good . . . I would drive them places and drop them off, or I would wait around just to make sure they were okay. I've always had this nurturing motherly thing that I just feel bad ditching someone at someone's house without any real protection, 'cause you know they always tell you that you're safe and you're gonna be okay and they're keeping an eye on you, but really they're out fucking around and you're mostly on your own.

In the last sentence of the above quote, Lara is referring to "they" as the trafficker, who told victims he would take care of them though he clearly did not. As the bottom, however, Lara figured out that the responsibility for everyone's safety fell squarely on her shoulders.

For bottoms in this study, being responsible for every victim in the operation was a common theme. Tia, who was exploited in a pimp-controlled setting, described having to work additional hours; if other victims were not fulfilling their quota, she had to make up for it:

We all have the same quota and nobody could come in unless everyone made their quota, so my job was to make sure like . . . Our quota was \$1,000. Everyone had to have \$1,000 in order for everyone to come in. Five girls. If I had \$1,000 and another girl had \$800, I still couldn't come in even if I had my thousand

until she had hers, so what I would do is I would . . . If I had my thousand early, I'll go make extra money, so I could make sure everybody else have the same amount of money that way we could go in. That was my job.

Besides caring for her own well-being, the bottom becomes responsible for the needs of the other victims under the trafficker's control. It is the bottom that builds relationships with the other victims, often providing mental and physical support. The bottom is in a unique position to share her previous experiences and knowledge about the "job" with the other girls. The bottom often makes sure the other women are able to perform in order to secure food, shelter and other necessities. Tia's description of her experience portrays the bottom girl as a buffer between the trafficker and the other victims. If the other girls cannot meet expectations, bottoms must put themselves in a position to make sure the trafficker is satisfied, which often required selling sex more than the other victims. In addition to ensuring the daily business operated in a smooth fashion, the women also were responsible for reporting victims' behavior to the trafficker when they were noncompliant with demands or expressing interest to leave.

Internal Informant & Recruiter

Jade, who was exploited in pimp-controlled trafficking online and outdoors on the street, described how one of her responsibilities as a bottom was to monitor and report on the other victims:

Yeah . . . act like you're mad at him and talk and see what other girls were saying . . . if they're keeping money, if they're planning to leave, if they're planning to call the cops.

This information was gathered by Jade and then delivered straight to the trafficker so he could inflict punishments as needed. Jade also went on to describe how common it was for traffickers to recruit new victims directly out of the juvenile justice system. She had been in and out of the juvenile justice and foster care systems herself and saw first-hand both as a recruit and as a recruiter how vital those locations were for luring in new victims:

It's easy to do that because there are so many girls that were in the foster care system and are just now in juvie. That's just what happens to us when we're in the foster care system. It's just a reality . . . it's just so common when you go to juvie that there's other girls who are already in that situation and want a better paying person.

By "better paying person," Jade was referring to the pimp/bottom/trafficker. They would essentially try to outperform their competition (other pimps/traffickers/bottoms) by pulling off the best performance:

And the best way we do that is, and this is the best way to make money, too, is by always making sure that you look good, you have the nicest hair extensions and the nicest nails and the nicest clothes.

Jade also described how compelling these offers are for vulnerable youth who have very few (and undesirable) options: "And then at least when you're with a pimp you feel like you have, oh this person is gonna protect me and this is my family and I have my sisters and whatever."

Jade's description of the vulnerability of juvenile justice or child welfare involved youth can be attributed to the lack of opportunity and support provided to young women upon reentering society. The attraction to entering the life is inspired by an illusion that promises love, protection and community. But this illusion fades almost immediately as traffickers use vulnerabilities such as addiction and lack of food and shelter to force victims to stay in the life.

Drugs

In outdoor (street) prostitution, bottoms were not responsible for posting ads – they had different tasks. Sasha, who was trafficked outdoors, describes the rituals her trafficker used to manipulate his victims. Her trafficker had her maintain the victims' addictions to controlled substances; this ensured the victims came back at the end of the day to turn over their money:

If they weren't ready properly [to go out to make money] then I got the slack for it, 'cause that's my responsibility to make sure they're ready to walk out the door. He had this little game that we used to have to play with them. Before they would walk out the door, I would give them their crack pipe. Literally . . . we had a piece of furniture there and I would have their crack pipes lined up with a rock ready to go for each of them. They would have to stand at the door. They weren't allowed to touch them. I would have to stand at the door, hold the pipe for them, light it, let them take their hit, spin them around and then send out the door.

. . . They weren't allowed to touch the pipe or the door. I had to do it all for them. I held the pipe, lit it for them, would put it down, physically spin them around, open the door for them, send one out. The next one, take their pipe, light the thing for them, spin them around, open the door, send them out.

Drugs were used to make sure the victims returned with the money at the end of the day, because the high from the drugs was so powerful that the trafficker knew they would undoubtedly return:

So the crack high would only last anywhere from 30 seconds to three minutes at the most, but it was the jonesing and the craving that lasts so much longer. And so that's what would get me the most, is that mental aspect. And knowing that the last thing that I was doing to these girls was giving them that hit of crack, knowing that they had been jonesing and that they would come back. And that was really why we did it, or the process that he set in place to do it was because you're coming back for what I just gave you . . . Crack is a beast and that is why it was the main tool on the strip. Even if they were on other things, heroin, coke or whatever, all the pimps got the girls on crack because they knew that that was that driving and controlling factor that, I have what you want, you're going to come back to me.

Angelina, who was trafficked via online advertisements, also described how powerful drugs could be to get victims to comply. Her trafficker used drugs to manipulate her, and then when she got pregnant, she left him and went on to manage her own victims. She used drugs to maintain control over her victims, just as she had experienced during her time of victimization:

There were some girls, like the one, she really paid my bills. She's the one who really had stayed around and held it down. She worked every day. I knew that she had a molly problem. The drugs would come in handy if she wanted to stop working, I would cop some molly and bring it to her. I knew she would work all night until the next day. I'm nine months pregnant knocking on three different hotel room doors collecting money from girls in Miami. It was really crazy. But there's a lot of guys, and I did it too, you offer drugs because you know that they're gonna work.

Traffickers prey on victims' vulnerabilities such as drug addiction to regulate the flow of their business. As in Sasha's experience, the power of addiction compelled women to return to their traffickers. Because victims lacked the resources to seek help for their addictions, the craving for drugs overpowered the ability to leave their trafficker and the life altogether. The vicious cycle of addiction becomes entwined with the abusive cycle of the victim-trafficker relationship. Victims begin to associate the source of drugs with their trafficker and are expected to return for a guaranteed "fix."

Rising to the Bottom: Hostage Babies, Abuse, and Out of Options

The majority of participants in the present study felt forced into the role of bottom. Cashmere, a survivor who was trafficked in pimp-controlled sex trafficking online experienced severe physical punishments as both the trafficker's victim and as his bottom. She did not want to be "promoted" to bottom because she saw the previous victim repeatedly abused.

So, I'm like, okay well, he did, you know, split her head open, whatever. But um, it was a little scary thinking like, okay well, if I leave or if I try to leave, [he'll] really, you know, really hurt me more than [if I wasn't] the bottom. So I felt like I always had to be like on it, like no questions asked . . . And then he'll go on with his little life while you're, you know, dealing with everything. Got sold a dream and it turned into a nightmare.

She also reflected on her transition into becoming the bottom – though she feared the position, her refusal did not matter:

My choice didn't matter. Because I was like already terrified of him, like I was already terrified, so it didn't matter if I said 'No,' or 'Let's talk about it.' Or, you know, it was just, that's just what it was.

Cashmere's experience of having no choice in the matter was not uncommon. Yet, other victims described the perceived choice of taking on the role as the lesser of two evils, because it came with some privileges. Rosa, who was involved in pimp-controlled trafficking outdoors, emphasized how important it was in drug culture to have a safe space to do drugs. This vulnerability, needing a safe space to live and to use, made her a perfect target for a drug and sex trafficker. After being pulled into the operation, Rosa became the bottom. To her, that meant a slight improvement in her situation:

I think it was super clear for me that it meant, or at least it seemed like it meant less abuse and even more control over my own life, even if it meant control over others, so it was like a place where I had so little control that the idea of being able to have any position of power felt good.

The additional “perks” of being a bottom did not always translate for other victims. Alicia, who was trafficked online, still had to make the same quota – \$1500 a day – as the other victims in the organization, but received other privileges as the bottom:

I mean, like I, I was the one that was with him every night. Like I was the one, like we stayed in a room together. Right. And like I, I got the shopping whenever I wanted shoes. I got whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted, um, I wasn't the one that got hollered at or anything like that.

These privileges came with a price; Alicia and Rosa were still forced to engage in commercial sex acts, turning all the money over to their traffickers.

Cashmere's experience perfectly aligns the roles of victim and offender. Becoming a bottom does not mean the abuse and manipulation ends. For Cashmere, the fear of saying no to such a position was life or death. Becoming a bottom was inspired by nothing more than survival. For Rosa, being entirely stripped of personal agency compelled her to accept a position she believed would award her some control over her own life. A chance to exert some power over her life, even if it meant controlling other victims, was an opportunity Rosa could not refuse. Both Rosa and Alicia's transitions into the role of bottom were shaped by the lack of options available. Giving victims no real choice in the matter is not the only tactic traffickers use to manipulate their victims into serving the role.

Hostage Babies

Over half of the sample became the bottom because they had children with the trafficker and therefore were the closest to him and perceived as the most submissive, the most loyal, or had the most to lose. Some participants used the term “anchor baby” or “hostage baby” to describe how the children they had with their traffickers were used to manipulate and control them. Camille described how her trafficker sold her on the idea of having a baby together. Later, she described how he used the baby as a hostage, saying,

. . . and that's kind of what kept me there for the next few years, was my child. He was my child . . . a hostage baby. That's exactly what he used my son as, was a hostage to keep me.

She also revealed that when she “wasn’t doing what [she] was supposed to be doing” that her trafficker would take her son away from her for up to six weeks at a time:

... and that would cause so much craziness within me cause then I would act out and then I would get in so much trouble for it, and then I felt so guilty about not being able to be there for my kid or being the mom I wanted to be.

Some of the women who were impregnated by their trafficker during their victimization were forced to recruit and replace the lost income that was a result of their pregnancy. Gwen described when this happened to a victim under her trafficker’s control:

I remember, and one of the other girls ... I know for her when she got pregnant with [his] baby ... he basically told her, ‘If you want to keep the baby, you have to go out, recruit, train and run another girl that’s going to make as much money as you do, or more.’ That was the only way she could keep the baby.

A common theme surrounding how and why women became bottoms had to do with their self-perceived connection to being a “mother” in the operation. Gwen, who had children with her trafficker in an outdoor pimp-controlled environment says:

Because I have three children with him, plus I’m the one with the driver’s license, I’m the one who puts the apartments in [my] name, and I realized he made it like this. I basically was ... He was forming me into be the bottom.

Another participant, Tia, had been experiencing homelessness and engaged in indoor survival sex – the selling of sex to meet subsistence needs – prior to being trafficked. She described how she felt victims became bottoms; showing loyalty to the operation was key to the trafficker:

For some, it’s the one that they have kids with, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. It’s the loyalty that they show, and usually the most loyal girls are the girls that were like me, the ones who don’t have anywhere else to go, really ... They don’t have any outs, so those are usually the ones that get chose for the bottom, because of the loyalty that they show to the [trafficker].

Physical and Emotional Abuse

With the increased emotional ties to the trafficker that came from being the bottom also came more severe emotional and physical abuse. Below, Tia describes how she wishes law enforcement, service providers, and anyone working with trafficking victims could see the reality behind why a victim is in the role of bottom:

I wish that they knew that we were the most brainwashed, and usually, bottoms were the most vulnerable in the situation out of all the girls. It seems like, ‘Oh, she had power,’ but no, this person is usually the girl that has no family. She has absolutely no one to look out for her. She has no one telling her that she can do better than this, that she is better than this, so she’s embodied this lifestyle and this person, because this has been the only place they accept her. I wish that they knew that. The mental chain that ... I mean, think about it, that has to be a hell of a mental chain that a person has on someone in order for them to be on the other side of the country and say, make sure you have the deposit and all the money here, or I’ll be there by this time tonight to whoop your ass, and you do it. That has to be a heck of a chain.

Tia’s experience provides insight into the heightened manipulation and control that bottoms face at the hands of their traffickers. Many of these relationships begin and remain romantic, and victims are manipulated by the companionship and special attention the pimps promise – the “mental chain” that Tia is referring to above. This invisible but powerful chain keeps victims shackled to their trafficker. The chain – built with romance and trauma bonds – gets reinforced with the use of children as hostage babies, weaponizing substance abuse as a means of control, and in many cases both physical and emotional abuse at the hands of the trafficker.

Amanda, who was trafficked outdoors, echoed these same sentiments, clearly revealing the trafficker's use of threats and force, saying:

... this guy put the fear of God in me. He used to tell me all the time, 'If I can't have you, nobody will. If you ever leave me, I'll find you. You'll never be gone from me very long because I'll find you wherever you are,' kind of thing.

Traffickers often used physical and emotional abuse to continually keep the bottoms in their operation, regardless of the type of trafficking. Mina, trafficked in a massage parlor, described being tortured by her trafficker because he said she was "out of pocket," a term used to describe a victim who is breaking the rules of "the game":

Yeah ... totally torture. He, oh my gosh, it was bad with me. That I was always out of pocket, I was always out of line, I was doing something wrong. And that, just reminds me, makes me think, how he was always trying to beat that spirit out of me. The more they break you down, physically, emotionally, spiritually, the more they have control. And he was just, that's what he was always trying to do, just beat that out of me.

Keisha, who was also trafficked outdoors, describes similar experiences – being the bottom came with more severe punishments:

I would be the only one that he had put in the hospital multiple times over multiple different things. Or could've went to the hospital. Some of them I didn't go to the hospital. But I would be the one that he beat the most. Is what he would ... tell everyone, is that I had to be hurt the most because I was a hard beast to tame to him.

Lei, also trafficked outdoors for twenty years, described being more afraid of her trafficker than of the police:

You know they look at bottoms as female pimps, that's what they do. But they don't understand that we didn't choose this life. This life chose us. As far as the pimp go, if we didn't do what we were told, we would get beaten. We were more terrified of him than of the police. I'd rather get arrested than have to deal with him. So when he says do something, we had to do it, because we were instilled in that fear. Now as far as making the women do this and making them do that, you really didn't have to because they were already afraid of him.

Many bottoms experienced physical abuse as a means of control to keep victims compliant. Contrary to what victims may have anticipated prior to being "chosen" as the bottom, the physical abuse did not subside with the perceived "promotion" to the role of bottom. Additionally, once bottoms occupy that role, it often becomes even more difficult to escape.

Out of Options

Not having any other options, or perceiving the upgrade to bottom as the best option available, purported many victims into this role. Ayesha, who was trafficked indoors in a pimp-controlled setting, described the feeling of being upgraded when she became a bottom:

I was told that I was being taken care of and that I was being treated well, because other girls in my situation weren't given a choice of saying ... what they were comfortable with doing or not and I was, and some of those girls had to walk the streets and I didn't. There were these positive things to such a negative thing that made it seem like, 'Oh, well, this one's not that bad.'

Camille said that living in the situation where she was being trafficked was not ideal, but it was what she thought was her best option at the time. Compared to going to a homeless shelter, she preferred the familiarity and stability that life offered:

So why would I leave an apartment, even though I'm getting beat and I'm having to do all this, why would I leave that to go to a homeless shelter where it's dirty and there's tons of people that are high and on drugs and everything else, why would I want to leave to go to that? That's not a better solution.

Mina felt similarly. She describes feeling special as the bottom:

So I ended up staying. And then I ended up talking myself into it, in order to cope. And so like, 'Alright, I'm going to be this dude's number one, then he's going to love me and I'm going to love him and everything's going to be fine'. And I kind of, I did take on that role and not take pride in it, but maybe I did. And yeah. I thought I had that position.

Likewise, Taylor, who was trafficked indoors in a pimp-controlled setting, describes how much more difficult it was for her to leave her traffickers because of how valuable she was to the operation:

How they kept me in line for so long is with basically fear because they had gang connections. So every time I would quit, they would send gangs to my house and they'd sit outside my house and I was required to keep my location on because I was one of their top girls, you know, I was who . . . I trained the girls and I would, I would turn them out and tell them how to do things without getting in trouble and getting hurt.

Each of these tactics described above contribute to a myriad of ways in which a victim is ultimately pulled into the role of conspirator in the trafficking operation. The often never-ending-cycle of violence, manipulation, and fear, the use of pseudo-family dynamics, being accepted as part of a familial community, and having nowhere else to turn all force victims to remain in the life. Along with the very real fear of violence, abuse and even death, victims are often compelled to remain in the life by the overwhelming fear of being alone without any means of survival. Amanda's experience details a situation in which her trafficker consistently instilled fear if she decided to leave him. She existed under the impression she could not escape him even if she tried. Similar to Amanda, Taylor was prisoner to her traffickers and their network. Not only did Taylor have to fear her traffickers if she decided to leave, but she feared the gang that assisted her trafficker in keeping her compliant. As Mina mentioned while discussing her experience, the mental and physical toll victims experience while forced to live at the will of their traffickers increases the level of control traffickers exert on victims.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study presented in-depth interview data from 17 survivors of sex trafficking regarding their role in the operation as the "bottom." Most prior research has relied on legal case study data, and the present study expanded the literature beyond this by including a sample of participants that was roughly split between those who had been arrested on prostitution or related charges and those who had not. On the whole, this expands the body of research and allows for a unique look into the lives of victims and survivors of sex trafficking who would potentially otherwise go undetected by research based on legal documents.

The three research questions guiding this study centered on empirically defining the role of bottom girl, examining the forces leading sex trafficking victims into that role, and the experiences bottoms have in the victim-offender overlap. Results from this study indicate that the daily roles and responsibilities of a bottom are similar to previous research (Crocker, 2016); bottoms often manage the entire operation and provide care and protection to the other victims. They are also responsible for making sure every victim meets their daily quota, recruiting new members and for carrying out responsibilities normally associated with running a household (e.g., cooking, cleaning). Bottoms are often forced into the role physically or emotionally, based both how long the victim has been with the trafficker and whether or not she has "anchor" or "hostage" babies with him. Bottoms are subject to more frequent and severe physical punishments and have increased responsibility, which often includes tasks commonly associated with human trafficking (Crocker, 2016).

Prior research also argued that bottoms are often the most victimized in a trafficking operation (Blizard, 2017); our data support this finding as well. Victims in our study dreaded having to fulfill the role of bottom, knowing how the severity of their punishments and workload would increase.

This study also contextualizes prior research based on criminal justice system cases. Both Finn et al. (2015) and Baxter (2019) found that law enforcement are failing to effectively take into account how an individual's prior victimization plays an important role in predicting offending, which ultimately leads

to criminal justice systems criminalizing individuals for their own victimization. Given these two studies were unable to access victim-offenders directly to gain context into the depths of their lived experience, our study expands on this body of work through in-depth interviews with women with varied criminal justice interactions. Indeed, all participants in our sample were simultaneously experiencing force, fraud or coercion while serving in the bottom role. This echoes Levy's (2016) argument that bottoms continue to face serious punishments for crimes committed as a direct result of their victimization.

The present study should provide much-needed context for researchers, law enforcement, and legal experts and the judicial system to better understand the victim-offender overlap. Women in the present study were forced to commit trafficking crimes while simultaneously experiencing sex trafficking victimization. These important considerations are further explored below.

Culpability

A majority of state trafficking laws allow for the prosecution of bottom girls as coconspirators in a sex trafficking operation. However, when bottom girls have technically performed acts that constitute criminal activity under the law, it is critical that this conduct be viewed as a factor inseparable from their experience as a victim of trafficking. This is important context for legislators, law enforcement, judges and attorneys to have; recognizing a victim-offender's criminal conduct as a product of her own victimization should help the justice system avoid the risk of assigning criminal culpability to victim-offenders who are themselves victims of sex trafficking.

As an example of the question of culpability from the data, Gwen describes how her fellow victims described her in their statements to police. In the context of culpability, they made her seem responsible for the operation when in reality, she was just doing as she was told and how she was trained to behave:

I remember in the statements, hardly anybody said anything about me whatsoever at all, in all the police statements. And I remember one girl, [when police asked her], 'When Greg is not around, who's in charge?', and she said, 'Gwen, you go to Gwen for any other problems. Do what Gwen says'. Well no it wasn't a thing of, I'm a bad person directing people. Everybody knew what they were supposed to do, but if there was trouble, yes you'd come to me, I'm going to help.

If the law enforcement officials involved in Gwen's case were educated about the bottom-girl or victim-offender narrative and were required by law to investigate Gwen's history of victimization to contextualize her culpability, the statements made by other victims would aid in the efficiency of identifying the offenders contributing to her victimization – the traffickers and pimps who perpetuate illegal activity. The experiences of the women in this study indicate the fact that bottom-girls are "in charge" of operations only because they are forced to do so by their traffickers. Further, a bottom is still a victim of sex-trafficking simultaneous to being forced to control other victims. As the women interviewed in this study have expressed, becoming a bottom girl is rarely a natural trajectory inspired by free choice. The physical, emotional, and sexual abuse trafficking victims experience does not cease, and often becomes more severe, when victims are forced to take on the role of bottom girl. The statements made by Gwen's fellow victims legally implicates Gwen as criminally culpable for assisting in the trafficking of individuals, but if the law incorporated language that recognized the victim-offender overlap, Gwen's culpability would be contextualized as a product of her own victimization.

Based on the data presented in this study, it is important to recognize that while challenging, law enforcement must dig further into trafficking investigations than simply charging who appears to be the most culpable individual in trafficking operation. It is important to consider how bottom girls in the present study consistently indicated that their responsibilities are entirely dictated by traffickers. Even when women acknowledged that they managed the activity and behavior of other victims, this responsibility was a product of fear and manipulation generated by their traffickers. Additionally, the participants in this study indicated bottom girls are often trafficked the most frequently and for

the longest amount of time, and often share an intense relationship with their traffickers that is distinct from the average victim-trafficker relationship. Data presented in this paper clearly reveal how the extensive vulnerabilities of bottom girls often results in an unavoidable victim-to-bottom trajectory. Ironically, the façade presented to sex trafficking victims is that the bottom role is a promotion; the data in this study reveal the truth, that the colloquial term used to describe this role is, in fact, indicative of a victim's place at the bottom of the actual pimp-controlled hierarchy. The bottom is often at high risk of criminal culpability, often frequently and physically abused, and in the current legal climate, will be the one to “take the fall” – to the bottom – when law enforcement investigates.

Finally, just as the term “prostitute” is often incorrectly used to identify a victim of sex trafficking, thereby encouraging a passive response to the victimization of prostituted persons, the term “bottom-girl” holds the risk of being improperly understood as to perpetuate a misinformed stigma that has damaging legal consequences on victims. The goal in allowing women who occupied the role as bottom girl to speak to their experiences is to expose the actual realities of bottom girls in order to challenge the term's current social and legal significance. Allowing women to self-identify as bottom girls while exposing truths of fear and violence as a consequence of this identity can help readers recognize the sensibility behind voiding criminal culpability for victim-offenders. In becoming witness to these realities through exposure to each narrative, readers are encouraged to not simply associate the term “bottom girl” with *offender*, but to recognize the *victim* instead.

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