

Medical & Psychological Impact of Prostitution

Pimps and traffickers, brothel owners and other third-party profiteers, and sex buyers subject people in prostitution to intersecting forms of violence^{1,2}: rape and sexual assault; emotional, economic and physical abuse; food and sleep deprivation; and acts of torture.³ The result is cumulative, psychological and physical trauma with lifelong impact.

People in prostitution are likely to endure multiple stressors or traumas, such as childhood physical or sexual abuse, the trauma of sexual exploitation itself and homelessness.^{4,5,6} They may struggle to remember life details due to traumatic brain injuries, memory damage, repressed memories or dissociation — all largely caused by pimps and traffickers, other third-party profiteers and sex buyers.

People in prostitution report high rates of psychiatric disorders including depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, substance use, suicidal ideation or attempts, self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and dissociative disorders.⁷ Dissociation, a particularly severe trauma-related symptom, is common. Developing in response to extreme pain and fear, it serves as a coping strategy for enduring extremely painful, frightening, or potentially deadly life events. The trauma endured in prostitution induces heightened emotional reactions such as “terror, surprise, shame, or helplessness, or feeling trapped or exposed” that can catalyze a dissociative state.⁸

The consequences of being repeatedly bought and sold to strangers for sex results in an array of medical issues, including:

- Malnourishment,
- Pregnancy-related issues,
- Old and new injuries from sexual and physical assault — burns, broken bones, stab wounds,
- Dental trauma,
- Traumatic brain injury,
- Anogenital injury (rectal prolapse/vaginal injuries),
- Internal injuries,
- Sexually transmitted infections, and
- Untreated chronic medical conditions.

Additionally, pimps and traffickers often control a victim's access to medical care. They may allow the person under their control to seek care when the injuries or illnesses are particularly severe or if their ability to make money is inhibited. However, exploiters intentionally keep their victims isolated and often prohibit critical, preventative or follow up care.⁹

Survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking testify that the traumatic scars of this physical and psychological harm experienced at the hands of pimps and traffickers, brothel owners and sex buyers are lifelong.¹⁰ The sex trade cannot be made less harmful — these effects cannot be regulated or deregulated away.

Statistics About the Medical & Psychological Impact of Prostitution

- Sex trafficked children are the most at-risk for the lifelong medical and psychological harms pimps and traffickers, and sex buyers inflict in prostitution.¹¹
- Typically, entering prostitution happens between childhood and adolescence.¹² While not everyone enters the sex trade through a pimp/trafficker, the vast majority are initially targeted by a “boyfriend” and/or “protector.” Even if someone isn’t under the control of a pimp, every encounter with a sex buyer¹³ puts a person in prostitution under the power of another during which he can, and very often does, inflict harm with lifelong consequences.^{14,15}
- Studies in the U.S. among survivors and victims of sex trafficking suggest that up to 50% of victims seek medical care while in their trafficking situation.¹⁶
- The detrimental effects of prostitution can be seen in the high rates of PTSD among survivors and victims. Symptoms include anxiety, depression, insomnia, irritability, flashbacks, emotional numbing and hyper-alertness.¹⁷
 - Of 475 people in prostitution interviewed across five countries (South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, U.S. and Zambia), 67% met diagnostic criteria for PTSD, suggesting that the traumatic consequences of prostitution were similar across different cultures.
- People in prostitution suffer extremely high levels of violence: 62% of women in prostitution report being raped and 73% report being physically assaulted in the sex trade.¹⁸
- In one study, trans youth who experienced prostitution were more than four times as likely to have HIV as those without such a history.¹⁹
- Mortality rates for women in prostitution are 40 to 50 times the national average.²⁰
- Out of all known victims of fatal anti-transgender violence in the U.S. from 2013 to 2018, 32% were reportedly in the sex trade, including many who died while in prostitution.²¹

Endnotes

- ¹ Waltman M. Sweden's prohibition of purchase of sex: the law's reasons, impact, and potential, 34 *Women's Studies Int'l Forum*. 2011;451.
- ² Waltman M. Sweden's prohibition of purchase of sex: the law's reasons, impact, and potential, 34 *Women's Studies Int'l Forum*. 2011;451.
- ³ MacKinnon C. Prostitution and civil rights. In *Women's lives, men's laws*. Harvard University Press. 2005;157.
- ⁴ Farley M, Banks M, Ackerman R, & Golding J. Screening for Traumatic Brain Injury in Prostituted Women. (2018) Volume 3, Issue 2.
- ⁵ Personal communication with Dana DeLeon, GEMS Alumni and Survivor Advocate (Mar. 19, 2018).
- ⁶ Muftic LR, Finn MA. Health outcomes among women trafficked for sex in the United States: a closer look. *J Interpers Violence*.2013;28(9):1859–1885pmid:23295378 p 1874
- ⁷ Ross C, Farley M, Schwartz H. Dissociation among women in prostitution. *Journal of Trauma Practice*. 2008; 2(4):200.
- ⁸ Raymond J, Hughes D. Sex trafficking of women in the United States: International and domestic trends. New York, NY: Coalition Against Trafficking in Women; 2001.
- ⁹ Muftic LR, Finn MA. Health outcomes among women trafficked for sex in the United States: a closer look. *J Interpers Violence*.2013;28(9):1859–1885pmid:23295378 p 1874
- ¹⁰ Matheison, A. & Dodge, A. "Reducing Barriers to Medical Care for Survivors of Commercial Sexual Exploitation" in *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence A Complete Clinical Guide*, ed. Veronica Ades (2020) p 59-83.
- ¹¹ Greenbaum, J. & Crawford-Jakubiak, J. E. (2015). Child Sex Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Health Care Needs of Victims. In *American Academy of Pediatrics*. Vol. 135
- ¹² Farley et al., (1998) interviewed. Farley, Melissa, Kulaksizoglu, Işin, Kiremire, Merab, Sezgin, Ufuk. (1998). *Prostitution in Five Countries: Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*
- ¹³ Survivor leader Autumn Burris has frequently said: "There isn't always a trafficker but there is always a sex buyer." <https://www.facebook.com/Survivors4Solutions/photos/1189193957779313>
- ¹⁴ "... it is important to note that many also experience violence at the hands of buyers. One study of adult women found that 8.5% had been raped by their pimp and 26.2% reported assault, while in contrast, 7% reported being raped by a buyer with 54.8% experiencing assault at the hands of a buyer (Clarke, Clarke, Roe-Sepowitz, & Fey, 2012). Murder is not uncommon, while stabbings, gang rapes, kidnappings, being hit by a car, and torture also occur. One formerly exploited woman stated the following about buyers: The Johns, you know the buyers, they don't buy people to treat them well. So every act is usually a form of either a rougher than normal act or a deviant act. So the amount of health issues are truly endless. (Hom & Woods, 2013, p. 77)" in Mapp, S. C. "Chapter 4 – Impacts of Trafficking and Services to Address Them." *Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking*. Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 67.
- ¹⁵ Williams, L. M. (2010). Harm and Resilience among Prostituted Teens: Broadening our Understanding of Victimisation and Survival. *Social Policy and Society*, 9(2), 243-254. doi:10.1017/s1474746409990376
- ¹⁶ Konstantopoulos, W.M., Ahn, R., Alpert, E.J., Cafferty, E., McGahan, A., Williams, T. P., Castor, J.P., Wolferstan, N., Purcell, G. & Burk, T.F. (2013). An Intersectional Comparative Public Health Analysis of Sex Trafficking of Women and Girls in Eight Cities: Achieving a More Effective Health Sector Response. In *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, Vol. 90, No. 6
- ¹⁷ Konstantopoulos, W.M. (2013).
- ¹⁸ Farley et al., (1998) interviewed. Farley, Melissa, Kulaksizoglu, Işin, Kiremire, Merab, Sezgin, Ufuk. (1998). *Prostitution in Five Countries: Violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*
- ¹⁹ Wilson, E. C., Garofalo, R., Harris, R. D., Herrick, A., Martinez, M., Martinez, J., Belzer, M., & The Transgender Advisory Committee and the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions. (2009). Transgender female youth and sex work: HIV risk and a comparison of life factors related to engagement in sex work. *AIDS and Behavior*, 13(5), 902–913. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-008-9508-8>
- ²⁰ Farley et al., (1998) interviewed.
- ²¹ [FATAL ANTI-TRANSGENDER VIOLENCE IN AMERICA IN 2018](#)