



Chapter 3: The Intersection of Gender, Sexuality, and Human Trafficking

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“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” - [Psalm 139: 13-16](#)

Objectives:

- To address the discrepancies that often exist in statistics regarding victims of trafficking and their gender.
- To highlight misconceptions that only males are trafficked for labor.
- To discuss the impact of gender norms, and how the failure to account for the sexual abuse of males makes space for the under-reporting of sex trafficking of boys and men.
- To bring light and offer practical steps for outreach to the most overlooked population of sex-trafficked individuals - particularly for those in the transgendered community.

Introduction

In [Chapter 1](#) the data on reported trafficking paints a picture that does not always describe the reality that is often witnessed by churches, faith-based groups, and caregivers providing aftercare services. In early conversations and research surrounding trafficking, the predominant focus was placed on the sexual exploitation of females with males complicit in both the purchasing and buying of coerced sex leaving gaps in caregivers' understanding of other vulnerable populations or other dangers inherent in other forms of trafficking ([Herbert, 2016](#)).

Still, men are often seen as the primary victims of labor trafficking while women and girls are more likely viewed as controlled by male traffickers for sexual exploitation and prostitution. In a classic example of this restrictive view, young women have often been trafficked from the Isaan province in Thailand to Bangkok for sex buyers. In contrast, young men were trafficked to Bangkok to work in the construction industry. Often these men were given amphetamines in their drinking water to work hard and long.

Narratives from these beliefs paint women and girls as vulnerable, naive, and in need of protection while overlooking or disregarding vulnerabilities in other groups. Additionally, perpetrators of abuse and trafficking are not always male. There is increasing evidence that women teachers sexually abuse boys in exchange for better grades, women partner with men to traffick others, or women are the primary traffickers. To complicate matters, some view sex workers as choosing prostitution as a means empowering themselves sexually to make money rather than being exploited, regardless of gender. This could make them more vulnerable to exploitation because they do not anticipate the violence they receive. These gendered and ideal beliefs about who is abused or trafficked and who is a perpetrator often lead to well-meaning groups failing to identify those caught in the web of trafficking and making wrong decisions about who needs healing and recovery ([Palacios, 2022](#)).

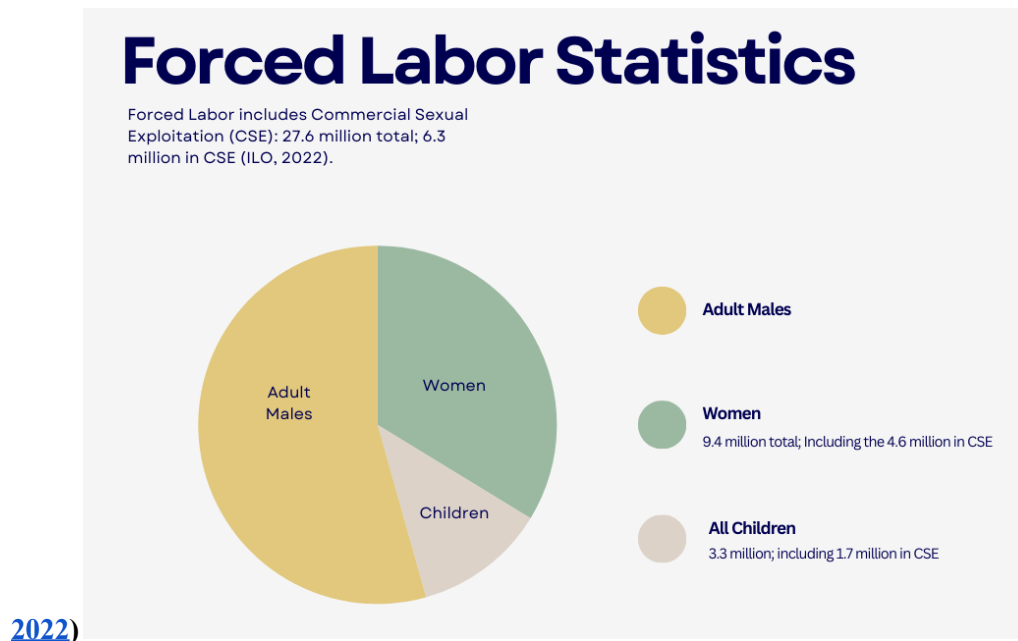
As you engage this chapter, do so with eyes and hearts open to how media portrayals of victims, gender stereotypes, and beliefs about who meets the criteria of vulnerability may impact your understanding and decision-making about who will be included in your community and aftercare engagement and detection and outreach efforts. We all have blind spots in how we see the value of people who have been created in the image of God depending on their expressed gender, sexuality, or trafficking type. These blindspots are often a result of our cultural backgrounds, belief systems, religion and political stance and family of origin. While the source of blindspots is not a topic of this chapter, you will likely engage those as you read. That is normal and happens to everyone as we begin to work to bring light into this dark area of trafficking.

[Chapter 2](#) centered the *Hands That Heal* theological focus on caregiving actions that are Biblically based and promote the dignity of the survivor. Continue to keep that theological principle in mind as you read this chapter. Some will feel that the writers did not go far enough to promote gender or sexuality equality and some will feel that they were too progressive. The purpose of the chapter is to detail the realities that those caregivers encounter, promote awareness, and prompt all of us not to exclude people from our care because they do not meet our preconceived idea of who a survivor should look like. Are you up for the challenge?

Not Only Males are Trafficked for Labor

As mentioned in Chapter 1, labor trafficking results when an individual is forced or coerced into involuntarily providing labor. Typically this labor is given with little or no monetary compensation. For example, in a trafficking case in the United States, of Esmeraldo Enchon, a Filipino immigrant, and his family were forced to work 10-hour days, six days each week for food and shelter ([Gardner-Wong, 2021](#)). The Sackett family, the traffickers, withheld monetary compensation and even profited from selling the labor of the Enchon's to others under the guise of paying off an immigration debt. In this example, gender is irrelevant to the discussion of exploitation and the needs of the survivors. The Sacketts exploited the entire family, husband, wife, and children for profit. While the UN Report on Trafficking in Persons typically indicates that males are predominately exploited for labor purposes, failing to notice where women and children may be exploited in the workforce will limit the reach that NGOs and Faith Based Organisations (FBOs) will have in ministry to survivors (See Figure 1 for actual numbers on women and children in forced labor). However, as stated in [Chapter 1](#), obtaining the actual statistics and percentages of who is being trafficked is difficult.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women and Children in Forced Labor ([International Labor Organization, 2022](#))



Additionally, it is important to note that geopolitical factors play a role in the shifting landscapes that drive changes in the labor markets which include the use of illegal means to lower production costs or bring agriculture to market promptly. Keeping with old stereotypes, exploited agriculture workers in Sicily and other southern Italian areas traditionally trafficked Tunisian men ([Palumbo & Scieurba, 2015](#)). However, after Romania joined the European Union in 2007, more Romanian migrants flowed into Italy for work. These migrants had the benefit of being cheaper labor than locals and allowing the agriculture industry to avoid the offense of exploitation and illegal immigration ([Palumbo & Scieurba, 2015](#)). Rather than creating improved conditions, these factors opened the door for the exploitation of female migrant workers with children who emigrated from Romania to take on primary breadwinning roles for their families. As an additional harm, many stories of labor exploitation include sexual exploitation as well.

CASE STUDY from Ragusa, a city in Sicily: *Luana, a Romanian immigrant, “used to work and live on a small farm near Vittoria with her young daughter and son. Every day, the employer took her children to the area school, which was far from the farm. In exchange for this ‘favor’, he asked Luana to have sex with him. To protect her children and keep her job and accommodation, she accepted this situation. The only reason she finally decided to escape was because she was worried for her children’s safety...She told me, ‘I am obliged because I have my children [...]’. When he started to refuse to take her children to school, she began to refuse to have sex with him, and so he stopped giving drinking water to her and her children”* ([Palumbo & Scieurba, 2015](#)).

CASE STUDY from Finland: *Tara moved to Helsinki after she was recruited to work in a restaurant. However, when she arrived, they put her to work for 16 hours per day, and she was expected to pay the owners almost 10,000 euros to cover the transportation and paperwork fees. Her living conditions were not good and when she complained they threatened to report her to Migri, the Finnish immigration system for failure to have completed documentation. Out of fear, she kept quiet. However, she has learned that another restaurant has been investigated and other Nepalese workers are in the same situation as her. One day she tells the police what has happened to her. They introduced her to a worker with the Finnish Victim’s Support Services who helped her find services with a local FBO. (Note: This case is a mix of stories from many cases in Finland, read here for the news article: [Restaurant Owners in Prison for Trafficking](#)).*

In the case of Luana, Tara, and the Enchons, it is clear that women and entire families, as well as single men, are trafficked and exploited for labor purposes. From global enterprises, and regional agriculture markets, to family-owned restaurants, traffickers look for opportunities to exploit people of all genders to profit themselves with little concern or thought for the outcomes of others.

Recognizing the Dignity of All Children: Addressing the Sexual Exploitation of Boys

Our faith teaches that every human being is created in the image of God, possessing inherent dignity and worth that must be affirmed and protected. However, societal attitudes and assumptions can blind us to the suffering of certain groups, leaving them vulnerable and unsupported. As the section above addressed the often overlooked context of labor trafficking in women and families, this section explores another overlooked issue - the sexual exploitation of boys and young men. It will explore this issue through the lens of our shared belief in the sacredness of all children.

Case Study – Amir’s Story: *Amir, a 14-year old boy, found himself on the streets after his family could no longer afford to care for him. With nowhere else to turn, Amir resorted to begging for food and shelter. He eventually made his way to the railway station, where he discovered that young boys like himself were sexually exploited at night.*

Desperate and without any other options, Amir felt he had no choice but to engage in survival sex. He knew it was wrong and hated every moment of it, but he needed to eat and find a place to sleep. The men who exploited him sometimes provided food or a bed for the night, but the price was far too high.

One evening, an outreach worker from a local NGO approached Amir at the railway station. The worker, named Priya, offered Amir a friendly smile and a small care package containing food and hygiene items. She explained that her organization ran a drop-in center nearby where Amir could take a shower, get a hot meal, and access other support services.

Initially hesitant, Amir eventually agreed to visit the center. When he arrived, he was greeted warmly by the staff, who showed him to the bathroom facilities and provided him with clean clothes. After taking a shower, Amir sat down to a nourishing meal and gradually began to feel more at ease.

Priya sat with Amir and gently asked him about his story. She listened attentively as Amir shared about his family’s financial struggles, his feelings of abandonment, and the exploitation he endured at the railway station. Priya validated Amir’s experiences and reassured him he was not to blame for what happened to him.

Over the next few weeks, Amir continued to visit the drop-in center regularly. The staff worked with him to explore alternative livelihood options and connected him with educational resources. They also provided trauma-informed counseling to help Amir process his experiences and begin to heal.

Through the support of the NGO, Amir was eventually able to secure a place in a transitional shelter for youth and enroll in a vocational training program. He began to build a new life filled with hope and the promise of a brighter future.

Amir's story illustrates the harsh realities faced by many homeless and vulnerable children, who may turn

to survival sex as a means of meeting their basic needs. It also highlights the critical role that NGOs and outreach workers play in providing a lifeline to these youth. By offering practical support, a listening ear, and a path towards alternative livelihoods, these organizations can help young people like Amir break free from exploitation and build a life of dignity and purpose.

Differing Approaches to Boys and Girls

A poignant biblical illustration of the vulnerability and exploitation of boys is the story of Joseph in [Genesis 37](#). Driven by jealousy, Joseph's brothers violently strip him of the symbolic coat that set him apart and cast him into a pit. This act of familial betrayal foreshadows Joseph's later sexual exploitation in Potiphar's household ([Genesis 39](#)), demonstrating how deeply rooted assumptions about masculinity can enable and obscure the abuse of boys and young men. Some may suggest it was sexual harassment rather than exploitation but he ended up in jail because of her lies.

There is a tendency to view girls primarily through the lens of vulnerability while assuming an inaccurate resilience in boys. The global community has rightly focused on defending the "girl child" from discrimination, harmful practices, and sexual violence ([UN Women, 1995](#); [UNICEF 2007](#).) Yet this focus can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes that deny the agency of girls and overlook the genuine vulnerabilities faced by boys ([Stemple et al., 2017](#)). Research indicates that both girls and boys experience various forms of violence and exploitation, albeit often in different ways. Recognizing the complexities of gender-based vulnerabilities is crucial for developing more inclusive and effective protection strategies for all children ([Chynoweth et al., 2017](#)).

Rigid gender norms shape the experiences of children from an early age, with girls restricted to preserve sexual purity, while boys face pressures to achieve an idealized, invulnerable masculinity ([Kågesten et al., 2016](#)). These expectations can harm all children by denying girls the chance to develop resilience and self-efficacy while leaving boys ill-equipped to seek support when facing abuse or trauma. We must recognize that both girls and boys can be both strong and vulnerable. Affirming the full humanity of all children means creating spaces where girls can exercise their agency and where boys can voice their pain without shame.

The Oft-Invisible Sexual Exploitation of Boys

Recent grassroots research reveals the widespread yet largely unaddressed reality of sexual exploitation faced by street-involved boys across Southeast Asia. Studies we conducted from Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines document shockingly high rates of sexual abuse, with boys in some areas reporting even higher levels than girls. For example, in Poipet, 31% of street-involved boys disclosed sexual touching by adults, compared to just 8% of girls ([Davis & Miles 2021](#)). The complex interplay of poverty, family background and instability, lack of protection and safety network, lack of safeguarding and cultural values, lack of awareness of the dangers, lack of opportunity, and gender norms converge to create environments where boys' bodies and lives are treated as commodities.

CASE STUDY - Cambodia: *Samnang was just 13 when a foreign man approached him on the streets of Phnom Penh with an offer of food and money in exchange for sex. Desperate to survive, Samnang agreed. For the next two years, he endured repeated abuse and exploitation until he finally found help at a local drop-in center. "I felt so ashamed, like it was my fault," Samnang recalls. "But the social workers helped me understand that what happened to me was wrong, and not because of anything I did."*

Samnang's story (an alias) is devastatingly common. The research studies conducted in Poipet, Manila, Chiang Mai, Sihanoukville, and Phnom Penh shine a disturbing light on the high rates of sexual violence and exploitation experienced by street-involved boys in Southeast Asia (Davis & Miles, [2017](#); [2019](#); [2021a](#); [2021b](#); [2021c](#)). Across this region, rapid economic growth and urbanization in recent decades have disrupted traditional family and community structures, leaving many vulnerable children fending for themselves ([Hillis et al., 2021](#)). Entrenched poverty, gender inequity, and lack of robust child protection systems combine to heighten risks.

While no child can ever provide meaningful "consent" to exploitative situations, economic desperation and lack of opportunity coupled with young people's lack of awareness makes them especially vulnerable to coercion and manipulation by predatory adults. Further exacerbating the crisis is widespread impunity for perpetrators due to corruption and inadequate legal protections. Family background, and a lack of safety network together with a lack of safeguarding and cultural values are also important. Strikingly, across diverse contexts, boys not only disclosed exploitation at high rates but also described their abuse as "normal" - a devastating reflection of how their suffering has been rendered invisible and acceptable by societal indifference.

This is apparent among street-involved boys in Southeast Asia. Recent research from Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines has begun to shed light on the pervasive yet often overlooked sexual exploitation of boys who live and work on the streets. These studies were conducted in tandem with local support workers from various grassroots partners and illuminate both the individual experiences and systemic factors that shape their vulnerability.

Across the different contexts studied, a consistent pattern emerges of boys facing sexual abuse at rates equal to or higher than their female peers. In Poipet, nearly one-third of boys (31%) reported sexual touching by adults compared to just 8% of girls, with many describing sexual violence as a normal part of their lives on the street ([Davis & Miles, 2021a](#)). The Manila study found that 65% of boys had experienced some form of sexual abuse, including 47% being inappropriately touched and 27% suffering oral sex, kissing, or intercourse with adults, and more than a quarter were lured into sex acts with offers of food, money, or gifts ([Davis & Miles, 2019](#)). Psychologists note that such traumatic betrayals of trust can shatter a child's sense of safety and self-worth ([Ralston et al., 2020](#)).

In Chiang Mai, 54% of boys reported sexual touching, and 44% disclosed abuse beyond touching. One in five said they had been physically forced to have sex. More than half engaged in survival sex, exchanging sexual acts for resources. A 13-year-old boy explained he agreed to have sex with a stranger "because of the money" ([Davis & Miles, 2017](#)). The term "survival sex" itself highlights the lack of meaningful choices these children face ([Hounmenou & Her, 2018](#)). Economic desperation renders them vulnerable to

predatory adults who wield money and power to demand sexual access..

The Sihanoukville research uncovered similar patterns, with 38% of boys experiencing sexual touching and 26% being abused beyond touching, including forced sex. One in four engaged in survival sex, nearly half of whom were minors. In the boys' own words, the streets were "like a kind of torture" and a place where "I have been raped two times" ([Davis & Miles, 2021a](#)).

Finally, in Phnom Penh, boys were almost twice as likely as girls to report sexual touching by adults (30% vs. 18%). Among the 12 interviewed children forced into oral sex, anal sex, or sex with other children, 8 were boys. Nearly one-quarter said the exploitation was still ongoing¹ ([Davis & Miles, 2021b](#)). Such egregious violations of bodily autonomy constitute clear breaches of children's fundamental human rights enshrined in international law ([UNCRC, 1989](#)). Yet these violations remain shrouded in silence and neglect. Rigid norms of masculinity can intensify feelings of weakness, self-blame, and isolation when boys are abused (Coveny, 2022).

These empirical findings point to a profound theological crisis. How can the church and faith traditions be encouraged to make a positive change in the reduction of childhood exploitation and then re-frame the list to say they can do this through "speaking up instead of silence, they can focus on victim support and intentionally avoid victim-blaming teachings and also through affirming the full personhood and rights of young boys as well as young girls, recognizing they have the right to be protected as much as adults do? Could making people more aware of the stories of abused boys catalyze a more holistic, justice-oriented understanding of sin, human dignity, and our collective call to solidarity with all humans of any gender who are violated?

CASE STUDY - Philippines: *Monica Ray from [The Stairway Foundation](#) has written an innovative play called [Cracked Mirrors](#) about a young boy's battle with sexual exploitation drugs, and suicide. It is one of few creative tools that explores the issue of male sexuality and abuse.*

Health and Spiritual Impacts

The impacts of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (CSEA) on boys and young men are profound and far-reaching, encompassing physical, psychological, spiritual, and relational harm. Survivors may struggle with trauma, shame, identity confusion, and difficulty forming healthy relationships. They may also face unique challenges related to their sense of masculinity and self-worth, particularly if their abuser is male. Survivors face elevated risks of HIV, substance abuse, depression, PTSD, and suicidality ([Gauthier-Duchesne et. al., 2023](#)). The traumatic betrayal of trust can shatter a child's fundamental sense of safety, self-worth, and faith ([Ralston et al., 2022](#)). The chapter on children takes a look at the outcomes of sexual abuse and exploitation in more detail (See [Chapter 5: Trafficking in Children](#)).

¹ In accordance with our ethical protocol, all interviews were conducted by experienced support workers as part of their regular outreach work. This approach ensured that in cases where participants indicated ongoing exploitation or present risk, the support workers were well-positioned to offer immediate assistance, connecting them with essential resources and services.

CASE STUDY - Philippines: *At the same time, the raw humanity and resilience of survivors shines through. One 15-year-old Filipino survivor reflected: "My life is hard...but I have dreams of finishing school and finding a good job. I want to help other children too." This defiant hope in the face of violation is both heartbreaking and sacred. It testifies to the indomitable spirit of children fashioned in the image of the Creator - spirits no abuse can ultimately extinguish.*

These stories beckon people of faith to understand theologies and communities that honor the full complexity of survivors' experiences - acknowledging their unspeakable suffering while empowering their inherent dignity, insights, and dreams for restoration.

A Theology of Solidarity and Justice

If our faith is to be pro-child and pro-life, we must develop a theological praxis that sees and fiercely upholds the sacredness of all young lives, especially the most vulnerable. This requires wrestling with Scripture's difficult yet liberating witnesses.

In the Gospels, Jesus defies social conventions by elevating children to places of honor and warning of dire consequences for harming them ([Mark 9:37](#), [Matt. 18:6](#)). He embodies solidarity with the abused and exploited. The prophets thunder for justice for the crushed and denigrated, including poetic voices that gender Israel as an abused boy ([Ezekiel 16](#)) and decry sexual violence against females of any age ([Judges 19](#)).

While faith communities have at times enabled abuse through toxic purity codes and hyper-individualistic views of sin, our traditions possess powerful resources for resistance and healing. Biblical narratives unveil a God who is afflicted in the afflictions of the violated, and who hears their cries for justice. Pioneering feminist theologian Delores Williams locates the cross not as a glorification of suffering, but as the ultimate witness of divine solidarity with the oppressed (Williams, 1993).

This preferential option for the vulnerable demands a holistic praxis of pastoral care and social transformation. Some potential strategies include:

- Trauma-informed ministries that create safe spaces for all children including boys to find healing in the community.
- Biblically-grounded prevention curricula addressing consent, masculinity, and human dignity.
- Advocacy for legal reforms and anti-poverty efforts protecting vulnerable children.
- Spiritual support groups and counseling fostering resilience in male survivors.
- Interfaith coalitions challenging hypersexualization of youth in media and pornography.

Ultimately, the prevention of sexual violence against children and the restoration of survivors is inseparable from the broader struggle for human equity, rights, and flourishing. This is the sacred work to which God calls us - to fiercely name the suffering of the violated, attentively listen to their stories, embody Christ's radiant compassion, and join the holy struggle to dismantle the unjust structures and ideologies that enable their abuse.

STOP & THINK

1. How have societal assumptions about gender norms and vulnerability impacted the way you view and relate to boys and girls? What influences have shaped these perspectives?
2. What are the factors that arise from your personal background and history that impact your view about gender norms?
3. After learning about the exploitation of street-involved boys, what thoughts or feelings arise within you? How can centering their stories deepen your understanding of human dignity?
4. Reflect on teachings or practices within your surrounding culture and faith tradition that may contribute to shame, secrecy, or stigma around male sexual abuse. How could these be transformed to create safer, more affirming spaces?
5. What biblical narratives or theological concepts could help ground a more holistic, justice-oriented response to the sexual exploitation of children? How do these connect to your faith's core principles?
6. What concrete steps could you, your community, and faith leaders take to actively prevent sexual violence, support male survivors, and advocate for systemic change? How might taking such steps deepen your spiritual witness?

STOP & ACT

Work in groups of 5-10 people to design a programme:

- Group 1: Teach a group of young teenage street boys about sexuality, including being informed and empowered about protecting themselves when possible.
- Group 2: Convince the pastor and parents of the need, and then teach a Sunday school class of boys about sexual development focusing on relationships rather than biology.
- Group 3: Teach a group of young men about sexual abuse of boys/young men. How does it make them feel? Does it make them feel the same when they talk about sexual abuse of girls? Why?

Ask each small group to report back to the entire class. Consider the differences in the approach needed for each programme.

Working with Sexually Exploited Transgender Individuals

The discussion within the Church and around the world regarding transgender individuals, their health care, and Biblical standards has increased in recent decades. With that increase, there have been many voices speaking on the theological aspects of their lives. This section will not engage in that discussion.

However, it is intended to reiterate the importance of caring for all survivors of trafficking with dignity and giving a few practical guidelines for engaging this underserved and vulnerable population.

As Christians, we are called to love and minister to all people, including those who have faced sexual exploitation ([Matthew 25:40](#)). Transgender individuals are at exceptionally high risk of being sexually exploited due to societal marginalization, familial rejection, housing insecurity, economic vulnerability, and other factors.

A major study by the Center for Victim Research ([Nemoto et al, 2011](#)) found that 24.5% of transgender people have engaged in sex work compared to just 10% of other groups. Another study in the *American Journal of Public Health* found transgender youth were 5 times more likely to experience sexual exploitation compared to cisgender youth ([Rider, et al, 2022](#)).

Scripture teaches us to care for the oppressed and those facing injustice ([Isaiah 1:17](#), [Proverbs 31:8-9](#)). Empirical research clearly shows transgender individuals grapple with extremely high rates of sexual exploitation - a modern form of oppression. As the Body of Christ, we have a biblical mandate to respond as mandated in Isaiah and Proverbs with this minority group as much as with women and men.

CASE STUDY - Phnom Penh Cambodia: *In the Phnom Penh study ([2014](#)), the crushing weight of societal stigma emerges as a central theme. Family rejection was a painful reality for many, leading to a downward spiral of isolation and despair. "When my family found out I was transgender, they chased me out of the house. I had nowhere to go," recounted one participant.*

CASE STUDY - Athens, Greece: *"Jessica", a transgender woman, faced familial rejection at 16 and turned to survival sex work, experiencing violence and exploitation. After becoming connected with a Christian outreach, she found hope, housing, counseling services, and the life-transforming love of Christ.*

CASE STUDY - Mumbai, India: *In one of the largest slums in Mumbai, India a small group of hijra (transgender) live. They are effectively marginalized within a marginalized community. They contracted HIV/AIDS from working in the sex trade. They attended a women's clinic run by IMCares who had to decide if they could provide them with care. They now have an excellent relationship with the hijra being probably the only people to provide any kind of care.*

With compassion and biblical truth, the Church can play a crucial role in preventing the sexual exploitation of transgender individuals and offering holistic care and restoration to survivors. We must sacrificially love marginalized people as Christ loved us ([1 John 3:16-18](#)). For more detailed information on working with Transgender in the sex trade see the [European Freedom Network's Manual on Transgender Care](#).

Understanding Stigma, Discrimination, and Violence against Transgender

"My villagers spit when they see me," described a young transgender woman in Cambodia. Such painful experiences of stigma and discrimination are the daily reality for many transgender individuals. Over a third of the Bangkok participants reported having to change residence due to their gender identity. Verbal harassment and physical attacks are common, especially for those engaged in street-based sex work. The

studies by Ganju and Saggurti (2017), Miller et al. (2020), and Maclin et al. (2023) provide harrowing data on the shockingly high rates of physical, sexual, and emotional violence experienced by transgender sex workers in India, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic, respectively, underscoring the urgent need for interventions to address the epidemic of violence against transgender individuals.

The police emerge as major perpetrators of this harassment and violence, particularly in the Cambodia study. "I really hate the police. They chase us like dogs," shared one participant. Over 60% of the Phnom Penh sample reported sexual assault in the past year, primarily by clients. Transgender sex workers faced higher rates of forced sex compared to other groups like men who have sex with men (MSM) and male sex workers in the Thailand studies, highlighting how transgender identity compounds vulnerability. As Niven et al. (2018) illustrate in the context of Timor-Leste, the intersections of transphobia, poverty, limited education, and rural-urban migration shape heightened risks of violence and exploitation for transgender sex workers. Perpetrators act with impunity, knowing their victims are unlikely to be believed or able to access justice. Tackling this epidemic of violence requires addressing deep-rooted prejudice and reforming discriminatory laws and policing practices.

The Physical and Emotional Health Needs of Transgender Survivors

General Physical Health: In addition to sexual/reproductive health, transgender individuals may face issues like infectious diseases (e.g. tuberculosis), chronic diseases (asthma), non-infectious conditions (back pain), injuries, and mental health problems (Winter & Doussantousse, 2009). Access to healthcare may be limited due to stigma, discrimination, immigration status, and prior negative experiences with providers. Programs that offer medical care outreach should consider ministry to those in the transgender community as a way to help identify and help those in trafficking situations.

Sexual Health: Transgender individuals in the sex trade have high rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV rates which were up to 25% in some studies (Davis & Miles, 2014). They also face higher risks of physical and sexual violence (Davis & Miles, 2019; Davis & Miles, 2018). Trans women may or may not have had genital surgery. Some organizations consider the provision of condoms and other disease protection as part of outreach into the community. It is a method of meeting those who live in redlight districts and determining those who are in trafficking situations.

Transition-related care & Detransition: The transition process is long, stressful, and costly. It usually involves becoming a lifelong medical patient. Many transgender individuals, especially those of lower socioeconomic status, pursue hormones and procedures without proper medical supervision, which carries health risks (Winter & Doussantousse, 2009). The European Freedom Network manual (2023) advises helping them access care to stay as healthy as possible while clarifying risks are important (Vandenbussche, 2022). As Christian carers or church workers we cannot determine or direct anyone's decision about possible detransition; trust the Holy Spirit to do or not do that - we can only walk with people and prepare to answer and discuss even the difficult questions - even when it is uncomfortable and we don't have answers.

Some individuals decide to halt or reverse their transition. They need substantial support, including help managing persistent dysphoria, mental health issues, social pressures, hormonal reversal, and possibly surgical reversal (Vandenbussche, 2022). The overarching goal presented is to compassionately support

the health and well-being of transgender individuals without necessarily endorsing transition itself (Van Mol et al., 2020). This involves facilitating access to respectful, holistic healthcare to the degree possible, providing guidance on risks, and continuing to offer acceptance and support throughout their journey, including if they detransition.

Mental health: Transgender individuals have high rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, suicide, autism (McClure et al., 2022), attachment issues, and unresolved trauma - these may precede or be exacerbated by, but not entirely caused by, gender dysphoria (D'Angelo et al., 2020; [Vandenbussche, 2022](#)). Discrimination compounds mental health struggles (Yarhouse, 2018). While these individuals may already experience discrimination in the world, as followers of Jesus, we want to show the love of Christ and offer them the opportunity to find Him and His healing power.

STOP & THINK

Read The European Freedom Network manual - [Working with Transgender People in the Sex Trade](#). After reading this manual, answer the following:

1. Discuss the presence of transgendered people involved in the sex trade within the communities you serve. What do you notice? Who interacts with them or ignores them?
2. When considering the recommendations given by this committee, what would work in your community? What would not work based on cultural, religious, or legal concerns?

Outreach Strategies

It is important to plan and prepare outreach carefully. Composing outreach teams thoughtfully, with attention to the roles of men and women, is crucial for fostering a sense of safety and trust among those being served. All-women teams may provide a safer space for initial outreach, while male team members can be valuable in building healthy, non-sexual relationships with transgender individuals over time ([Transgender Action Group, 2023](#)).

Establishing clear safety protocols and researching the specific context in which outreach will occur are also key steps outlined in the manual ([Transgender Action Group, 2023](#)). Understanding the legal and social landscape, including local laws related to prostitution and transgender rights, can help teams navigate potential challenges and tailor their approach to the unique needs of the community they serve.

While faith can be a source of strength and guidance for some practitioners, it is crucial to ensure that religious beliefs are not imposed upon those being served. Transgender individuals may have complex relationships with faith due to experiences of rejection or discrimination from religious communities ([Beardsley & O'Brien, 2016](#)). Practitioners must prioritize the autonomy and self-determination of those they serve, offering spiritual support only when initiated by the individual. It will be important to note that in some cultures a group of survivors may wish to determine their “autonomy” together. The important

part for caregivers to remember is that decisions about the healing process should include input from survivors and consider their culture of origin.

CASE STUDY: *On International Women's Day, one team faced the real-world challenges and opportunities that can arise during outreach. The team's decision to offer flowers and Scripture cards to all individuals in the red-light district, regardless of their assigned sex at birth, prompted reflection on how to embody the unconditional love and acceptance modeled by Jesus ([Transgender Action Group, 2023](#)). This example underscores the importance of treating all individuals with respect and dignity, while also considering how actions may be perceived by those being served. This approach embraced an emphasis on hospitality.*

Hospitality Emphasis

The Bible emphasizes hospitality as a core Christian virtue, with Jesus himself modeling radical welcome by embracing those on the margins of society. Scripture calls believers to:

- Welcome strangers, remembering that some have "entertained angels" in doing so ([Hebrews 13:2](#)).
- Engage people face-to-face with the mindset of reflecting Jesus and exemplifying and modelling His teachings and actions.
- Pay attention to outcasts that often go unnoticed and show them kindness.

Following Christ's example of "omnipotent compassion", the church is to create inclusive communities where all people, regardless of background, can experience God's unconditional love and find a place of belonging.

Many transgender individuals in the sex trade have experienced significant trauma, abuse, rejection, and suffering. Churches and faith-based groups can foster places of healing that:

- Promote safety, trustworthiness, peer support, and paths to empowerment.
- Understand the impacts of trauma and creates safe spaces to be an instrument of Christ's restorative love ([Chapter 4](#) will provide more information on trauma-informed approaches to aftercare.)
- Recognize that God "heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds" ([Psalm 147:3](#)).
- Embody the spirit of [Isaiah 61:1](#) - "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to bind up the brokenhearted."

By practicing trauma stewardship, faith communities can wisely and respectfully care for the painful experiences of others, abiding in hope and honoring God who never wastes pain. Hospitality and trauma-informed care are rooted in the understanding that many transgender individuals in the sex trade have experienced significant trauma, rejection, and discrimination throughout their lives. These experiences can lead to a heightened sense of vulnerability and mistrust, making it challenging for individuals to seek or accept help.

Scripture affirms that all people are created in the image of God ([Genesis 1:27](#)) and deserve to be treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. By modeling Christ's unconditional love and cultivating communities of belonging for all people, the church bears witness to the inherent worth and value of

every individual.

The concept of hospitality involves creating a welcoming and non-judgmental environment where transgender individuals feel valued, respected, and safe. This approach is grounded in the idea that every person, regardless of their gender identity or life history and circumstances, is created in the image of God and deserves to be treated with dignity and compassion.

Practicing hospitality requires a willingness to meet individuals where they are, without imposing expectations or requirements for accessing support. It involves listening to their stories, acknowledging their struggles, and offering practical assistance in a way that honors their autonomy and agency. Small gestures of kindness, such as offering refreshments or engaging in friendly conversation, can go a long way in building trust and rapport ([Transgender Action Group, 2023](#)).

Faith communities have an important role to play in creating safe spaces where all people, including those who have experienced trauma and marginalization, can find healing, belonging, and the unconditional love of Christ. Some key principles for cultivating safe spaces in churches include:

- **Practicing radical hospitality:** Following Jesus' example of embracing those on the margins, churches should intentionally welcome and include people from all backgrounds and life circumstances. This involves creating a non-judgmental environment where everyone is treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. Rosaria Butterfield's book [The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radical Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World](#) offers some insight into how to practice radical hospitality with individuals from all backgrounds and life experiences.
- **Facilitating honest conversations:** Churches can foster safe spaces by being open to vulnerable sharing and discussions around difficult topics like gender, sexuality, abuse, and mental health. This requires listening well, protecting confidentiality, and honoring people's stories without shutting them down.
- **Empowering peer support:** Feeling a sense of connection and community is vital for those who have experienced isolation and rejection. Churches can facilitate peer support by creating small groups where people can share openly, pray for one another, and find encouragement in their faith journeys together.
- **Collaborating with experts:** Trauma-informed care requires wisdom and sensitivity. Faith leaders should be willing to learn from mental health professionals, abuse prevention specialists, and others with expertise in caring well for survivors of trauma. Partnerships with counselors and community organizations can help churches provide holistic support.
- **Embodying Christ's compassion:** Ultimately, the church's ability to be a safe space flows from its identity as the body of Christ, called to embody His healing love to a hurting world. As faith communities abide in Christ and rely on the Spirit's power, they can become beacons of hope, restoration, and transformation for all people.

By cultivating these qualities, churches can offer a countercultural witness to the gospel - one that reveals God's heart for the vulnerable and invites people from all walks of life to find wholeness in Christ.

CASE STUDY: *“Our ministry in Antwerp, Belgium has reached out to and welcomed the transgender*

community into our outreach center and has been asked several times over the years to host memorial services for members of the transgender community. Each time this has happened there has been an openness and response from the trans community to receiving the message of hope of eternal life found in Christ. Often statements are made that they appreciated the atmosphere of love and dignity extended to their community and this has resulted in some coming back to attend Bible studies at the center.” - (Outreach worker)

STOP & ACT

Working in a Small group:

1. What stories, insights, or statistics from this section were most impactful for you, and why?
2. How has your understanding of the experiences of transgender sex workers evolved through engaging with this material?
3. When considering the outreach in Antwerp, discuss the use of hospitality in outreach to the transgender community. What might this look like in the culture and city you reside in?
4. What is one specific commitment you can make to understanding the safety, dignity and empowerment of transgender individuals in your context? What specific challenge or need are transgender people might facing in your context? Only after knowing this, can you actually commit to thinking how to support them.

Conclusion

The challenge of discussing human trafficking and making plans for aftercare programs often lies in faulty dichotomies caregivers create about who perpetrates acts of trafficking, who is exploited, who is vulnerable, and who exhibits resiliency. While this chapter has not comprehensively demonstrated all the factors that play a role in each context you and your organization may encounter, it does suggest additional areas to consider before you begin to develop your program of care. Assessing the specific gender-based needs of the trafficking community your organization will serve, ensures that the entire community is seen and considered with the heart of our Savior. It will be impossible to meet all needs; however, seeing and hearing the cries of the vulnerable and oppressed is the first step to making room for the oft-overlooked to be offered a chance to find the life-altering love of Christ.

Important Definitions for this Chapter -See the [Glossary](#)

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Resources

Networks Addressing the Sexual Exploitation of Men and Boys

End Child Prostitution and Trafficking: www.ecpat.com Secular International NGO with a particular concern for prostitution of girls and boys. Recent research about boys.

Urban Light <https://www.urban-light.org/> Working exclusively with young men and boys in Chiang Mai, Thailand

Emmaus Ministries: www.streets.org Christian ministry working with men involved in prostitution in Chicago in the States

The Stairway Foundation: www.stairwayfoundation.org Resources including the DVD ‘A Good Boy’ about boys and paedophiles. Translated into several Asian languages and including English.

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