



# Sex Trafficking of Men and Boys

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*A review of the literature on human trafficking of men and boys for the purposes of sexual exploitation (sex trafficking) reveals the limited academic attention the issue and the inadequacy of identification and support for this group.*

## Overview

Despite increasing scholarly attention on human trafficking and child sexual exploitation, research overwhelmingly focuses on women and girls. While the third sector has sought to address fundamental knowledge gaps and shed light on the experiences and support needs of men and boys, academic scholarship on trafficking '[reflects] and [reinforces] popular and political narratives', where sex trafficking is analysed 'almost exclusively in relation to females', overlooking the gendered vulnerabilities of the sizeable minority of men and boy victims (Herbert 2016: 281).

Barnardo's report that one in every three of their service users are male, while the Salvation Army indicates two in every five adult victims that they assist in England and Wales are men (Cockbain et al 2014: 4; Tein 2012: 209). Research suggests that the prevalence of sex trafficking of men and boys is much higher than stated by official records because of gender specific barriers to disclosure and professional blindness, both of which can stem from internal and external stereotypical conceptions of masculinity. Drawing attention to the experiences of these men and boys is vital in order to give visibility to the wider cohort of victims and to expose 'the complexities of power hierarchies both between and within the sexes' (Magugliani 2022: 2). This brief seeks to illuminate the ways in which sex trafficking of men and boys differs to that of women and girls, with a focus on gender specific support needs.

## Characteristics and Differences

While the majority of women and girls are trafficked specifically for the purpose of sexual exploitation, men and boys are often considered by traffickers as more versatile and consequently subjected to multiple forms of exploitation (Leon and Raws 2016: 16). In a recent study, Hestia found that sexual exploitation was the primary form of exploitation for only 12% of men and boy victims, compared to forced labour, which constituted 82% (2018: 3). As the most common form of exploitation of men and boys, forced labour masks sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse. While it often goes undetected, sexual exploitation is sometimes used in addition to forced labour, forced criminality, and domestic servitude, in order to maximise traffickers' gains, while enforcing extreme control over victims and deterring escape (Leon and Raws 2016:16; Hestia 2018: 3).

With an average referral age of 13.9 years, sexually exploited boys tend to be younger than sexually exploited girls (14.6 years) (Cockbain et al 2014: 16). They are also more likely to have learning or behavioural disabilities: Barnardo's found that 35% of male victims presented a disability, compared to only 13% of women and girls (McNaughton Nicholls et al 2014: 7; Cockbain et al 2014: 20). Furthermore, boys are more likely to have a youth offending record than girls (48% compared to 28%) (Cockbain et al 2014: 22, Brayley et al 2014: 24). This reflects youth and adult offending rates while highlighting gendered stereotypes and the criminalisation of young men.

Both men and boy and women and girl victims of sexual exploitation are likely to have experienced homelessness and non-sexual violence (McNaughton Nicholls et al 2014: 8; Barnardo's 2014: 3). Hestia, however, notes that the vulnerability associated with homelessness, social isolation, and the ensuing poverty overwhelmingly affects men, reporting that 61% of men in their service came from an impoverished background (2018: 8-10). This is a strong risk factor for men and boys given the tendency of traffickers to exploit men's 'desire' to provide for themselves and their families (Hestia 2018: 10). With over half of men experiencing homelessness after escaping their traffickers, and in the absence of adequate housing support, there is a significant risk of re-exploitation (Hestia 2018: 8).



## Why Does Sex Trafficking of Men and Boys Go Undetected?

There is broad professional consensus that rather than low prevalence, the identification of sex trafficking of men and boys is affected by their reluctance to disclose sexual exploitation, coupled with 'professional blindness', (Leon and Raws 2016: 43). Norms and cultural values surrounding victimisation and masculinity present the biggest gender-specific barrier to disclosure. The perception that victims are 'weak and vulnerable', is incompatible with stereotypical conceptions of masculinity and men and boys are often ashamed to acknowledge their exploitation (Leon and Raws 2016: 20). This is particularly so in cultures where sex and homosexuality are heavily stigmatised and exacerbated by the tendency of men and boys to lack the skills required to openly discuss their exploitation (McNaughton Nicholls 2014: 13).

Many men and boys rely on denial as a coping strategy for their trauma, while for others sexual exploitation has become so normalised that they accept it as a necessity in exchange for a 'better life' (Leon and Raws 2016: 4). Psychological manipulation and fear of recapture are other significant barriers. Long after victims have escaped, many men and boys refuse to co-operate with support services in trepidation that their exploiters will find out (Hestia 2018: 11).

Systemic issues further hinder identification of sex trafficking of men and boys. The vulnerabilities of men and boys are often overlooked on account of external conceptions of masculinity and unconscious gender bias of professionals (McNaughton Nicholls et al 2014: 11; Leon and Raws 2016: 24). In a cross-sectional survey of NHS professionals in contact with victims of human trafficking, Ross et al (2015: 1) found that 71% lacked confidence in making appropriate referrals for men. This illuminates a concerning absence of knowledge amongst professionals which is likely reflective of support services beyond the NHS.

Further, while women and girls are typically viewed as vulnerable and weak, men and boys are more likely to be perceived as perpetrators than victims. Their relationships with others are therefore not viewed with the same suspicion as those of women and girls, and professionals are less likely to consider the possibility of sexual exploitation (McNaughton Nicholls et al 2014: 12; Leon and Raws 2016: 24). Gendered differences are also evident in referrals. While going missing is the most common referral reason for boys and girls alike, this accounts for a much higher number of referrals of

boys (80%) than girls (42%) (Cockbain et al 2014: 5; McNaughton Nicholls et al 2014: 12). While girls are more likely to be referred by social services or educational institutions due to suspicious relationships with an older person, such safeguarding concerns are typically overlooked for boys. They are instead more likely to be referred by criminal justice agencies (Cockbain et al 2014: 5). Forced criminality in addition to sexual exploitation, and the consequent criminalisation of men and boy victims exacerbates this issue, shifting focus away from sex trafficking (McNaughton et al 2014: 13).

There is a lack of understanding of the differences in behavioural and emotional responses to trafficking between men and boys on the one hand, and women and girls on the other. While women and girls typically internalise trauma, men and boys tend to express it externally, often presenting as 'aggressive' and 'violent'. Men and boys may provoke fights with the intention of sustaining an injury, however this is often not recognised as a method of self-harm (Barnados 2014: 7). It is therefore dealt with inadequately and often leads to criminalisation.

Furthermore, men and boys tend to withhold disclosure of sexual exploitation until later stages of intervention when they have developed a trusting relationship with professionals (Leon and Raws 2016: 16). This can result in inconsistencies in their stories, which are often misunderstood by professionals, and a culture of disbelief further deters disclosure (Leon and Raws 2016: 27). The NRM checklist of trafficking indicators fails to account for these differences and is consequently inconducive to identification of trafficked men and boys (Leon and Raws 2016: 25). Greater awareness of gendered differences in the presentation of trauma in response to sexual exploitation is therefore required.

Having carried out a comparative judgement study, using the wisdom of the crowd to estimate the prevalence of trafficking of men and boys in each area of the UK relative to the others, service providers and survivors were unable to provide sufficient data for researchers at the Rights Lab to rank prevalence in areas across the UK. The research emulated the findings in the literature review that men and boys are failing to be identified for those reasons outlined above.

## How do support needs differ?

Statutory services are often ill-equipped to support highly traumatised men and boys, many of whom are diagnosed with PTSD before being turned away due to



the complexity of their condition. Hope for Justice reported the ineffectiveness of 'traditional recovery models' in supporting men and boys, further highlighting the need for gender specific support (Hestia 2018: 6).

Given that men and boys are more likely than women and girls to lack relationships where they can safely discuss feelings, this need needs to be met by support services (McNaughton et al 2014: 12). Services can facilitate safe discussion of sex and relationships while enabling survivors to understand that their exploitation has not compromised their masculinity or affected their sexuality. Hope for Justice noted that long term support needs change over time in a gender specific way. Men often attribute their difficulties to their inability to work rather than mental health needs. It is often not until men are back in employment and continuing to face difficulties that they accept the need for mental health support. However, by this point many men have exited the National Referral Mechanism and support is considerably scarcer (Hestia 2018: 7).

Furthermore, failure to protect trafficking survivors from homelessness and poverty perpetuates the cycle of exploitation. This also needs to be addressed in a gender-specific way, in recognition of the fact that

homelessness after trafficking overwhelmingly affects men and boys.

## Conclusion

The evidence suggests that the prevalence of sex trafficking of men and boys is much higher than suggested by official records, due to a number of gender specific complexities. The very nature of multiple forms of trafficking experienced by one person masks the sexual exploitation of men and boys, while internal and external conceptions of masculinity present barriers to both disclosure from victims and identification by professionals. Lack of knowledge and inadequacy of gender-specific support worsens this issue, while the criminalisation of men and boy survivors diverts attention away from sexual exploitation.

Despite the abundance of research on child sexual exploitation and sex trafficking of women and girls, men and boys continue to be overlooked. Barring a few examples, the majority of research on sex trafficking of men and boys comes from the third sector, demonstrating a major gap in academic scrutiny of the issue, and a worrying lack of attention.

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