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Gender and Trauma: Psychological Differences in the Experience of Female vs. Male Trafficking Victims

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Abstract

This study investigates gender-based psychological differences in the experience and aftermath of human trafficking, focusing on how trauma manifests, is internalized, and expressed among female versus male victims. The aim of the research is to identify distinct trauma patterns and coping mechanisms shaped by gendered forms of victimization, aiming to inform gender-sensitive approaches in psychological assessment, rehabilitation, and legal protection. Drawing on trauma theory, gender psychology, and victimology, the paper integrates empirical findings from clinical case studies, international reports, and forensic evaluations of trafficking survivors. Results indicate that female victims tend to display higher levels of post-traumatic stress, shame, dissociation, and relational anxiety, often linked to sexual exploitation and repeated coercion. In contrast, male victims exhibit more externalized symptoms such as aggression, emotional numbing, and avoidance, typically associated with forced labor and identity deconstruction. The study further emphasizes that societal stigma and cultural masculinity norms hinder the recognition of male victimization, leading to underreporting and inadequate psychological care. By employing a comparative analytical framework, the research highlights the necessity of differentiated trauma-informed interventions, where psychological recovery, social reintegration, and legal redress are tailored to gender-specific vulnerabilities and resilience factors. Ultimately, the paper advocates for a holistic understanding of trauma in trafficking survivors—one that bridges gender studies, clinical psychology, and criminology—to enhance both therapeutic efficacy and human rights protection.

Keywords: human trafficking, gender differences, trauma psychology, PTSD, sexual exploitation, forced labor, coping mechanisms, victimology, psychological recovery, gender-sensitive intervention

1. Introduction

Human trafficking represents one of the most pervasive violations of human rights, affecting millions of individuals globally across genders, ages, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite its heterogeneous forms—sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, criminal exploitation—trafficking consistently produces profound and long-lasting psychological consequences mediated by trauma, coercion, and chronic exposure to abuse (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ,UNODC, 2024). Although both women and men experience violence, exploitation, and psychological distress, empirical research indicates that gender significantly influences pathways into trafficking, victimization patterns, trauma responses, coping strategies, and recovery trajectories (Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017).

This study aims to provide a comprehensive, gender-sensitive analysis of psychological trauma among trafficking victims. Grounded in contemporary trauma theory and evidence from psychology, psychiatry, and victimology, the paper (a) synthesizes gendered vulnerabilities and patterns of exploitation, (b) explores gender-specific trauma outcomes, and (c) discusses implications for psychological intervention and policy. The overarching research question guiding this work is: *How do female and male trafficking victims differ in their psychological experience and expression of trauma?*

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Human Trafficking: Definitions, Typologies, and Epidemiology

Human trafficking is widely recognized as one of the most severe forms of contemporary organized violence, conceptualized in legal, criminological, and psychological literature as a complex, multidimensional, and highly structured process. The Palermo Protocol (United Nations, 2000) defines trafficking in persons as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of individuals through the use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or abuse of a position of vulnerability for the purpose of exploitation (Ștefănoaia, 2015). This definition emphasizes the processual nature of trafficking: a sequence of coercive actions oriented toward subjugation, in which power asymmetries and psychological control mechanisms constitute the core instruments of exploitation. From a criminological perspective, this framework highlights the systemic character of trafficking, where physical constraints, psychological pressure, affective manipulation, social isolation, and intimidation are deployed to erode personal autonomy and secure sustained compliance (UNODC, 2024).

International classifications distinguish several major forms of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude, forced begging, forced criminality, forced marriage, organ removal, and emerging digital forms such as online sexual exploitation and technology-facilitated trafficking (ILO, 2022; UNODC, 2024). The distribution of these exploitation types is closely shaped by socioeconomic, political, and cultural factors, generating substantial regional variation in victim profiles. Sexual exploitation remains most prevalent among women and girls, whose exposure is amplified by gender-based violence, structural inequality, and intersecting forms of discrimination. Conversely, men and boys are disproportionately represented in forced labour sectors such as agriculture, construction, fishing, manufacturing, and mining—industries frequently characterized by informality, high physical risk, and coercive managerial practices (ILO, 2022).

Global epidemiological data indicate that women account for approximately 49% of identified victims, men for 23%, girls for 21%, and boys for 7% (UNODC, 2024). This distribution reflects the intersection of structural vulnerability and forms of exploitation, illustrating that

trafficking operates within broader dynamics of socioeconomic inequality, precarious migration, gender-based violence, and global labour market demands. International reporting also signals a growing prevalence of technology-facilitated exploitation, where recruitment, manipulation, surveillance, and control of victims occur through digital means, enhancing criminal reach while simultaneously complicating detection and intervention.

Research consistently identifies a range of structural risk factors associated with heightened vulnerability to trafficking, including extreme poverty, unemployment, irregular migration, limited access to education, ethnic or gender discrimination, childhood exposure to violence, and the absence of supportive social networks (ILO, 2022; UNODC, 2024). Psychological mechanisms also play a crucial role in sustaining exploitative systems; phenomena such as trauma bonding, dissociation, conditioned fear, and distrust of authorities hinder victims' ability to seek help and significantly reduce identification rates, contributing to the well-documented global pattern that only a small proportion of trafficking cases are formally detected.

Overall, epidemiological and typological analyses underscore that human trafficking is a deeply adaptive phenomenon, continuously transforming in response to social, economic, and technological shifts and reinforced by victims' psychological vulnerability. This integrative perspective highlights the necessity of multidisciplinary intervention frameworks drawing on psychological, victimological, legal, and social expertise, with the dual aim of ensuring effective identification and promoting sustainable recovery and reintegration for survivors.

2.2. Trauma and Psychological Sequelae in Trafficking

Trafficking exposes individuals to prolonged, cumulative, and relational trauma that fundamentally disrupts psychological functioning and neurobiological development. Survivors are repeatedly subjected to coercion, physical and sexual violence, degradation, isolation, threats to self and family, and the systematic erosion of autonomy—conditions that align with what trauma theory conceptualizes as situations of totalitarian control (Herman, 2015). Such environments share structural similarities with captivity, domestic violence, and torture, where sustained fear, unpredictability, and entrapment severely constrain coping resources and fragment the sense of self. Empirical research shows that the consequences of this chronic exposure frequently manifest as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), dissociation, major depressive disorder, suicidality, somatic distress, and profound disturbances in identity, affect regulation, and interpersonal functioning (Herman, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014).

A defining psychological mechanism in the trafficking context is trauma bonding, a paradoxical attachment formed through alternating cycles of terror and intermittent kindness, particularly when escape appears impossible and the perpetrator controls access to basic needs (Dutton & Painter, 1993). Intermittent reinforcement—an established behavioural conditioning principle—deepens the bond, making the victim more likely to interpret minor acts of kindness as evidence of care, despite ongoing abuse. This dynamic strengthens compliance, reinforces dependency, and contributes to the victim's tendency to protect or defend the trafficker, complicating identification by professionals and reducing help-seeking behaviours.

From a neurobiological perspective, chronic trauma associated with trafficking leads to dysregulation across multiple systems governing memory, emotion, and executive functioning. Research on developmental and interpersonal trauma demonstrates that prolonged activation of the stress-response system results in structural and functional alterations in the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex—regions central to threat detection, memory integration, and impulse control (van der Kolk, 2014). Hyperactivity in the amygdala heightens vigilance

and reactivity to perceived threats, while reduced hippocampal volume impairs contextual memory and contributes to fragmented or dissociated recollections of traumatic events. Concurrently, diminished prefrontal cortex functioning compromises the capacity for emotional regulation and rational decision-making, often resulting in impulsivity, fear-based responses, and difficulty engaging in long-term planning. These neurobiological patterns support clinical observations that survivors may appear ambivalent, inconsistent, or uncooperative—even while experiencing profound fear and coercion—behaviours frequently misinterpreted by legal and institutional systems.

The cumulative effect of these psychological and neurobiological mechanisms is a pervasive disturbance in self-concept, interpersonal trust, and worldview. Survivors frequently report feelings of shame, guilt, self-blame, and existential hopelessness, reflecting the deep internalization of the trafficker's degrading messages. Moreover, relational trauma—trauma perpetrated by another human being with whom a dependency relationship exists—compromises survivors' future ability to form secure attachments, heightens sensitivity to rejection, and increases the likelihood of revictimization. These factors underscore the necessity for trauma-informed identification and intervention frameworks, as traditional legal or procedural responses often fail to capture the complex behavioural adaptations produced by trauma.

2.3. Gender, Vulnerability, and Differential Pathways into Trafficking

Gender shapes both vulnerability to trafficking and the specific pathways through which individuals are recruited, coerced, or exploited. Structural inequalities, cultural norms, and socioeconomic stratification interact to produce gendered patterns of victimization, resulting in distinct modes of entry into trafficking for women, men, and gender-diverse individuals. Women and girls disproportionately experience recruitment through relational and affective mechanisms—such as grooming, intimate partner coercion, promises of marriage, or manipulation of emotional and economic dependency—processes especially prevalent in contexts characterized by entrenched gender-based discrimination and limited economic opportunities for women (Farley, 2018). These pathways reflect broader systems of gendered violence wherein coercive control, emotional manipulation, and normalization of male dominance heighten susceptibility to sexual exploitation.

By contrast, men and boys are more commonly trafficked into forced labour, often through fraudulent employment offers, exploitative recruitment practices, or debt bondage schemes, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, mining, fishing, and manufacturing (ILO, 2022). In many cases, traffickers exploit pre-existing economic precariousness, labour migration patterns, and structural pressures that compel men to accept high-risk employment in hopes of supporting families or escaping poverty. Economic deprivation thus functions as a key driver of male victimization, with deceptive recruitment and coercive labour conditions reinforcing systemic vulnerabilities.

Gendered socialization further contributes to differentiated risk profiles and behavioural patterns in trafficking contexts. Patriarchal norms—including early marriage, control over female sexuality, and tolerance of gender-based violence—significantly increase women's exposure to recruitment through relational dependence and limit their likelihood of seeking help or resisting coercion (Farley, 2018). Conversely, hegemonic masculinity norms emphasizing physical endurance, stoicism, and self-reliance often inhibit men from recognizing their victimization or disclosing abuse, particularly in labour exploitation contexts. Shame, stigma, and fear of social discreditation (e.g., being perceived as weak or failing as a

provider) further suppress help-seeking among male survivors, contributing to their systematic under-identification in official statistics.

Importantly, emerging evidence highlights that gender-diverse and LGBTQ+ individuals experience distinct vulnerabilities resulting from discrimination, family rejection, homelessness, and exposure to violence, factors that heighten susceptibility to trafficking for sexual exploitation or survival-based labour. These intersectional vulnerabilities underscore that gender does not operate in isolation but interacts with class, ethnicity, migration status, and age to produce layered risks.

Overall, gender functions as a powerful structural determinant of trafficking pathways, shaping not only how individuals are recruited and exploited but also how they are perceived by systems of protection and justice. Recognizing these gendered mechanisms is essential for designing effective prevention strategies, improving identification, and ensuring that interventions align with the lived experiences and specific vulnerabilities of different groups.

2.4. Gendered Patterns of Abuse During Trafficking

Gender profoundly structures the forms of violence, coercion, and psychological manipulation that victims experience while under trafficking conditions. Women and girls are disproportionately subjected to forms of abuse that target sexuality, bodily autonomy, and identity. Repeated sexual violence functions not only as a means of physical domination but also as a tool of psychological subjugation, eroding self-worth and reinforcing dependence on the trafficker. Reproductive coercion—including forced pregnancies, forced abortions, and denial of reproductive healthcare—further entrenches control by limiting bodily autonomy and creating additional barriers to escape. Objectification and humiliation serve to dehumanize female victims, positioning them as commodities within hypersexualized exploitation dynamics where their bodies become the primary locus of economic extraction and coercive authority. Such experiences contribute to deep disruptions in identity, self-concept, and interpersonal trust, consistent with trauma models describing captivity-related psychological collapse (Baldwin et al., 2015; Kiss et al., 2015).

Male victims, while often under-identified, endure equally severe but distinct forms of violence. They are frequently exposed to extreme physical brutality, including beatings, restraints, and hazardous forced labour in sectors such as construction, agriculture, mining, and fishing. These environments expose them to dangerous machinery, toxic substances, and physically exhausting workloads, often without adequate safety equipment or rest. Deprivation of food and sleep operates as an intentional strategy to weaken physical resistance and impair cognitive function, thereby reducing the likelihood of escape or defiance. Threats directed at family members—particularly spouses, children, or parents—are commonly used to enforce compliance, exploiting cultural expectations of male protectiveness and financial responsibility (Kiss et al., 2015). This form of coercion weaponizes masculine norms, transforming them into tools of psychological control.

Although psychological manipulation is a universal feature of trafficking, its modalities often differ along gendered lines. Female victims are more likely to experience sexualized coercion, grooming, and degradation that attack their bodily integrity and relational identity. The cumulative effect is frequently identity dissolution: a fragmentation of self shaped by repeated violations of sexual boundaries and long-term exposure to humiliation. Male victims, on the other hand, frequently face manipulation tied to ideals of masculinity—strength, endurance, productivity, and emotional stoicism. Traffickers exploit these norms by framing resistance as weakness, shaping compliance through shame, threats to manhood, and expectations of

physical resilience. As a result, men may be less likely to seek help or self-identify as victims, reinforcing their invisibility in service and justice systems.

Taken together, these gendered patterns illustrate that trafficking is not a uniform experience but a differentiated system of domination calibrated to social expectations and vulnerabilities. Understanding these distinctions is critical for designing gender-responsive identification procedures, trauma-informed interventions, and long-term recovery frameworks.

Table 1. Type of abuse

Type of Abuse	Female Victims	Male Victims
Sexual Violence and Exploitation	Repeated sexual violence; hypersexualized exploitation dynamics; reproductive coercion	Rare; generally not the central form of exploitation
Physical Violence	Objectification, humiliation, physical assault associated with sexual control	Extreme physical violence, beatings, torture-like coercion
Labor Exploitation	Often combined with sexual exploitation; domestic servitude	Hazardous forced labor in agriculture, construction, industry
Deprivation and Control	Coercive reproductive control; psychological manipulation	Severe food and sleep deprivation; constrained living conditions
Threats and Coercion	Threats of sexualized punishment; relational manipulation	Threats to family members; economic coercion to enforce obedience
Overall Exploitation Pattern	Primarily sexualized, relational, and identity-targeted exploitation	Primarily physical, economic, and force-based exploitation

Sources: Baldwin et al. (2015); Kiss et al. (2015)

2.5. Gender Differences in Trauma Responses

A growing body of empirical research demonstrates that men and women trafficked for sexual or labour exploitation exhibit distinct trauma symptom patterns, shaped by interactions among neurobiological processes, gender socialization, and cultural norms governing emotional expression. Women survivors demonstrate significantly higher rates of internalizing symptoms, including anxiety, major depression, somatic complaints, emotional numbing, guilt, and profound shame—patterns consistent with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) and relational disturbances arising from prolonged coercive control (Tolin & Foa, 2006). These symptoms reflect the cumulative effects of interpersonal trauma, sexual violence, and identity degradation, which erode self-worth and disrupt affect regulation. Women exposed to chronic sexualized abuse often develop trauma-related alterations in attachment, trust, and intimacy, mirroring the relational disruptions consistently reported in CPTSD clinical profiles.

In contrast, male survivors more frequently present with externalizing behaviours, such as irritability, aggression, hypervigilance, risk-taking, substance misuse, and pronounced emotional suppression (Olff, 2017). These symptom patterns correspond to trauma expressions commonly observed among men exposed to chronic physical violence, hazardous forced labour, and threats to personal or familial safety. Hypervigilance and behavioural arousal are often heightened due to prolonged exposure to dangerous work environments and unpredictable violence. Substance misuse may serve as a maladaptive coping strategy for managing pain, exhaustion, and psychological distress in contexts where emotional disclosure is discouraged by social norms of masculinity.

The divergence between internalizing and externalizing symptomatology cannot be understood solely as a function of trauma exposure. Instead, it reflects a complex interplay between neurobiological responses to chronic stress and gendered expectations regarding emotional

expression. Trauma research indicates that long-term activation of the stress-response system leads to alterations in the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, limbic hyperreactivity, and impaired prefrontal regulation—changes that manifest differently depending on individual, social, and cultural factors (Olff, 2017). Gender socialization further shapes these neurobiological dynamics: women are more likely to internalize distress due to cultural norms emphasizing relationality, emotional expressiveness, and compliance, while men are more likely to externalize or suppress affect in alignment with norms promoting toughness, stoicism, and control.

These gendered trauma profiles have important implications for identification, assessment, and intervention. Women may present with symptoms that mimic depression, somatization, or interpersonal withdrawal, whereas men may exhibit anger, substance use, or behavioural dysregulation—symptoms that can obscure underlying trauma or lead to misclassification in clinical and forensic settings. Recognizing these patterns is critical for developing gender-responsive, trauma-informed services that accurately interpret victims' behavioural expressions and avoid pathologizing adaptive survival strategies.

Table 2. Gender Differences in Trauma Responses

Trauma Response Domain	**Women**	**Men**
Primary Symptom Pattern	Internalizing symptoms	Externalizing symptoms
Emotional Manifestations	Anxiety, emotional numbing, chronic fear, shame	Irritability, anger, emotional suppression
Clinical Disorders Most Commonly Observed	Depression, CPTSD, somatic complaints, relational disturbances	Hypervigilance, risk-taking behaviors, substance misuse
Cognitive Processing Style	Rumination, self-blame, heightened interpersonal sensitivity	Avoidance, minimization, detachment, task-focused coping
Social and Behavioral Responses	Withdrawal, difficulties in trust and intimacy	Aggression, impulsivity, reduced help-seeking
Underlying Influencing Mechanisms	Neurobiological sensitivity to relational trauma; gendered norms encouraging emotional expression	Neurobiological hyperarousal; masculine norms discouraging vulnerability

The conceptual model of gender differences in trauma responses illustrates how women and men exhibit distinct psychological patterns following exposure to trafficking-related violence. Empirical evidence shows that women predominantly display internalizing responses, such as anxiety, depression, emotional numbing, shame, somatic complaints, and complex PTSD symptoms that affect relational functioning (Tolin & Foa, 2006). In contrast, men tend to manifest externalizing responses, including irritability, aggression, emotional suppression, substance misuse, hypervigilance, and behavioral impulsivity (Olff, 2017). These divergent symptom patterns are shaped by a combination of neurobiological predispositions, culturally learned gender roles, and social expectations regarding emotional expression. Together, these mechanisms influence how trauma is processed cognitively, expressed behaviorally, and managed in social contexts, resulting in gender-specific clinical profiles and recovery needs.

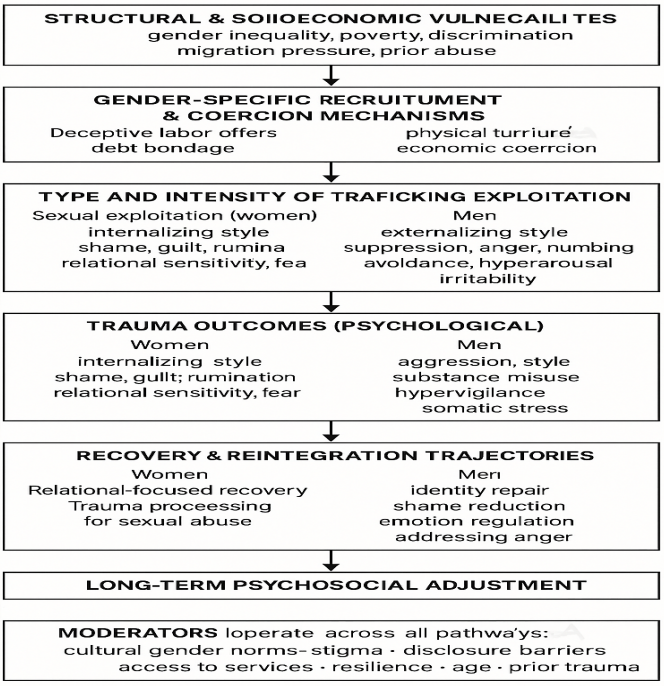

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Gendered Trauma Pathways in Human Trafficking

Recent scholarship increasingly highlights the necessity of incorporating male survivors, non-binary/LGBTQ+ individuals, and regional variations into analyses of trafficking-related trauma, given that early conceptualizations—often centered on female sexual exploitation—have produced an imbalanced empirical foundation.

Male survivors and sexual victimization

Although the literature historically underrepresented men, emerging evidence demonstrates that male sexual victimization in trafficking contexts is both more common and more severe than previously assumed. Studies across Europe and Southeast Asia document that trafficked men experience high rates of sexual coercion, humiliation, genital violence, and forced sexualized labor, often in conjunction with extreme physical exploitation (Dijk & van der Laan, 2021; Kiss et al., 2020).

Furthermore, trauma profiles among male survivors frequently include complex PTSD, dissociation, and somatic symptoms at levels similar to or exceeding those of women, particularly for men subjected to sexualized torture, captivity, or chronic debt bondage (Ottisova et al., 2016).

Another recurrent finding is the underreporting of sexual trauma due to masculine norms, shame, fear of criminalization, and stigma surrounding same-sex victimization—factors that systematically obscure prevalence estimates and distort gender comparisons.

Non-Binary and LGBTQ+ Trafficking Survivors

Recent research reveals heightened vulnerability among LGBTQ+ persons, particularly transgender women, gay men, and non-binary individuals. These groups face disproportionate risks of recruitment, coercion, and violence, driven by family rejection, economic marginalization, discrimination, and lack of legal protections (UNODC, 2020; Polaris, 2021).

LGBTQ+ survivors often report polyvictimization, including sexual assault, forced pornography, exploitative intimate-partner recruitment, and targeted psychological abuse (e.g., threats to disclose identity). Trauma manifests not only through PTSD and depression but also

through identity-specific stressors such as minority stress, internalized stigma, and compromised social support networks.

Regional and cross-national differences

The psychological impact of trafficking varies considerably across regional contexts, reflecting differences in exploitation types, migration pathways, and institutional responses:

- Eastern Europe and the Balkans: Male forced labor in agriculture, construction, and maritime sectors is prevalent, with trauma shaped by chronic deprivation, beatings, and captivity. Women in the region experience high rates of sexual exploitation, but recent studies show increasing cases of male sexual victimization in informal migration corridors (GRETA, 2022; IOM regional data).
- South and Southeast Asia: Research from Nepal, India, and the Philippines indicates pervasive childhood recruitment, intersecting with poverty and caste discrimination. Both boys and girls trafficked for begging, sexual exploitation, or domestic servitude exhibit severe trauma, including developmental disruptions and attachment disorders.
- Western Europe: LGBTQ+ asylum-seekers trafficked en route to Europe display elevated levels of complex trauma, shaped by cumulative violence across transit countries, institutional distrust, and fear of deportation.

These regional comparisons underscore the importance of avoiding overgeneralization and emphasize that trauma trajectories are contingent on contextual variables such as migration status, conflict exposure, legal protections, and access to specialized services.

Updated empirical evidence beyond the classics

To strengthen the evidence base, recent high-quality studies should be integrated, including:

- **Ottisova et al. (2016)** – Meta-analysis on mental health outcomes among trafficked adults and children, disaggregating findings by sex where available.
- **Kiss et al. (2020)** – Longitudinal evidence on psychological distress, comparing men and women trafficked for labor versus sexual exploitation.
- **Van Dijk L. (2021)** – Qualitative evidence on sexual violence against trafficked men in Europe, challenging the assumption that sexual victimization is predominantly a female phenomenon.
- **Polaris (2021)** – Data on LGBTQ+ trafficking survivors in North America, identifying unique coercive tactics and mental-health consequences.
- **Zimmerman et al. (2022)** – Multi-country cohort study assessing trauma, depression, and functional impairment across different exploitation types.

Collectively, these contributions broaden the analytic scope beyond female sexual exploitation and allow your paper to engage with contemporary, intersectional, and gender-inclusive evidence on trafficking-related trauma.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The present study adopts a narrative, integrative review approach synthesizing peer-reviewed empirical findings on gender and trauma among trafficking victims. This design is appropriate given the ethical and practical barriers to primary data collection with highly vulnerable populations (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003).

The search covered studies published between *January 2000 and December 2024*, reflecting contemporary trafficking patterns, evolving psychological frameworks (e.g., CPTSD), and currently accepted operational definitions of trafficking under the Palermo Protocol.

3.2. Sources and Inclusion Criteria

Sources include:

(a) studies published in peer-reviewed journals between 2000–2024,

(b) empirical research on trafficking-related trauma,

(c) studies analysing gender differences,

(d) international reports from UNODC, ILO, WHO, and the European Commission.
Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

Population:

- Included victims of human trafficking (adult or minor), with explicit gender disaggregation (female vs. male).
- Included studies on sexual, labor, domestic servitude, forced criminality, or mixed exploitation.

Design:

- Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-method empirical studies
- Systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and theoretically grounded conceptual papers

Outcomes:

- Reported psychological trauma indicators (PTSD, CPTSD, dissociation, depression, anxiety, emotional dysregulation, shame, guilt)
- Described gender differences in trauma mechanisms, coping strategies, or help-seeking behaviors

Context:

- Included trafficking victims in any region (global), allowing cross-cultural comparison

Studies were excluded if:

1. They examined migration, domestic violence, or sex work without explicit reference to trafficking.
2. Gender analyses were missing or undifferentiated.
3. Psychological trauma outcomes were not reported.

4. Articles were opinion pieces, editorials, or non–peer reviewed unless they provided relevant conceptual frameworks (e.g., UNODC or IOM reports).
5. Full texts were unavailable.

Study Selection Process (PRISMA-Style Narrative)

A total of 2,463 records were initially identified across databases. After removing duplicates (n = 814), 1,649 titles and abstracts were screened. Of these, 1,232 were excluded based on topic irrelevance or inadequate gender differentiation. The remaining 417 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility.

Following full-text review:

- 295 were excluded for lacking gender-specific findings
- 54 were excluded for not addressing trauma outcomes
- 21 were excluded for methodological limitations or unclear trafficking definitions

A final set of 47 studies met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the synthesis.

Quality indicators evaluated included:

- clarity of trafficking definition
- sampling and recruitment procedures
- presence of control or comparison groups
- validity and reliability of psychological measures
- transparency regarding trauma assessment
- potential recall, social desirability, or selection biases
- conflict of interest disclosures

Search Strings

Search terms were constructed using Boolean operators, controlled vocabulary and free-text keywords. The core search string was:

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("human trafficking" OR "trafficked persons" OR "sex trafficking" OR "labor trafficking" OR "exploitation")
AND
(trauma OR "psychological trauma" OR "complex PTSD" OR "mental health" OR "emotional impact")
AND
(gender OR male OR men OR boys OR female OR women OR girls OR "gender differences")
```

4. Results

Across studies, several convergent patterns emerge:

1. **Prevalence of trauma symptoms**: Both genders display high levels of PTSD, CPTSD, major depression, and anxiety disorders (Kiss et al., 2015).
2. **Gender-specific emotional responses**:
    - Women exhibit more severe emotional dysregulation, shame, and interpersonal distress.
    - Men show more avoidance, anger, and substance-related coping (Olff, 2017).

Table 3 highlights the distinct emotional response patterns exhibited by female and male trafficking victims, reflecting gendered differences in emotional processing and trauma expression. Women tend to experience more pronounced emotional dysregulation, characterized by heightened affective reactivity and difficulties in stabilizing emotional states. They also show elevated levels of shame, guilt, and negative self-evaluation, which are strongly associated with sexualized violence and relational trauma. Interpersonal distress is more common among women, manifesting through challenges in trust, intimacy, and relational engagement.

In contrast, men predominantly exhibit avoidance-based emotional responses**,** including behavioral and emotional withdrawal, detachment, and suppression of vulnerability. They display higher levels of anger, irritability, and aggressive reactions**,** often linked to trauma-related hyperarousal and culturally reinforced expectations of masculine toughness. Additionally, men more frequently rely on substance use as a maladaptive coping strategy**,** using alcohol or drugs to manage intrusive memories, fear, or emotional discomfort.

These gender-specific patterns align with evidence suggesting that women are more likely to internalize trauma-related distress, whereas men tend to externalize emotional struggles. The findings correspond with empirical literature indicating that avoidance, anger, and substance-related coping are more prevalent among men with trauma histories (Olff, 2017).

Table 3. Gender-Specific Emotional Responses

Domain	Women	Men
Emotional Dysregulation	Pronounced emotional instability; heightened affective reactivity	Less overt emotional fluctuation; increased suppression
Shame and Self-Evaluation	High levels of shame, guilt, and negative self-appraisal	Lower reported shame but greater emotional numbing
Interpersonal Distress	Difficulties in trust, intimacy, and relational functioning	Social withdrawal, limited emotional communication
Avoidance Patterns	Cognitive and relational avoidance, often trauma-linked	Strong behavioral and emotional avoidance, detachment
Anger and Irritability	Internalized anger; episodic outbursts associated with trauma	Elevated anger, irritability, and aggressive reactions
Substance-Related Coping	Less prevalent overall, but associated with severe trauma exposure	More frequent use of alcohol or drugs as maladaptive coping
Representative Empirical Evidence	Emotional dysregulation, shame, interpersonal sensitivity	Avoidance, anger, substance-related coping (Olff, 2017)

Differences in Exposure:

- Women experience disproportionate sexual victimization and psychological manipulation.
- Men more commonly endure physical torture, dangerous labor, and threats tied to financial coercion (Baldwin et al., 2015).

Table 4 illustrates the distinct gendered patterns of exposure to violence and exploitation among trafficking victims. Women are disproportionately subjected to sexual victimization, including forced sexual acts, reproductive control, and continuous sexualized coercion. Their exploitation is frequently reinforced through psychological manipulation**,** relational grooming, and emotional dependency, which traffickers use to maintain control and reduce resistance. This pattern reflects the gendered nature of sexual exploitation, where perpetrators exploit vulnerabilities linked to gender inequality and relational dynamics.

Men, by contrast, are more often exposed to physical torture, extreme bodily harm, and physically hazardous labor conditions. Forced labor in construction, agriculture, or industrial sectors typically involves prolonged physical exertion, dangerous environments, and severe deprivation. Coercion against men is frequently tied to economic pressures**,** including debt bondage, wage withholding, and threats targeting family members to enforce compliance. These mechanisms reflect a structurally different exploitation pathway, where physical dominance and financial manipulation form the primary means of control.

Overall, the table highlights that while both genders endure severe harm, the nature, intensity, and mechanisms of exposure differ markedly**:** women face predominantly sexualized and psychological exploitation, whereas men experience primarily physical and economically driven coercion. These differences are consistent with empirical research indicating gender-specific victimization profiles within trafficking contexts (Baldwin et al., 2015).

Table 4. Gender Differences in Exposure During Trafficking

Exposure Domain	Women	Men
Primary Form of Victimization	Disproportionate sexual victimization	Physical torture and severe bodily harm
Psychological Manipulation	High levels of coercive control, grooming, emotional degradation	Moderate; often secondary to physical coercion
Nature of Exploitation	Sexual exploitation, forced sexual acts, reproductive control	Forced labor in hazardous conditions (construction, agriculture, industry)
Violence Patterns	Sexual violence, reproductive coercion, threats of sexualized punishment	Physical beatings, torture, confinement, weapon threats
Coercion Mechanisms	Emotional dependency, relational manipulation, threats of humiliation	Economic coercion, threats to family, debt bondage
Overall Risk Profile	Gendered vulnerability to sexualized violence and intimate coercion	High physical risk and labor exploitation driven by economic pressures
Representative Evidence	Disproportionate sexual victimization and psychological manipulation	Physical torture, dangerous labor, financial coercion (Baldwin et al., 2015)

Help-seeking patterns:

Help-seeking behaviours among trafficking survivors exhibit marked gender differences, shaped by social norms, stigma, and culturally reinforced expectations surrounding emotional expression and vulnerability. Women are generally more likely to engage with psychological services, disclose traumatic experiences, and seek support from formal and informal networks. This heightened readiness to access care aligns with broader epidemiological research demonstrating that women tend to interpret distress through relational and emotional frameworks, view help-seeking as socially acceptable, and show greater openness to therapeutic intervention. For female survivors of trafficking—particularly those exposed to sexual exploitation—clinical engagement is often driven by acute emotional distress, relational disruption, and the severe psychological sequelae associated with complex trauma.

By contrast, men demonstrate significantly lower rates of disclosure and are less likely to seek psychological or social services following exploitation. Stigma, fear of judgment, and dominant masculine identity norms strongly inhibit help-seeking among male survivors. These norms valorize stoicism, self-reliance, emotional restraint, and physical endurance, discouraging men from acknowledging victimization or expressing vulnerability. Trafficked men often perceive disclosure as incompatible with masculine roles such as provider or protector, and may fear social discreditation if their experiences become known. Additionally, externalizing coping strategies—such as substance use, irritability, or work overinvestment—frequently mask psychological distress, further reducing the likelihood of professional intervention.

The reluctance of many male survivors to seek help contributes to their systematic under-identification in health, legal, and social service settings. Conversely, the greater visibility of female victims within psychosocial services reinforces the perception that trafficking is a predominantly female phenomenon, thereby obscuring male victimization and perpetuating service gaps. Gendered help-seeking patterns thus mirror the broader variance in trauma expression: women's internalizing symptoms tend to prompt support-seeking, while men's externalizing or avoidant patterns impede recognition of their psychological needs.

Together, these dynamics underscore the necessity of gender-responsive, trauma-informed systems capable of recognizing how gender norms shape survivors' willingness to disclose exploitation and engage in care. Understanding these differences is crucial for designing interventions that reduce stigma, broaden access to services, and ensure that all survivors receive tailored, clinically appropriate support.

Table 5. Gender Differences in Help-Seeking Patterns Among Trafficking Victims

Help-Seeking Domain	Women	Men
Engagement with Psychological Services	More likely to seek and accept psychological support; higher openness to therapeutic intervention	Less likely to access psychological services; high reluctance toward mental health care
Disclosure of Victimization	More willing to disclose exploitation experiences to professionals when trust is established	Significantly lower disclosure rates due to stigma and masculine identity norms
Barriers to Help-Seeking	Fear of judgment, shame linked to sexual exploitation, concerns about social stigma	Fear of appearing weak, cultural norms discouraging vulnerability, internalized masculinity expectations
Patterns of Service Utilization	More frequent use of trauma-informed counseling and social support networks	Sporadic or crisis-driven utilization; often limited to medical or emergency services

Help-Seeking Domain	Women	Men
Perceived Acceptability of Support	Higher acceptance of emotional support and relational assistance	Lower acceptance of emotional care; preference for practical, non-psychological aid
Representative Evidence	Women engage more readily in psychological services	Men are less likely to disclose victimization due to stigma and masculine norms

Table 5 illustrates the distinct gendered patterns that shape help-seeking behavior among trafficking victims. Women demonstrate a higher likelihood of engaging with psychological services, displaying greater openness to emotional support, trauma-informed counseling, and relational assistance. Their help-seeking behavior is often facilitated by a willingness to disclose experiences of exploitation once a trusting relationship with service providers is established. However, women may still face barriers, such as shame, fear of judgment, and stigma associated with sexual exploitation, which can delay or complicate access to care.

In contrast, men show significantly lower rates of disclosure and reduced engagement with psychological services. This reluctance is strongly shaped by masculine identity norms, cultural expectations discouraging vulnerability, and fears of being perceived as weak. As a result, men tend to underreport victimization experiences and avoid emotional support, relying instead on practical or crisis-oriented services such as emergency medical assistance. Their help-seeking patterns are often marked by avoidance, suppression of trauma-related emotions, and a preference for handling distress independently.

Overall, the table demonstrates that help-seeking behavior is gender-dependent, influenced by sociocultural norms, internalized gender expectations, and the type of exploitation experienced. These findings align with empirical evidence indicating that men are disproportionately inhibited by stigma when seeking help for trauma, while women exhibit comparatively higher readiness to engage with psychological care.

5. Discussion

5.1. Interpretation of Findings

Gender plays a decisive role in shaping the psychological consequences of trafficking, influencing not only the types of victimization experienced but also the ways in which trauma is processed, expressed, and maintained over time. Although traumatic stress symptoms are prevalent across all survivors, empirical evidence consistently indicates that the nature of abuse—and the socio-cultural context in which it occurs—produces divergent psychological profiles for women and men. Women, whose exploitation typically involves sexual violence, coercive intimacy, and reproductive control, are more likely to **internalize** distress. This pattern manifests through anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional numbing, shame, self-blame, and the relational disturbances characteristic of complex post-traumatic stress responses. In contrast, men—who are disproportionately subjected to hazardous forced labour, physical violence, and threats to familial roles—tend to **externalize** trauma. Their responses often include irritability, anger, hypervigilance, emotional suppression, and maladaptive coping behaviours such as substance misuse.

These gendered expression patterns align closely with broader trauma literature, which demonstrates that women typically exhibit internalizing symptomatology while men present more externalizing or avoidant profiles (Tolin & Foa, 2006; Olff, 2017). Such distinctions are not attributable solely to biological differences but emerge at the intersection of

neurobiological stress responses, gendered socialization, and cultural expectations surrounding emotional expression. Norms prescribing emotional expressiveness and relational orientation for women encourage internalization, while masculine norms emphasizing stoicism, control, and physical endurance predispose men toward externalizing reactions or non-disclosure of distress.

Together, these converging factors show that trafficking-related trauma is not a homogenous phenomenon. Rather, it is mediated through gendered pathways that shape how survivors experience, interpret, and communicate psychological harm. Recognizing these differences is essential for developing gender-responsive clinical assessments and interventions, ensuring that service providers do not misinterpret symptom profiles or overlook trauma masked by culturally reinforced behavioural patterns.

5.2. Implications for Psychological Practice

Effective intervention with survivors of human trafficking requires a gender-sensitive, trauma-informed framework that accounts for the distinct psychological patterns shaped by differential victimization experiences. Because trafficking is embedded in prolonged coercion, relational trauma, and profound violations of autonomy, treatment must move beyond generic clinical models and address the specific emotional, cognitive, and relational needs that emerge across gendered trajectories of harm.

For women, whose exploitation frequently involves sexualized violence, grooming, and relational betrayal, therapeutic work must prioritize emotional regulation, restoration of interpersonal trust, and recovery from sexual trauma. Interventions should address the internalized shame, guilt, and identity fragmentation that stem from repeated violations of bodily integrity. Relational repair—rebuilding the capacity for safe attachment—is particularly essential given the high prevalence of CPTSD presentations marked by affective dysregulation and relational disturbances. Therapies must create a predictable, empowering environment that counters past experiences of domination and fosters gradual reconnection with a coherent, autonomous sense of self.

For men, whose exploitation often revolves around physical violence, hazardous forced labour, and threats to familial roles, treatment must directly engage with shame, anger, and culturally reinforced expectations of emotional suppression. Clinicians must recognize that masculine norms of stoicism and self-reliance can inhibit disclosure and mask trauma responses, leading to under-recognition of psychological injury. Therapeutic interventions should normalize help-seeking, challenge maladaptive beliefs tied to masculinity, and address compensatory behaviours such as substance misuse or aggression. Creating space for men to articulate fear, vulnerability, and grief—emotions traditionally discouraged in male socialization—is central to effective recovery.

Across genders, evidence-based trauma therapies provide a robust foundation for intervention. Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) has demonstrated strong efficacy in restructuring maladaptive trauma-related cognitions and reducing symptoms of PTSD. Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) facilitates the integration of traumatic memories and reduces physiological hyperarousal, offering an adaptable modality for survivors with fragmented or dissociative memory patterns. Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) is particularly suited for individuals exposed to cumulative trauma, enabling survivors to construct a coherent narrative that organizes traumatic experiences within a broader life context. Complementary stabilization techniques—including grounding, affect regulation training, and psychoeducation on trauma responses—are crucial preliminary steps, especially for survivors exhibiting dissociation or severe emotional dysregulation.

A gender-sensitive, trauma-informed approach therefore requires not only technical proficiency in evidence-based modalities but also an understanding of how gendered experiences shape trauma expression, coping strategies, and pathways to recovery. Tailoring intervention to these differentiated needs enhances therapeutic engagement, promotes psychological safety, and supports long-term healing and reintegration.

5.3. Policy and Social Implications

Policies aimed at preventing trafficking and supporting survivors must explicitly account for gendered vulnerabilities, as the mechanisms of recruitment, coercion, exploitation, and recovery differ markedly across gender groups. Strengthening early identification mechanisms is essential, given that gender norms influence both visibility and disclosure. Women may be more readily identified due to the higher institutional awareness of sexual exploitation, while men—particularly those in forced labour—often remain invisible because their trauma manifests externally or is normalized within exploitative labour markets. Effective screening protocols must therefore integrate gender-specific indicators, deploy trained personnel in high-risk sectors, and incorporate trauma-informed interviewing practices that reduce shame and fear of reprisal.

At the same time, policies must address a critical gap in service provision: the adaptation of shelter and support services for trafficked men, who remain significantly underserved despite increasing recognition of their victimization. Traditional service models were designed primarily for women and girls, particularly those escaping sexual exploitation, resulting in limited accommodation capacity, inadequate psychosocial resources, and the absence of masculinized care frameworks tailored to men's needs. Ensuring equitable access requires developing shelters that provide safety, confidentiality, medical care, legal aid, and gender-responsive psychological support for male survivors of forced labour, debt bondage, and other forms of exploitation.

An additional policy imperative is the integration of comprehensive psychological care within all post-trafficking reintegration programs. Given the high prevalence of PTSD, CPTSD, dissociation, depression, shame, and behavioural dysregulation among trafficking survivors, psychological intervention cannot be treated as an optional or secondary service. Policies should mandate routine mental health assessments, access to evidence-based trauma therapies, long-term follow-up, and specialized services for survivors with gender-specific trauma patterns. Integrating psychological care with legal, social, and economic support enhances stability, reduces revictimization risk, and supports sustainable reintegration.

Finally, effective anti-trafficking strategies must confront the structural inequalities that create and reinforce gendered pathways into trafficking. For women, these include gender-based violence, limited employment opportunities, discriminatory norms, and economic dependency. For men, structural vulnerabilities often arise from precarious labour migration, exploitative recruitment practices, and cultural norms that discourage help-seeking. Policies must therefore address the broader social determinants of trafficking through gender-responsive labour protections, economic empowerment initiatives, education access, and community-level prevention efforts.

Taken together, these measures underscore that trafficking cannot be effectively prevented or addressed without policies that recognize gender as a central axis of vulnerability, exploitation, and recovery. Gender-sensitive policy frameworks not only improve identification and service provision but also contribute to dismantling the systemic inequalities that facilitate trafficking in the first place.

6. Limitations

The current evidence base on gendered psychological outcomes in trafficking is constrained by several methodological and conceptual limitations that restrict the precision and generalizability of findings. A primary challenge is the notable scarcity of studies focusing specifically on male trafficking victims, which significantly narrows the empirical foundation for gender comparisons. Because the majority of research has concentrated on women and girls—particularly those trafficked for sexual exploitation—our understanding of male victimization remains incomplete. This imbalance limits the capacity to identify gendered trauma patterns with accuracy and perpetuates the misconception that trafficking predominantly affects females.

A second limitation arises from the high heterogeneity of trafficking experiences. Trafficking varies substantially in type (e.g., sexual exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude), duration of captivity, coercive techniques, environmental context, and the severity of violence. These variations introduce considerable complexity into attempts to draw uniform conclusions about psychological sequelae across survivor groups. Without greater stratification by exploitation type, demographic characteristics, and contextual factors, it becomes difficult to disentangle which trauma patterns are attributable to gender and which stem from the nature of the exploitation itself.

Furthermore, much of the existing literature relies heavily on self-reported data, which can be influenced by recall bias, shame, fear of retaliation, and internalized stigma. These concerns are particularly salient among male survivors, who may underreport or minimize their experiences due to cultural norms surrounding masculinity, emotional restraint, and the perceived stigma associated with victimhood. As a result, psychological symptoms—especially those involving vulnerability or fear—may be systematically underrepresented in quantitative and qualitative data.

In addition, there are substantial ethical and logistical barriers to identifying and recruiting trafficking survivors, which complicate efforts to build robust and representative research samples. Concerns about participant safety, confidentiality, retraumatization, and the risk of ongoing coercion necessitate cautious recruitment strategies that often result in small, convenience-based samples. These limitations constrain the external validity of findings and reduce the capacity to capture the full spectrum of trafficking experiences.

Cross-cultural differences further challenge the interpretation of existing research. Gender norms, trauma expression, and help-seeking behaviours vary widely across societies, influencing both the manifestation of psychological symptoms and the willingness of survivors to disclose exploitation. These cross-cultural variations complicate generalization across regions and may obscure meaningful gendered dynamics that are culturally specific.

Finally, the field is hindered by a lack of longitudinal studies, which limits the ability to examine long-term psychological trajectories, recovery patterns, and the stability of gender differences over time. Most studies capture survivors' psychological functioning at a single point, providing only a snapshot of distress in the immediate or short-term aftermath of trafficking. Without longitudinal data, it remains unclear how symptoms evolve, which interventions support sustained improvement, or how gender influences long-term adaptation and reintegration.

Taken together, these limitations underscore the urgent need for more methodologically rigorous, gender-inclusive, and culturally sensitive research to advance understanding of trauma in trafficking survivors.

7. Future Research Directions

Future research must address significant empirical gaps to advance a gender-sensitive understanding of trauma among trafficking survivors. First, there is a pressing need for longitudinal analyses of recovery trajectories that examine how psychological symptoms evolve over time, which factors predict sustained improvement or relapse, and whether gendered differences in trauma responses persist, diminish, or intensify across the recovery process. Longitudinal research would enable a more nuanced understanding of the temporal dynamics of PTSD, complex trauma, dissociation, relational functioning, and reintegration outcomes, thereby informing the development of phase-specific interventions.

Second, empirical work must incorporate larger and more diverse samples of male and non-binary victims, whose experiences remain significantly underrepresented in the literature. Expanding research participation beyond predominantly female samples is essential for capturing the full range of trafficking-related harms and for refining gender comparisons that currently rest on limited or skewed datasets. This includes ensuring representation across different forms of exploitation, age groups, and cultural contexts.

A third avenue involves investigating neurobiological markers of trauma across genders, including differences in HPA-axis functioning, neural circuitry implicated in threat processing, emotional regulation, and memory integration. Neurobiological research can illuminate how chronic coercion and violence shape brain structure and function, and whether gender moderates these effects. Such insights would enhance the precision of trauma-informed clinical models and support the development of tailored therapeutic approaches.

Fourth, future studies should incorporate culturally comparative trauma profiles, recognizing that gender norms, coping mechanisms, and help-seeking behaviours vary across societies. Cross-cultural research can clarify how cultural scripts influence trauma expression, disclosure patterns, and perceptions of victimhood, thereby improving the cultural validity of assessment tools and intervention frameworks. Comparative analyses across regions would also help identify culturally specific risk factors and protective mechanisms.

Finally, greater attention should be directed toward identifying resilience and post-traumatic growth factors specific to trafficking survivors. While much of the existing literature focuses on pathology, a strengths-based perspective is essential for understanding how survivors adapt, rebuild identity, and develop new competencies following prolonged trauma. Research examining social support, meaning-making processes, spiritual coping, community reintegration, and personal agency can provide critical insights into mechanisms that facilitate long-term recovery and wellbeing. Understanding these resilience pathways across gender groups will also support the creation of gender-responsive, empowerment-oriented interventions.

Taken together, these research priorities offer a roadmap for advancing a more comprehensive, inclusive, and scientifically robust understanding of gendered trauma in human trafficking.

8. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that although trafficking constitutes a profoundly traumatic experience for all victims, gender operates as a critical determinant shaping pathways into exploitation, forms of coercion, and the psychological consequences that follow. The evidence shows that women are disproportionately exposed to sexual violence, reproductive control, and relational forms of domination that disrupt identity, attachment, and bodily autonomy. By contrast, men typically endure physically brutal labour conditions, economic coercion, threats to familial roles, and forms of violence that capitalize on socially constructed expectations of

endurance and stoicism. These divergent patterns of victimization produce correspondingly distinct trauma profiles: women more frequently internalize distress through anxiety, depression, shame, and complex relational disruptions, while men often externalize trauma via anger, emotional suppression, hypervigilance, and substance misuse.

Such differences underscore that trafficking-related trauma is not monolithic but filtered through gendered social norms, cultural expectations, and the specific modalities of abuse to which victims are subjected. As a result, uniform approaches to identification, psychological care, or reintegration risk overlooking the highly differentiated needs of survivors. Effective responses must therefore adopt a gender-sensitive, trauma-informed framework that recognizes the unique vulnerabilities and symptom expressions associated with different forms of exploitation. Clinically, this requires tailoring interventions to gendered trauma patterns—emphasizing emotional regulation and relational repair for women, and addressing shame, suppressed affect, and masculine identity norms for men. At the policy level, gender-responsive practices must strengthen early identification, expand specialized services for underrepresented groups such as male survivors, integrate comprehensive mental health care into reintegration programs, and confront structural inequalities that channel individuals into gendered routes of exploitation.

In sum, acknowledging the central role of gender in trafficking dynamics is essential for improving survivor-centered practices across clinical, social, and legal systems. A nuanced understanding of how gender shapes both harm and healing enhances the precision of interventions, promotes equitable access to services, and supports more sustainable reintegration outcomes for all trafficking survivors.

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