

Psychological Vulnerability and Criminal Exploitation: A Legal-Psychological Perspective on Human Trafficking

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Abstract

Human trafficking is a severe violation of human rights and a complex criminal phenomenon that intertwines legal, social, and psychological dimensions. This paper explores the psychological vulnerability of victims as both a risk factor for being trafficked and a consequence of prolonged exploitation. The primary aim of this study is to analyze how psychological mechanisms—such as coercion, trauma bonding, learned helplessness, and dissociation—facilitate criminal exploitation and influence the victim's behavior, cooperation with legal authorities, and perceived responsibility. Integrating theoretical frameworks from forensic psychology with relevant jurisprudence, the research highlights the role of trauma-informed approaches in legal proceedings involving trafficked persons. Particular attention is given to the challenges of victim identification, credibility assessment, and the potential for re-victimization during the legal process. The paper also examines how psychological manipulation—often subtle and prolonged—can undermine the legal notion of free will and consent, raising questions about culpability, testimony reliability, and access to justice. By bridging the gap between psychological insights and legal practices, this study underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing human trafficking. The findings support the development of victim-sensitive legal protocols and advocate for enhanced training of professionals in both criminal justice and mental health fields. Ultimately, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the invisible psychological chains that bind trafficking victims, with implications for both prevention and rehabilitation.

Keywords: coercive control, trauma bonding, consent and autonomy, forensic assessment, victim identification