

Overlooked: Sexual Violence in Labor Trafficking



Sexual violence is defined as any unwanted sexual act, including but not limited to touching, voyeurism, exhibitionism, sexual assault and rape, perpetrated against a person through force or coercion. Within the workplace generally, sexual violence is used by perpetrators as a mechanism of power and control. Human traffickers use sexual violence, primarily against women and girls but also against men and boys, as both a physical and psychological means to compel labor.

Sexual violence is commonly associated with sex trafficking, where commercial sexual activity comprises the compelled service. Yet with more information on how sexual violence is used as a coercive tool used by labor traffickers, more victims can be identified and offered appropriate services.

How Traffickers Use Sexual Violence to Compel Labor

There are numerous examples of traffickers using sexual violence to compel labor – women in domestic servitude who endure intruders in their room every night, farmworkers in the fields or in employer-owned housing, men and women in manufacturing, women in entertainment clubs, and men at sea for months on fishing vessels. Traffickers

use dehumanizing tactics to compel service such as sexual violence and physical force by brutally beating their victims into submission. These assaults essentially serve the same purpose as barbed wire and chains, conveying a trafficker's overt control over the workers and breaking their spirit.

Sexual violence can also be used as a form of psychological coercion to compel labor. Traffickers have used rape as punishment for workers either trying to escape or not completing their production quotas for the day. When rape is used to punish one worker, it also stands to further intimidate other workers and the trafficker never even has to utter a word. This alone is a powerful threat, but compounded by the myriad of other coercive techniques, sexual violence is all the more powerful in compelling work. Additionally, traffickers may threaten to tell victims' family or community about the circumstances of their trafficking, including sexual activity. Sometimes this threat is implied and understood without the traffickers having to communicate it verbally. The fear of rejection by family or community can be so strong that trafficked persons will continue to work, not complain, not try to escape, and become resigned to a life of exploitation or trafficking.

Human traffickers use sexual violence, primarily against women and girls but also against men and boys, as both a physical and psychological means to compel labor. Recognizing sexual violence as a mechanism to compel labor can help to increase identification and the provision of appropriate services.

How to Improve Identification

Recognizing sexual violence as a mechanism to compel labor can help to increase identification and the provision of appropriate services. An important first step to improve identification is to broaden awareness of the indicators of labor trafficking generally. Labor trafficking is often easily masked as low-wage work or labor exploitation. Particularly when sexual violence is the silent mechanism compelling labor, trafficking may appear to be low-wage work.

First responders and a wide variety of law enforcement and service providers must be prepared to ask about sexual assault in labor trafficking contexts. Sexual violence is more often addressed by the criminal justice system when it involves an act between strangers or acquaintances but is addressed far less often when it occurs in a workplace setting. Decreased awareness more generally about sexual violence in the workplace extends into the labor trafficking context as well. As a result, professionals in the position to identify and help trafficked persons may not think to ask about sexual violence when presented with labor trafficking cases. Therefore, increased awareness will help professionals to be inclusive of sexual violence in their screenings, questionnaires, interviews, outreach and services.

Conversely, sexual assault service providers have the skills to be able to identify the signs of sexual violence, but may not realize that when it occurs in a workplace setting, it may serve as an identification tool for labor trafficking. Being prepared to ask questions about sexual violence in a labor setting, could help to identify someone as trafficked and trigger a range of critical protections and services. An expanded understanding of sexual violence within labor trafficking will allow professionals to extend their services to people who have been labor trafficked.

Sexual assault is such a sensitive issue that it is not readily disclosed even if a professional is poised to screen for it. In the case of trafficked persons, there are even more reasons not to share this information. Traffickers use threats like harm to family members to ensure that trafficked persons never talk about the trafficking or the sexual assault specifically. Traffickers also manipulate their victims, telling them that they will be jailed, deported, or otherwise punished so even once they escape trafficked persons are extremely reluctant to trust others and

Solutions for improved identification and protection:

- *Increase recognition of labor trafficking indicators, law enforcement and other first responders*
- *Increase awareness of sexual violence in the workplace generally*
- *Include sexual violence questions and information in screenings, questionnaires, interviews, outreach and services*
- *Incorporate sexual violence in a workplace setting as a potential indicator of labor trafficking*
- *Expand sexual assault services to people who have experienced sexual violence in the workplace and in labor trafficking*
- *Employ techniques to build trust with trafficked persons to make disclosure of sexual violence more comfortable and more likely*

discuss the circumstances of their trafficking for fear of these consequences. Therefore, using techniques known to build trust with trafficked persons can make disclosure more comfortable and more likely.

To achieve these improvements in identification, anti-trafficking, sexual assault and workers' rights professionals must share their respective expertise with one another and update their screenings, intakes, questionnaires and interviews. These steps will help identify more trafficked persons and direct them toward comprehensive services and protections that also address the sexual violence they endured.