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Reaching and Supporting Trafficked Women in Austria and Germany: A Call for Training on Attachment and Trust-Building

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Abstract

Many victims of trafficking in women are not reached by the available support services despite numerous measures that have been put in place on both the national and international levels. This deficiency is due to the inadequacy of the support systems, which do not meet the needs of the women concerned. A bilateral Austro-German research project entitled “Prävention und Intervention bei Menschenhandel zum Zweck sexueller Ausbeutung (PRIMSA) [“Prevention and intervention in the trafficking of human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation”] was set up with the aim of developing ideas for a multidisciplinary prevention and intervention scheme. This article presents a case study of one of the women from a Central European country who was interviewed and the selected results on the need for training on trust-building and attachment with victims.

Keywords

Austria, Germany, Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Western Europe, trafficking in women, violence prevention, violence intervention, bonding, attachment work, relationship work, trust-building work, networking

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REACHING AND SUPPORTING TRAFFICKED WOMEN IN AUSTRIA AND GERMANY: A CALL FOR TRAINING ON ATTACHMENT AND TRUST-BUILDING

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ABSTRACT

Many victims of trafficking in women are not reached by the available support services despite numerous measures that have been put in place on both the national and international levels. This deficiency is due to the inadequacy of the support systems, which do not meet the needs of the women concerned. A bilateral Austro-German research project entitled “Prävention und Intervention bei Menschenhandel zum Zweck sexueller Ausbeutung” (PRIMSA) [“Prevention and intervention in the trafficking of human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation”] was set up with the aim of developing ideas for a multidisciplinary prevention and intervention scheme. This article presents a case study of one of the women from a Central European country who was interviewed and the selected results on the need for training on trust-building and attachment with victims.

KEYWORDS

Austria, Germany, trafficking in women, violence prevention, violence intervention, bonding, attachment work, relationship work, trust-building work, networking

This is a case study of a trafficked woman from a Central European country. The case study is excerpted from the joint research project PRIMSA (Prevention and Intervention of Sex Trafficking), which is a German-Austrian cooperative project. It takes an interdisciplinary approach with the aim of developing a multi-purpose instrument of prevention and intervention to sex trafficking. Martina (not her real name) was 33 years old at the time of the interview.

Already as a child Martina experienced an enormous amount of violence from family members. Her mother and her grandmother were regularly physically

violent to her. They threatened her with a knife and hit her with a belt. She was also sexually abused by family members. In an interview, she said: “My mother was a very violent person.” Her grandmother once hit her with a branch of a tree which left a scar on her face. The rest of her family rarely offered any protection from the abuse. Her father was an alcoholic and wasn’t able to protect her. The only exception was her grandfather: “He was, really, the only good person.” She was forced into exploitative sexual relationships as a teenager. She had no choice. At school a teacher became aware of her problem but the authorities in charge did not place her into foster care.

These childhood injuries had a strong impact on Martina life. She said: “Now, of course, I don’t dare have children. Because I’m scared that I’ve probably inherited this anxiety, this aggressiveness, aggression, from my mother.”

When she was 17, her mother arranged for Martina to leave the country with a member of the extended family.

During the travel to their destination she was forced into prostitution to get money to pay for the hotel rooms. The acts of violence continued for several months after Martina and the pimp arrived in a Western European country. She was then sold multiple times to different pimps who exploited her in different brothels.

Martina’s life was an irrevocable downward spiral that started when she began to be commercially sexually exploited abroad. “Our clients would come up into the attic. Friends of the exploiter came, paid, and we went upstairs or they tried to procure for us in various bars, to find clients for us ... [The women] were sold from pimp to pimp, and when the time comes when a girl can’t earn any money any more, either she’s killed or she’s sent back. By then she’s no longer a human being.”

In one of the brothels she met the man who became her husband. He was the brothel owner. She told him about her story of exploitation and he decided to free her from the pimp by paying him for her. She was 24 and he was 50 years old. She describes him as a very possessive person who would use physical violence. She calls him her “ex-husband,” but doesn’t say if they got married. During their time together she worked for him at the bar in the brothel without prostituting herself.

After five years her husband died. She had to return to the street. She met a man who she thought she could trust:

I thought, he’s nice, and what did he do? He hit me, he took me to live in a sort of doss house¹ and wanted me to build up a clientele there, you know? And in the evening, you know, he would hit me, and you know, went to bed with me ... and the next day he sold me.

Again, after more exploitation she was thrown away: “He threw me on to the streets.” In order to survive she sold sex on the streets.

When Martina eventually ended up in such an abject state that she was no longer of any use she was thrown out on to the street by her pimp. “I lived on the streets .. just to get a piece of bread. I had to do anything. I slept in the toilets ...

¹ A “doss house” is a flophouse or a cheap place to stay that has no or few services.

went into a cafe for a cup of coffee, slept all day on the chair, and went to work in the evening.” Eventually in her downward spiral Martina hit rock bottom. Despite trying to take different paths she realized that everything kept taking her back into exploitative sexual relationships. In retrospect Martina describes this time as a time of pure, desperate survival. “That was when all I had time for was survival. I didn’t think about the whole psyche and the whole, you know, it was survival. It was only important to survive.” The way she describes it, in this state it wasn’t possible to reflect or think very much about a way out or escape, all that mattered was surviving from one day to the next.

While living on the streets, she met an outreach worker.

Martina inability to move was also rooted in a lack of inclusion and a feeling of homelessness. “Nobody, or put it this way, not only my family have rejected me, but my home country as well, you know. The whole country has thrown me out.” For Martina, starting to get help is therefore a fragile affair. Initially Martina observed female streetworker for months in very low-threshold settings before she was able to take a step towards them. “I met Maria in Alraunstrasse. She, you know, she went out on to the streets with the other women, from one girl to another. And to begin with I saw her and thought, what does she want from me.” Eventually, after a while the streetworker took the initiative. “Maria would always come up to me, with sweets or a little book or something, and it took two years for me to trust her.”

However, in Martina’s case it also became clear that just a single meeting, a single person or a single institution would not be enough to help her escape from the system of violence in the long term.

For this to happen, the role of the police, for example, was also fundamental. Martina had several experiences of the police being helpful before she was able to trust them and it became possible for them to provide her with comprehensive help. After every negative encounter she relapsed into the accumulated experience that no-one can be relied on. Every situation that does not secure lasting trust, blows down the whole house of cards again.

Martina is able to describe how the process of helping her finally succeeded.

She (the streetworker) saw, she saw I don’t have trust, nothing. And she went slowly, slowly. Slowly, slowly she got through me. Lots of conversations, you know, and well, as they say, by talking you win people’s trust.

This way of initiating trust was reinforced by continuity. “She kept coming back, you know, kept coming back.” Gradually Martina was able to accept other people helping her as well. “So, well, the people have really helped me a huge amount.” A network of trust was built up. In this way Martina succeeded in building up a new life for herself.

However, it is not over. Martina says candidly that she still is only able to sleep with the light on because of all the recurring panic attacks.

I always leave it, the light, I always leave the light on, and I got up, switched on this light, and that’s why I went and bought an energy-saving bulb and hung it up straight away and up to now, up to now I have always slept with the light on, sometimes music too.

Every step out of this system of violence was bound up with existential dangers. Again and again she would start to have feelings of hopelessness and despair and also even thoughts of suicide.

Anyone else would put a bullet, not that I, no I didn't try. Five times, five times I tried, suicide. And every time it didn't work. And then I saw, ok, life isn't easy. I won't have anything, that is, if I am planning something in this life, that means somehow, I have to ... and I came and sorted myself out.

Martina knows that it's not all over yet. She cannot escape her emotional reactions to what happened.

And then it all came out. Then it really did all come out. All these suppressed feelings I'd had, this sadness, this rage, you know, it all came out. I was, I... I was really sad, I was very angry.

In the meantime, however, she is able to accept help in these situations, to develop her own strengths and also to see what she has achieved. She is determined to make the best out of her past, even though she knows she has a very difficult life history behind her.

Ok, because a lot, a lot of people hear stories like this, but nobody believes, you know ... Somehow lots of people say, 'wow, what a really strong, strong powerful woman you are.'

Social workers supported Martina's recovery. They arranged for her to go to school (Hauptschulabschluss). It took her nine years to complete the course. At the time of this interview, she is 33 years old. She is receiving vocational training to become a professional house painter. She lives in her own apartment with her cat and received public social benefits. She has a partner who she says, "Loves me the way I am."

THE PRIMSA RESEARCH PROJECT

Martina is not an isolated case. Human trafficking in the form of commercial sexual exploitation is a worldwide phenomenon. It violates the human rights of the victims and goes hand in hand with violent physical and psychological abuse (BKA [German Federal Criminal Police Office], 2015; Rabe & Tanis, 2013; UNODC, 2014). In Central Europe, Germany and Austria are key transit and destination countries where this exploitation takes place. According to (current) estimates, the actual extent of the problem far exceeds the number of reported cases (BKA, 2014; Herz & Minthe, 2005), the majority of victims cannot be identified and accordingly the available protection services fail to reach them. What is needed, therefore, are prevention and intervention strategies that are multi-faceted and transnational. Despite the introduction of numerous measures on both the national and international levels, so far the investigative and intervention work has not been highly successful (cf., for example, the Austrian National Action Plan on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings for the years 2012 – 2014 and also for 2015 – 2017: BMEIA [Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs] – TF-MH, 2012, 2015 – and the German Federal Situation Survey Human Trafficking: BKA – BKA, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015).

As early as 2010 the United Nations (UN) implemented a global action plan to combat human trafficking (United Nations Global Report on Trafficking in Persons: UNODC, 2012). The European Union passed a number of directives which supported this action plan and gave the responsibility for implementing it to the Member States. With the legal position being so clear and the readiness to engage in national and international programmes the question arises as to why the success of support services is so unsatisfactory to date. Apart from the clandestine crime structures, thus far, this lack of success has been attributed first and foremost to a lack of training of the support systems. They do not take sufficient account of either the economic dependence of the victims on their pimps or the complicated emotional entanglements, which usually involve violence, and emotional ties to persons from the milieu (*ibid.*; Helfferich, Kavemann & Rabe, 2010; GRETA, 2015).

The Austro-German research project “PRIMSA” was set up with the aim of developing a multidisciplinary prevention and intervention approach that includes both technical and also sociological, legal, psychological, pedagogical and socio-spatial perspectives. The goal of the project is to establish bilaterally, in a multidimensional investigational design, trans-institutional modes of prevention (Gordon, 1983, 1987) and to use them for concrete training objectives for the professional groups concerned. The aim is to make the support that is currently available fit the needs of the actual problems better than it does now.

Out of seven parts of the project, which were carried out by very different disciplines, we will focus on the results of the first. This part of the research project concentrates on why victims frequently do not get to institutions that are there to help them or may even return to the violent milieus, and how this gap in the support system can be closed. What we are concerned with is what in social work is called the problem of being “hard to reach” (Labonté-Roset, Hoefert & Cornel, 2010; Brackertz, 2007). The targets are women who are poorly integrated socially and whose trust in people and institutions has been destroyed by repeated ruptures.

To clarify this, this part of the research project included in particular the perspective of the women having been victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, which is not taken into account in many research projects on human trafficking and violence (European Commission, 2004). The combination of different methodological approaches, most of which are currently subsumed under the concepts of “method integration,” “mixed methods,” or “triangulation”, has proved to be particularly suitable for depicting the inductive-deductive process between existing knowledge and insights to be gained (Schreier & Fielding, 2001). This procedure was chosen for the present project. The main focus was the question as to how professionals can intervene constructively in this process to support the victims.

Thirty victims of trafficking in women participated in problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 1982, 2000), which were initiated with an open question, and followed by exploratory questions to support participants’ narratives. The interviews were conducted in close co-operation with practitioners. The methodological procedure employed paid attention to both cultural and linguistic barriers to understanding (for a recent description see Enzenhofer & Resch, 2011). On the basis of prevalence and the project-specific focus, victims of trafficking in women in Germany, Austria, Eastern European countries, and Africa were included in the study. Content-analysis, which lays particular emphasis on the inductive portions of the

text, was intentionally selected for data preparation and analysis (Mayring & Gahleitner, 2010).

Conducting research in the area of interpersonal violence continues to be considered a highly risky undertaking. The problems encountered in this field need to be balanced through reflection—and by ensuring that researchers have suitable trauma skills (Gahleitner, 2002). The risk was reduced in advance by obtaining approval from an ethics committee, but also by the NGOs involved. Thus, for example, the victims were able to give their interviews in the presence of a support service provider. Women who felt under stress could stop the interview at any time and take advantage of the counselling services offered. Thus, not only was the risk minimized, but the participants were able to benefit from an alternative experience; positive, healing effects during the project were not infrequent (Bar-On, 1996).

Results and Discussion: Ways Out of Violence for Victims of Trafficking in Women

How can women who have been subjected to trafficking make a new start after their experiences of violence? If we look at how the women fall victim to trafficking in the first place, we find a series of ruptures, even if their histories vary widely: Violence; deprivation; and dysfunctional families; and particularly being broadly disadvantaged were issues that were repeatedly brought up in the interviews. Thus, all of the women interviewed had numerous experiences of contact with structures of violence in the course of their lives. In the setting of exploitation, the women were subjected to surveillance, threats to family members, physical maltreatment, loss of control over their own bodies, and rape. As one of them put it: “They threatened us all the time.” A vicious circle developed in which the feeling of helplessness became firmly rooted in them. Another participant reported that she “... didn’t manage to get out of it for five years.”

As a result of the associated feelings of guilt and shame, the social taboos, and the secrecy imposed by the perpetrators, the victims’ self-esteem and sense of being in touch with themselves and other people are impaired. Summit (1983) calls this dynamic of sexual violence and the resulting typical modes of reaction of the victims the “sexual abuse accommodation syndrome”. Society intensifies these effects with its tendency towards taboo and stigmatization of the victims which undermines their credibility (Birck, 2001), which we can consider to be “secondary victimization” (Schneider, 1975, p. 32). To trust becomes dangerous for the victims, since trust has resulted in abuse. Attempts to enter into relationships repeatedly end in disappointment, since healthy attachment patterns are lacking. The result is re-enactments and renewed exploitation.

As a result of the traumas experienced throughout years of sexual exploitation, the basis for which is in many cases already laid down in childhood, the victims suffer from complex traumatization. The women interviewed report anxiety states, depression, substance abuse, panic attacks, and sleep disturbances which must ultimately be considered to be part of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, which can best be formally addressed with the diagnosis complex post-traumatic stress disorder or “disorder of extreme stress not otherwise specified” (DESNOS) (Herman, 1993; Kolk et al., 1996). Many of the women continue to suffer from the full spectrum of this disorder after experiencing the stress of violence for many years (Oram, Stockl, Busza et al., 2012). Moreover, constant confrontation with

denigration and discrimination in the destination country promote the continuation of what is known as “sequential traumatization” (Keilson (1979/1992) (see also Müller, 2016).

Due to the many experiences of excessive violence and many years of sexual exploitation, mental problems, attachment disorders, severe helplessness, feelings of shame, and frequently also self-hate penetrate deep into the psyche. This requires active (trauma-informed) trust-building work on the part of professionals in order to help the women start a new life (see also Müller, 2016). One woman aptly said, “I don’t trust anyone, everyone is against me”. The rapprochement can therefore only take place step by step. “It had taken me two years to trust her,” another interviewee reported about her first contact with a street worker. Baker, Dalla and Williamson (2010) describe leaving prostitution as a six-stage process, i.e. immersion, awareness, deliberate planning, initial exit, re-entry. and final exit.

These sequelae of trauma alter access to the support system for the women in a destructive way. Due to the fact that these structures are disorganized, the women can only gain access to help via professionals who are highly experienced and have knowledge and skills in the areas of trauma, attachment, and trust-building. However, if it is possible to enable the woman to have an initial “protective island experience” (Gahleitner, 2005, p. 63; 2011, p. 40; Petzold, Goffin & Oudhof, 1993), it needs to be constantly supported by cautious access to other supportive persons in other networks and institutions. It becomes clear how much knowledge and experience is required by the professionals who prepare the way for the woman to access aid structures in the sequelae of trauma and the phenomenon of trafficking in women, in order to mobilize the patience, skills, and understanding that the victims need. This is true for all professionals involved in the process, including advisors and counsellors, the police, and the legal system.

For counselling work with severely traumatized clients and persons such as those in the field of trafficking in women it is important to realize that interactions that are successful in being sensitive to trauma and attachment are a fundamental organizing principle of development as a whole. This is particularly so after experiences of sexual violence (Gahleitner, 2005). Supportive psychosocial experiences are needed to provide a positive alternative to years of humiliation and disappointments in relationships (Keupp, 1997). In this area, competent counsellors must be particularly capable of helping survivors of human trafficking to access “prothetic social networks” (Petzold, 1993, p. 742) and “protective island experiences” (Gahleitner, 2005, p. 63; 2011, p. 40; Petzold et al., 1993) – and they must be able to do so from the first go and in interdisciplinary teams.

Conclusions and future prospects

We know from research on psychotherapy and counselling and also research on social support that positive attachment relationships, that is, what are referred to as “corrective emotional experiences” (Cremerius, 1979, pp. 588-590; Alexander & French, 1946; Grawe, 1998) decisively influence the success of professional support interventions. This applies particularly to work with clients who are “hard to reach,” which, as mentioned above, is typical of victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In order to achieve this, aspects of trauma and attachment already need to be part of the diagnostic work-up as the starting point for providing professional support efforts. Only then can these aspects be suitably

taken into account in the management of the professional relationship and planning of interventions (Gahleitner, 2011; Gahleitner & Pauls, 2013).

However, this by no means applies—as is generally assumed—to psychotherapy alone, but, as is shown by the results of the present research project, also and especially to everyday advice and counselling settings and to acute interventions. It is therefore becoming clear, precisely in the field of human trafficking, that the representatives of the respective institutions—support and counselling services, police, courts—must demonstrate to the victims that they are trustworthy through finding points where connection is possible as a visible link between person and system in everyday life (Giddens, 1990, pp. 92-99). “I met Maria in Alraunstrasse,” one of the interviewees told us about her first encounter with a streetworker, which was the start of a support process that lasted several years.

Accordingly, the goals of the project are oriented towards providing training for groups of professionals involved in this process, mainly social workers providing support and counselling, representatives of law enforcement and lawyers. In Germany a supra-regional network office, the “German Network and Coordination Office Against Trafficking in Human Beings” (Bundesweiter Koordinierungskreis gegen Menschenhandel – KOK) promotes constant further development in the field of support for victims of human trafficking in Germany.

The authors suggest that the aspects of attachment, trust, and trauma should be further expanded in professionals working in acute services, not only in psychotherapy. In particular the area of everyday support and the provision of advice should be conceived as a qualified space for trauma problems and they should be qualified to provide trauma education, thus enabling victims to master their trauma reactions.

The process doesn't conclude at this point. In addition to developing ways of breaking through the system of power and violence by creating a basis for trust and offering a professional relationship, the binational project also investigates criminological and legal aspects. The present project will include an investigation of the organizational structures, modus operandi, and the profiles of perpetrators. The relevant information is obtained from police investigation files and surveys. The goal is to analyze the files from 2009 to 2014—to establish an overview of how the crime unfolded, the business models, motives, social backgrounds, and relationships between the perpetrators and the victims. The studies will address the subject matter on many different levels and are intended to help reconsider the chances and possibilities of different approaches. The results will also be made available for training and continuing education programmes for the professional groups taking part in the concerted multidisciplinary effort to combat human trafficking.

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