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# RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SEXUALITY OF TRAFFICKED AND SEXUALLY ABUSED SURVIVORS. SEXUAL TRAUMA AND SEX THERAPY

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the intricate process of reconstructing sexuality in the case of female survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse, presenting sex therapy as an effective therapeutic method that addresses the needs of these women. This paper investigates the profound impact of sexual trauma on victims, highlighting its long-term effects. Starting from the general context of trafficking and sexual abuse, the paper reveals the characteristics of these traumatic experiences and analyzes how they influence the survivor's subsequent sexual relationships. Through sex therapy-based interventions, ways in which these women can regain control over their own bodies and sexuality are explored. By integrating current research and clinical practices, the paper aims to contribute to understanding the reconstruction of survivor's sexuality. Additionally, this work emphasizes the imperative of ongoing research and policy development to support these highly vulnerable victims.

**Key words:** reconstruction, sexuality, sexual trauma, sex therapy, trafficking, sexual abuse.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the complexity of sexual exploitation, focusing on research and therapeutic approaches that have demonstrated results through the use of sex therapy and trauma therapy. The significance of this theme arises from the complexity of the traumas experienced by trafficked and sexually abused women. These traumas extend beyond sexual violence itself, encompassing the loss of control over one's own life and personal identity. According to studies, human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation remains by far the most widespread form of human trafficking, given that 51% of human trafficking victims in the EU are trafficked for sexual

exploitation (European Parliament, 2023) with the majority being Romanian women, some of whom are minors, according to a GRETA report published in 2016 (Copăceanu, 2018). Over 90% of victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation are women and girls, and the actual number of victims is greater than the registered number, with the majority remaining unidentified (European Parliament Report). Victims are intimidated, threatened, or fear the stigma (International Journal for Crime, 2022).

The analysis of the impact of sexual trauma and trafficking on female survivors reveals painful and complex consequences, including dissociation, the development of unwanted patterns of sexual arousal and difficulties in establishing healthy relationships. Considering

these aspects, this paper focuses on the need for a specialized therapeutic approach, centered on sex therapy, to guide survivors in the reconstruction of their own sexuality and intimate relationships.

In a world where stigma and ignorance can deepen wounds, this research explores effective ways in which sex therapy can provide a safe and trustworthy framework. The results highlight the importance of an integrative approach that goes beyond individual aspects, addressing relational dynamics and interaction with others.

The aim of this study is to emphasize that to protect women and girls from human trafficking for sexual exploitation (Commission Report on Preventing and Combating Trafficking, 2020), a holistic approach is needed, emphasizing that therapy is a key factor in facilitating recovery and improving mental health. According to statistics, the number of victims trafficked for exploitation in 2022 was 368, compared to 344 in 2021, representing an increase of 6.98% (Public Ministry, 2022), but through therapy, this number can be significantly reduced.

This paper analyzes the complexity of the recovery process for female survivors, focusing on sex therapy as an effective method for reconstructing sexuality. Therapeutic approaches require not only a deep understanding of sexual trauma but also adaptation to the individual needs of survivors. Therapists are encouraged to adopt realistic expectations, be sensitive and creative while providing personalized support.

Sexuality reconstruction is addressed through an integrated treatment, including sexual therapy that integrates psychotherapeutic and medical techniques. It is essential to overcome stigmatization and create a safe space for exploring and accepting individual sexuality. Therapists must be aware of the impact of trauma on subjective sensory competence and adopt a sensitive approach to promote safety and predictability in therapy.

By exploring the importance of this issue, this paper aims to highlight the need for an integrated approach that provides support not

only in managing sexual trauma but also in reconstructing a healthy and self-determined sexual life. Through the analysis of existing research and therapeutic practices, we aim to underscore the essential role of sex therapy in facilitating the recovery process for women who have experienced traumatic experiences related to sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

## **PRESENTATION OF RELEVANT LITERATURE**

### *General context of trafficking and sexual abuse against women*

In recent decades, the sexual exploitation of women has become one of the most dynamic and developed forms of contemporary crime. It is indisputable that the activities of criminal groups engaging in this criminal activity are becoming increasingly intense (Larii, Pohilă, 2021). Mental health specialists, researchers, law enforcement officials, and therapists have made significant efforts to advance the understanding of these consequences and develop therapeutic approaches aimed at healing and supporting women in the process of recovering their sexuality and regaining control over their lives.

Human trafficking for sexual exploitation is a serious crime involving actions such as recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring, or receiving individuals for the purpose of sexual exploitation, using methods of sexual coercion, such as threats, force, or coercion (ANITP), and is a human security issue (Shelley, 2008). This form of trafficking can encompass various forms of sexual exploitation, such as forced prostitution, the production and distribution of forced pornography, or other forms of forcibly imposed sexual abuse. The trafficking of women and sexual abuse are serious global issues that affect millions of women and girls worldwide. These phenomena represent severe human rights violations and have devastating consequences for victims, both physically and psychologically, with a high degree of victim traumatization (Topada-Coroi, 2018). Sexual trauma often creates self-disorganization, leading victims to confront feelings

of guilt, dissociation, and identity confusion, and sexual abuse therapy represents a challenge, making the reconstruction of sexuality a vital part of the recovery process (Herman, 1997).

In 2020, approximately 50% of identified victims worldwide were women and girls trafficked for sexual exploitation (UN, 2020), and approximately 77% of victims are girls and women (US Department of State, 2021). Typically, traffickers are Romanian citizens who are part of an organized criminal group based on ethnic or family ties, exploiting Romanian women in Romania and other European countries. Experts continue to report an increase in the number of women from Romania recruited for fake marriages in Western Europe; after these marriages end, traffickers force women into commercial sex work. More than 90% of traffickers are male, and the main motive for human trafficking is financial profit (UNDOC).

It is important to note that human trafficking is not limited to cross-border trafficking. In many countries, internal human trafficking is a significant issue, with numerous victims trafficked within their own countries.

### *Sexual Trauma and Its Long-Term Effects*

Sexual trauma, especially when associated with human trafficking, has serious consequences on both the physical and mental health of the victims. It represents any distressing experience that leads to reactions of fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or any other type of feelings strong enough to produce long-lasting negative effects on the affected person's behavior, beliefs, and health (American Psychological Association, 2015). Sexual trauma is suffered by a person whose body becomes an object for satisfying another person's sexual needs, a process in which the victim is physically and psychologically harmed without the ability to resist or escape (Ruppert, 2021). It is any inappropriate sexual encounter involving force, coercion, or consent that was not freely given. Trauma can be subjective; what one person considers traumatic may not be seen as such by another person. It can happen to anyone, at any time and place.

The impact of this trauma, without treatment, can last a lifetime (DSM, 2016).

Among the long-term effects of sexual trauma are depression, feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame, eating disorders, somatic disorders, anxiety, sexual disorders, and, especially, difficulty in developing intimate relationships (Copăceanu, 2018). In women, early sexual abuse has been associated with re-victimization in adulthood, as well as fear and suicidal tendencies (Beitchman et al., 1992). Sexual trauma varies in type and severity, and there are several phenomena that can be recognized as warning signs, both physical and psychological: unfounded fears (e.g., sleeping with the lights on), difficulty falling asleep due to symptoms such as evening migraines, trouble having restful sleep and muscle spasms, hypersensitivity to touch, cystitis, bruxism and tinnitus, back, hip, and leg pain, strong muscle contractions in the pelvic area, significant pain during sexual intercourse, vaginal cramps, dissociation during sexual acts or orgasms, disgust toward sex, toward foods with a consistency reminiscent of seminal fluid and phlegm, compulsive washing, memory gaps, exaggerated need for attachment, exaggerated tendency to isolate, sudden bursts of anger, hostility and aggression, self-harming behaviors, feelings of rejection toward one's own body, inability to build romantic relationships, promiscuity (Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, 2018). The use of pornography can be seen as impersonal sex, allowing the reduction of sexual impulses without the risk of engaging in intimacy and relationships. Avoidance of closeness and intimacy is common among survivors of sexual abuse, and many also have difficulty trusting and exhibit attachment traumas (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2023). These symptoms can be well understood when we consider, among other things, that there has been oral, vaginal, or anal penetration; the body has been subjected to forceful pressures and contortions; the victim has been forced to experience pleasure; and the victim has been threatened with death if resistance or telling someone about what happened. Bodily symptoms can be the immediate consequence of injury to body parts in the process of sexual assault.

They can also be caused by reactions to chronic stress that presses throughout the victim's life due to sexual trauma (Banzhaf, 2018). The negative experiences in the bodies of survivors and the sequences of reactions in the sexual sphere are deeply imprinted by experiences of sexual abuse. Sexual violence often leads to the development of psychosomatic disorders (Sator, 2016). The likelihood of a person experiencing suicidal or depressive thoughts increases after sexual violence. 94% of women who are sexually abused show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, 33% consider suicide, and 13% attempt suicide. Approximately 77% of sexual abuse victims experience moderate to severe suffering, a higher percentage than for any other violent crime (National Sexual Violence, Abuse, and Incest Network, 2020).

Although the adverse consequences of sexual abuse are well established, overcoming obstacles and achieving better outcomes than expected are possible through therapeutic methods; thus, resilience and post-traumatic growth can occur concurrently if resilience processes help victims find meaning and experience growth (Walker, Fouche, 2018).

### *Reconstructing Sexuality in Survivors of Sexual Exploitation Trafficking*

Every person is different, and every experience is unique. Survivors of abuse and sexual exploitation share many commonalities, but they also have aspects of their experiences that are individually unique to them. No two people have been hurt in exactly the same way, and no two people will heal in exactly the same way (Gray, 2023). The identity of victims is disrupted. Although it represents a physical and healthy presence here and now, primarily manifested through the perception of reality and the unconditional acceptance of one's existence, which is necessary for building and maintaining interpersonal relationships (Ruppert, 2021), survivors affected by sexual violence find it challenging to develop a burden-free and self-caring approach to identity and sexuality. Relational issues, avoidance of closeness and intimacy, persistent self-harm, revictimization, and harmful behavior towards

others are among the typical consequences. The resource of sexuality is lost as an opportunity to experience emotional and physical connection, liveliness, and sensuality (Buttner, 2020). Healing requires survivors to be able to express their suffering, to be heard, and taken seriously (Herman, 2019). Research on sexual assault shows that survivors face various sexual issues, including sexual dysfunction and a decrease in sexual satisfaction. Sexual avoidance also seems to be linked to sexual issues (Van Berlo, Ensink, 2000). Traumatic sexuality specifically refers to the reenactment of trauma in the sexual activities of adults, meaning how trauma and its impact unfold in the sexual domain and, therefore, to what extent the survivor experiences traumatic reactions during sexual activities (Gewirtz-Meydan, 2023). In a clinical sample of abused and non-abused women, abused women reported experiencing more guilt regarding sexual feelings and behaviors (Walser, Kern, 1996).

Previous research also supports the idea that women with a history of sexual abuse may experience sexuality as an act of physical submission in which they are controlled or control others (Maltz, Holman, 1987). Sex can be viewed as a behavior not guided by romantic ideals, such as love and passion, but as a permissive immoral activity in which one participates (Miller et al., 1995). Many women with a history of sexual revictimization may face greater challenges regarding sexuality and intimate relationships in general due to a loss of trust in men and/or intimacy-related issues (Classen, Palesh, Aggarwal, 2005). Traumatic experiences that are stored and expressed in the body, including sensations, emotions, and physical responses, can explain survivor's sexual difficulties. This is especially true when traumatic experiences, including unwanted or painful touching, are believed to be stored in the body as implicit memories and unpleasant sensations, affecting one's ability to experience sexual pleasure (Zolbrod, 2014). Issues may persist for years in some victims, including problems inhibiting arousal and desire responses (Van Berlo, Ensink, 2000).

Traumatic sexuality in survivors of sexual abuse moderates the link between sexual abuse and sexual outcomes. Traumatic sexuality can be measured by a unique set of sexual patterns related to the physical, cognitive, and emotional distortions of the survivor's approach to sex due to sexual trauma. Six major factors of traumatic sexuality have been documented: dissociation during sex, intrusiveness during sex, shame and guilt regarding sexual aspects, pleasure of the other during sex, interpersonal suffering, and hypervigilance during sex (Gewirtz-Meydan, Lassri, 2022). Various aspects of sexual contact, such as touching, nudity, flirting, oral or genital stimulation, any form of penetration, can be perceived as triggers for survivors, leading to feelings of re-experiencing past abuse, dissociation, and flashbacks during sex (Classen, 2005).

A qualitative metasynthesis was conducted to identify the essence of sexual trauma healing, and four domains of healing were identified: managing memories, relationship with others, seeking safety, and self-reassessment. The healing modalities in each domain reflected opposing responses. The dialectic process identified for each of the four domains includes evoking memories, regulating relationships with others, building a life as safe as possible, and restoring a sense of self (Wiley Periodicals, 2009). Another qualitative study examined the healing and recovery stories of 27 sexual abuse survivors. Three main themes emerged from their narratives: creating a coherent life narrative, the importance of turning points along the way, and developing supportive connections. The results of this study emphasize the importance of tailoring treatment and mental health services to survivors in their words, style, content, and form of storytelling (Anderson, 2007). Talking about sexual assault seems to be helpful for survivors (O'Donohue, Schewe, 2019).

### *Therapeutic Approaches*

Therapeutic approaches for the reconstruction of sexuality in women who have been trafficked and sexually abused represent a vital component of the recovery process. These

approaches are designed to help victims reconnect with their own sexuality. Available research suggests that therapists providing assistance need to be resourceful, sensitive, and creative to overcome these multiple challenges when attempting to establish a helping relationship with sexually exploited victims (Harper, Scott, 2005).

Therapists are encouraged to adopt realistic expectations, be patient, avoid rushing to solve the sexual issues of sexually exploited victims too early in the relationship, use an informal and flexible attitude with victims (Lefevre, Hickle, Luckock, Ruch, 2017), as well as a collaborative approach and joint decision-making, minimize their authority role, and strike a balance between care and control and between the need to protect victims and their right to make choices (Prior, 2023). Psychological treatment alone is only minimally effective in rehabilitating the sexuality of survivors, and therefore, the addition of sexual therapy is recommended (Almas, E., Benestad, 2021).

*Sex therapy* is a therapeutic strategy for recovering from sexual abuse, such as rape or sexual assault. Modern sex therapy often integrates psychotherapeutic and medical techniques (Bancroft, 2009). Before implementing sexual therapy techniques, in most cases, victims are given a physical examination, and relational and individual factors are explored. Sexual therapy is based on a combination of knowledge about sexual physiology and responses, as well as methods to modify responses. When victims explore their past experiences of sexual abuse, it is essential for therapy development that they place these experiences in the past. The focus shifts from the history of abuse to the story of sexuality on their own terms. Respect and safety must underlie all forms of treatment. Those who have experienced severe abuse are often vulnerable and interpret unclear signals as signs of danger. Those who have learned about sexuality through abuse often have an extremely low level of awareness of their own desires and needs (Almas, Benestad, 2021).

Subjective sensory competence is the foundation of personal sexual development, and

the senses themselves nourish an individual's desire and level of sexual arousal. The senses need to be made aware and trained to be used for the subject's service, as sexual abuse often leads to the use of senses to satisfy the needs of others. Sensate focus technique is central, modified by trauma theory, including understanding dissociation and the need to integrate memories at different levels: somatic, emotional, cognitive.

Traumatized victims need special attention to experiences of predictability, safety, and respect due to their history of violating these. Sex therapists need to be aware of the dissociation issue. Different dissociated parts may play different roles in the interaction between the victim and the therapist. Before delving into exploring the senses in sexual therapy, the woman's feelings about the sexual, sensual, and erotic culture around her are examined. She is encouraged to ask herself: "What does sexuality mean to me?" It offers her the opportunity to gain a broad spectrum of perspectives on the fact that sexuality exists within them (Weiner, Clark, 2017).

### *Restoring Sexuality*

Some people consider sexuality to be about performance, that someone must be a sexual object. Many have no consideration for themselves as sexual subjects with their own desires and needs. To move forward, it is necessary to clarify that there is no danger of abuse recurring. Treatment aimed at restoring sexuality is usually implemented when the traumatic experience has been processed, and a safe life situation has been established and consolidated. In working with sexually traumatized individuals, it is important to place additional emphasis on the here and now experience, as each sexual situation can easily send the individual who has suffered abuse back to the traumatic experience. The sight of the penis can evoke painful memories, as can the smell of seminal fluid; even a partner's naked body can trigger painful associations. Learning to focus on what they actually feel here and now during sensory focus is, therefore, a significant part of therapeutic work (Almas, 2021).

A victim of abuse may feel shame and guilt because their body responded sexually to stimulation during the abuse (Maltz, 2012). One of the major taboos is that they had a sexual response in the abusive situation and thus learned a pattern of sexual arousal that may include fantasies of violence and/or abuse (Almas, 2021). The general idea is that, because the body had a sexual response, this must have been willed by the victim. She needs to learn that the body can react without subjective participation, it can even react with orgasm during abuse. Some victims have never experienced sexuality on their own before the rape started. In these cases, we can use exploring their preferences through their senses and also develop and explore new sensory experiences for them to establish their own sexuality. One of the main goals of sexual therapy is to leave unwanted patterns behind and develop new ones (Laan, Everaerd, Evers, 1995).

Sexuality needs to be discovered, accepted, and appreciated. The central goal is for survivors to identify arousal responses as a here and now experience in a safe framework (Almas, 2021).

## **METODOLOGY**

### **Sex Therapy as an Approach to Addressing Sexual Trauma**

#### *General Objective*

To explore the effectiveness of sex therapy in facilitating the recovery and reconstruction of the sexuality of women survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse.

#### *Specific Objectives*

1. Analyze the specialized literature to identify the main aspects and challenges related to the sexual recovery of trafficked women.
2. Analyze therapeutic approaches aimed at eliminating the stigma related to the sexual responses of sexual abuse survivors.
3. Evaluate the role of sex therapy in rebuilding a positive and healthy relationship with one's own sexuality.

#### *Hypotheses*

Sex therapy is an effective therapeutic approach in facilitating the reconstruction of

sexuality and intimate relationships for sexually traumatized women.

Therapists specialized in sex therapy, adopting a sensitive and flexible attitude, contribute significantly to the recovery process of women survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse.

### *Research Procedure*

The research presented in this paper is based on a careful analysis of the specialized literature and relevant scientific articles in the field of reconstructing the sexuality of women survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse. The methodology used consisted of a comprehensive approach to the resources available in the field of sex therapy, sexual reconstruction, and intimate relationships in the context of sexually exploited victims. To achieve the proposed objectives, the research focused on the detailed analysis of numerous bibliographic sources, including books, articles, case studies, and academic reviews. Special attention was given to research addressing sexual therapy as an effective method in the recovery process of sexually traumatized women.

### *Variables*

*Independent:* The process of restoring sexuality

*Dependent:* Elimination of sexual stigma related to sexual responses, changes in the perception of sexuality and intimate relationships.

## **RESULTS**

The results of this research highlighted the crucial importance of sex therapy in facilitating the recovery and improving the mental health of women survivors. The literature analysis revealed the complexity of the process of reconstructing sexuality, emphasizing the need for a specialized and integrative approach. It was found that sex therapy provides an effective framework for overcoming dysfunctional mechanisms developed by survivors, including dissociation and unwanted patterns of sexual arousal. Through individualized approaches and a focus on relationships, therapists can

play an essential role in supporting women in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. This exhaustive literature analysis provides a significant perspective on the benefits of sex therapy and the need for a sensitive and personalized approach in the recovery process of sexually exploited women.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

Given that therapy is a key factor in facilitating recovery and improving mental health, this paper has investigated and highlighted the complexity of the process of reconstructing sexuality among women survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse. By examining the strong impact of sexual trauma and emphasizing its long-term effects, the paper argued for the need for a specialized therapeutic approach to support these vulnerable women, focusing on sex therapy as an effective therapeutic method. Survivors can develop dysfunctional coping mechanisms, including dissociation and the development of unwanted patterns of sexual arousal. The sex therapy model concentrates on individual aspects and relationships, considering the difficulties they may face in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships, and emphasizes the importance of a sensitive approach in their recovery. Individualized approaches, along with a focus on relationships and interactions, were highlighted as essential in supporting survivors in establishing and maintaining self-determined healthy relationships.

Drawing from many original articles, books, and review papers on this subject, this research demonstrated that through sex therapy, unwanted patterns can be left behind, and new ones can be developed, aiding in improving the mental health of survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse.

Although this research brought to light the importance of sex therapy in the recovery process of survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of the study. Firstly, the main source of data comes from specialized literature and relevant studies, and the lack of direct

empirical data collected through primary research methods may affect the generalization of results. This aspect could influence the direct applicability of conclusions to various contexts or populations. Secondly, variability in therapeutic approaches and individual experiences of survivors may introduce a degree of subjectivity in interpreting the results. Each person has a unique experience, and tailoring sex therapy to individual needs can influence outcomes.

The present research has opened an important perspective on the role of sex therapy in the recovery process of women survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse. However, there are ample opportunities for future research to make significant contributions in this field. Firstly, future research could delve into the diversity and complexity of individual needs of survivors, exploring how sex therapy can be more efficiently adapted to address these varied needs. Secondly, extensive empirical studies could be conducted, including quantitative data on the effectiveness of sex therapy in facilitating recovery and improving mental health. These studies could provide essential empirical data for validating the efficacy and practical applicability of sex therapy for this vulnerable population. Additionally, a deep investigation into the cultural and social aspects that may influence the receptivity and benefits of sex therapy could provide a broader understanding of the context in which these women undergo the recovery process. In conclusion, future research should continue to explore and expand knowledge in the field of sex therapy for women survivors of trafficking and sexual abuse, aiming to develop and adapt effective and sensitive therapeutic interventions to meet the individual needs of this vulnerable population.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this paper highlights the vital importance of sex therapy in the recovery process, emphasizing the need for a sensitive and individualized approach to support vulnerable women in the reconstruction of their sexuality after sexual trauma. It underscores

the need for the continued development of specialized therapeutic practices for this vulnerable population.

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