

Survivor-led and survivor-informed human trafficking research

Confronting inequalities in the research process

Othayonih Research



Comparing the structures

University model

- Hierarchical structure (PI, co-PI, RAs)
- Benefits concentrated at the top
- Using others' human capital a core activity

Trafficking model

- Hierarchical structure (pimp, bottom, stable)
- Benefits concentrated at the top
- Using others' human capital a core activity

**For survivors, both may be experienced as
exploitative processes**



Exploitation by any other name...

When survivors are viewed as “resources”

- Social & intellectual capital used to strengthen research proposals
- Social capital used to access other survivors
- Intellectual capital used to inform data collection instruments, qualitative coding and analysis, interpretation of findings
- Institutional rules prohibit compensation proportionate to value



What is actual empowerment?

Survivor-led

- Survivor is the PI or, at minimum, a co-PI
- Is hired as staff with full benefits
- Has major influence on project decisions
- Is listed as an author in publications, has access to data to develop future co-publications
- Costs are covered for national conference presentations



What is actual empowerment?

Survivor-informed

- Survivor(s) influence decisions about design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation
- Are compensated in proportion to the value of their contributions—can the project be done right without them?
- Are credited in publications and conference presentations if they wish



Major barriers to full empowerment

University/institutional rules:

- Only University personnel at certain levels can be PI or co-PI
- Institutional units not permitted to hire non-affiliated research staff, required to classify them as consultants
- Consultant compensation is capped if not affiliated with another academic institution
- Typically, NOT a funder's requirement



Survivor involvement in research

As PI or co-PI:

- Brings an important lens to the entire project
- Needs a good understanding of research methods, protection of human subjects in research
- Typically expected to have a Master's degree, at minimum
- But—even a PhD does not ensure equal status, influence, or compensation



Example: Great research partner

Dr. Lauren Martin, University of Minnesota,
2014 project *Mapping the Market for Sex with
Minor Trafficked Girls in Minneapolis*

- Made every effort to have me classified as PI
- Made every effort to compensate me at the highest possible rate

Despite her efforts:

- University would not allow me to be PI
- University limited the compensation she could give me



My investment in the project

Lauren could not compensate me for these activities:

- Developing research questions
- Developing the research design
- Writing the proposal
- Developing data collection protocols and the IRB application

I did them anyway to move the project forward, and she truly cared that I could not be “on the clock” for these stages of the project



Mapping the Market upside

Lauren made a huge effort to create benefits that mattered, ensuring that I had:

- A major role in coding, analysis and interpretation, and writing the report (all compensated)
- Full credit for co-authorship & contributions
- Co-presentations at conferences
- Access to project data and the right to develop publications as lead author



Why the survivor lens matters: Mapping the Market initial coding

Focused on the market structure

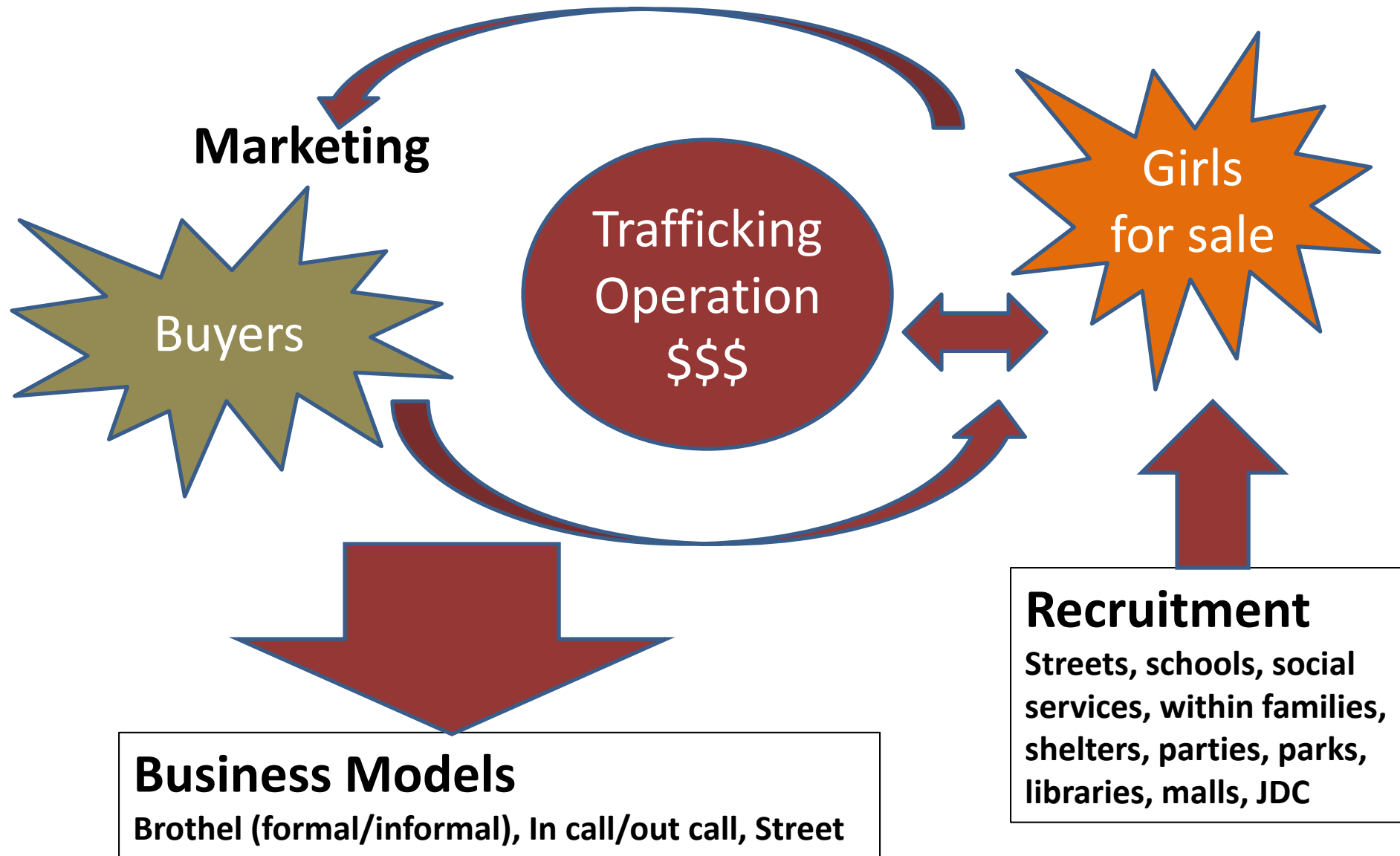
Coding within venues:

- Actor role (trafficker, facilitator, victim, buyer)
- Actor demographics
- Victim vulnerabilities

Our goal was to identify key strategies that would interrupt the market



Preliminary Visual: Market Structure



Through the survivor lens

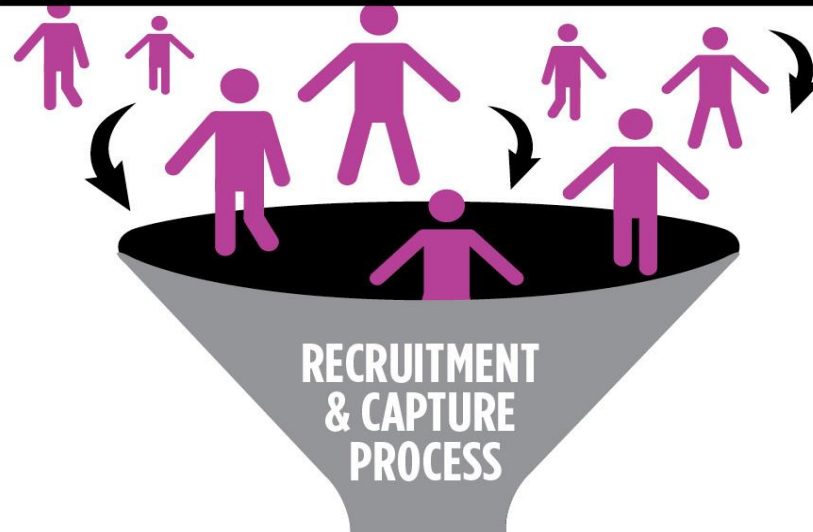
I saw different patterns that indicated processes:

- Juvenile sex trafficking as an extractive industry, similar to mining
- The trafficking process as a staged series of business activities: 1) accessing raw material, 2) processing to produce a range of products for various market segments via multiple business models, and 4) inventory control

Led to a graphic model, identification of demand as key priority



STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES:
RACISM GENDER BIAS POVERTY



How survivors can make a difference: De-pathologizing research questions

Consider the difference in these questions:

- How do survivors of human trafficking adjust following reunification with their children?
- How does the trafficking experience affect relationships between victims and their children?

The first locates the problem within the survivor, the second locates the problem within the trafficking experience.



How survivors make a difference: Trauma-informed data collection

- When participants are recruited through an organization providing them with support services, the survivor may feel indebted (coercion)
- Promoting research participation as “helping others” can trigger respondent PTSD
- Participants may over-disclose and experience psychological distress as a result
- Survivors on your team can reduce these risks of potential harm



Trauma-informed interview protocols

- Highly structured questionnaires can be distressing for survivor interviewers AND survivor respondents
- Can trigger memories of aggressive interrogations by police and/or traffickers
- Semi-structured interviews help survivor interviewers avoid feeling they are “controlling” the respondent
- Also allow “space” for survivor respondents to tell their story in their own way



Survivors as HT research interviewers

- Recognize important verbal clues and can probe appropriately
- Are highly sensitive to respondent distress, understand the need for compassionate check-in if respondents seem to over-disclose

Considerations:

- Need focused training on leading versus affirming, following the interview guide
- An experienced survivor can be invaluable as coordinator (guidance, debrief)



Challenges: Survivor researchers

PhD but not institution-affiliated

- Must choose: invest time and intellectual capital in developing research proposals “on spec,” vs. have no role in design decisions
- If funded, no guarantee of a specific role or compensation. If not funded, no guarantee of future inclusion in similar projects
- University personnel can (and do) use the survivor’s intellectual contributions to develop their own future proposals



Challenges: Survivor researchers

Even with a PhD and on staff, some have encountered:

- Assumptions that survivors are unable to be truly objective in HT research
- Having self-care strategies after trigger events interpreted as psychological instability
- Having professional status (researcher) decline following disclosure, survivor identity involuntarily becoming primary
- Being limited to subordinate roles



Take-home: Respect is an action, not a feeling

Important ways to empower survivors in research include:

- Financial compensation commensurate with value to the project
- Public recognition as an important contributor to the research process
- Opportunities to expand and practice research skills



One possibility that would matter

Hands-on, paid research internships to build skills needed in the research design process, mentoring by experienced researchers (not RAs!)

- Developing measurable research questions
- Determining data collection methods that fit the research questions and respondent population
- Full protection of human subjects in research, developing applications for IRB review
- Science-based survey design, coding of qualitative data



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