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COMBATING TRAFFICKING AS AN ADVANCED GENERALIST SOCIAL WORKER

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Abstract

Drawing upon personal, professional, and academic expertise in the areas of runaway, homeless, and street youth, as well as domestic sex trafficking, the author of this article provides readers with a raw and transparent look into to how she, as an Advanced Generalist Social Worker, was led to join the anti-trafficking movement. The complexities of domestic sex trafficking are illustrated through a story that demonstrates the repeated and cyclical trauma that is frequently endured by those subjugated to sex trafficking. Furthermore, the various dimensions of Advanced Generalist Social Work Practice that are needed to address domestic sex trafficking are discussed.

Keywords: Advanced generalist, social work, human trafficking, domestic sex trafficking, anti-trafficking movement

COMBATING TRAFFICKING AS AN ADVANCED GENERALIST SOCIAL WORKER

My journey into Advanced Generalist Social Work (Lewandowski, GlenMaye, & Bolin, 2004) has not been straightforward. Personal experiences led me to professional opportunities of working as a Street Outreach Services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013) Worker at the age of sixteen and soon after I began pursuing my formal education as a professional Social Worker. Looking back, I could have never imagined the great value of my training in Advanced Generalist Social Work.

Though I had already spent a handful of years working with runaway and homeless youth (RHY) who had been sexually exploited and trafficked in various forms, my heart truly became dedicated to combating domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) in the spring of 2000. As a survivor-leader and a Street Outreach Worker for a not-for-profit, non-governmental-organization (NGO) serving children, youth, and families, I had partnered with the Midwest Longitudinal Study of Homeless Adolescents (MLSHA) Project (Countryman-Roswurm, 2012; Wenzl, 2013; Whitbeck, 2009) and spent much of my time tracking, brokering community services to, and facilitating research interviews with young people. One particular afternoon, a typical day spent meeting with youth participants as usual, I went to a run-down apartment complex located on the cities' main drag that runs north and south – an area known for homelessness, drug exchange, and sexually exploitive activity. I had gone there to pick up an African American female who, at 15 years of age and pregnant, had regularly received Street Outreach Services and had actively participated in the MLSHA since the start of the Project. As I parked my car to the north of the complex, I noticed the young woman walking towards me. Suddenly, I heard a loud voice yelling after her and before I knew it she was stopped by and began arguing with her “boyfriend” who I knew was acting as some form of pimp to her.

Time seemed to slow and yet rapidly consume me as within seconds the interaction escalated. I felt I was in quicksand and yet I knew I needed to do something fast. I reached into my back seat to grab my cell phone out of my purse, but before I could dial the number the young woman had opened my car door. In an attempt to escape from the hands of her large-statured “boyfriend” her thin white undershirt had been halfway ripped from her body revealing her protruding five months of maternity and braless breasts. She paused for a moment with my car door open – looking back towards the man who served as her attacker before sitting down into the front car seat – giving him just enough time to catch up to her and virtually rip off my car door in one full sweep. Before I knew it, the man was on top of her and I in the front seat of my small vehicle – hitting, scratching, biting, spitting on, and cursing at both of us. Time stood still and observers watched saying nothing.

After what seemed like an eternity, an offbeat officer arrived. Fatefully, he had driven past the scene on his way home and had decided to stop based on the large crowd gathering to watch the incident. After struggling with our attacker and cuffing him in the back seat of the police vehicle, the officer discussed the situation with the young woman and I. He explained that due to lack of legislation at the time, if the young woman did not testify, her perpetrator would be released from jail within 24 hours. The officer also shared that even though she was under the age of 18 years, the abuse by the hands of her “boyfriend” would not fall under domestic violence law because of the acknowledgement that she was involved in “prostitution.” In response to such information, the young woman shared with me that she would not testify. She shared her love, commitment, and loyalty to her “boyfriend” and even more so, she shared that with me that “this is the most control I’ve ever had in terms of who I have sex with.” She went on to tell me, “You see – my dad had sex with me, my dad let my brothers have sex with me, and my dad let my uncles and his friends have sex with so he could get his drugs and alcohol.”

Within this situation my professional path as an Advanced Generalist Social Worker was laid and fully embraced. All of my life experiences were consolidated in a manner that both illuminated and validated the full and complex nature of sexual exploitation and trafficking and I gained a more thorough understanding that, while DMST can and does occur with people from all walks of life, treacherous childhood trauma acts as a breeding ground of vulnerability for trafficking predators to prey. After all, the young woman had been commoditized and groomed from the day she was born. Her perpetrator saw and preyed upon this vulnerability. She had been incubated, born and bred in trauma, and her trauma continued throughout her subjugation to DMST. A road to recovery, not to mention prosperity – movement from a victim to a survivor to a leader – would be long and difficult. Thus, I recognized that I could no longer continue to address the issue of sex trafficking with this young woman, or the many other children and youth at-risk of or subjugated to human trafficking through my typical roles as a Street Outreach Worker. If I wanted to truly combat trafficking, I had to do more. I had to practice within the broader range and skill of an Advanced Generalist Social Worker.

Combating any and all forms of human trafficking as an Advanced Generalist Social Worker begins with an understanding and acceptance of oneself and others as multidimensional systems that both require and deserve holistic care (Countryman-Roswurm, 2012; Lewandowski, GlenMaye, & Bolin, 2004). Building on this, combating trafficking as an Advanced Generalist Social Worker takes a foundation of ethics, knowledge, and skill to guide, direct, and inform anti-trafficking efforts that reflect cultural competency, promote social justice, and empower all people (Countryman-Roswurm, 2012; Lewandowski, GlenMaye, & Bolin, 2004). With this, it means that throughout all processes of practice (e.g. prevention, assessment, intervention, follow-up, evaluation, etc.) and at all levels of practice (e.g. micro, mezzo, or macro) recognizing and utilizing a creative multidimensional and collaborative multidisciplinary approach that bridges the gap between direct practice, research, and policy (Countryman-Roswurm, 2010; Countryman-Roswurm, 2013; Lewandowski, GlenMaye, & Bolin, 2004).

Combating human trafficking as an Advanced Generalist Social Worker includes developing professional multidisciplinary response teams, organizing and facilitating community action efforts, and providing public awareness and professional training. Addressing the repeated and cyclical trauma associated with trafficking means providing trauma-informed and survivor-centered prevention, assessment and early identification, intervention, recovery, prosperity, follow-up, and evaluation services including, but not limited to data management and research that can assist in the development of evidence-based practices; assessment and early identification; immediate shelter/housing; physical/sexual health examinations and treatment; mental and emotional health treatment; and legal support/representation. And it also involves assisting in human rights advocacy, perpetrator prosecution, legislation development and other systemic movements that reduce the demand and create the breeding ground for trafficking to occur in the first place (Countryman-Roswurm, 2010; Countryman-Roswurm, 2013).

Reflecting upon the multidimensionality of my work as an Advanced Generalist Social Worker in the anti-trafficking movement, I must admit that at times it would be much easier to assume just one clear-cut role. But, because all forms of life, and all issues are complex and multi-faceted in nature, the work in which I am privileged to engage in would not be nearly as rewarding or effective. I am honored that I have been able to assume the role as case worker, clinical therapist, and advocate as I walked alongside survivors as they became leaders; that I have assisted in the development and coordination of programs, written grants, and facilitated research; and that I have organized community action teams, provided training and education, and partnered with others to develop legislation that changes the very paradigms and contexts in which human trafficking is able to flourish (Wenzl, 2013; Wenzl & Wistrom, 2013). With all of this, the lines of where one process or level of Advanced Generalist Social Work practice begins and the other ends is not always clear – but I have accepted that it doesn't need to be. As an Advanced Generalist Social Workers combating trafficking ones role is professional but, various, complex, and artistic in nature. Thankfully, we don't have to do it alone.

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