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Systematic Review

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A Systematic Review of Consent, Coercion, and Compassion: Understanding the Responses of Trafficked Women

同意、胁迫与同情的系统评价：理解被贩运妇女的反应

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research: is to examine the complex interplay of consent, coercion, and compassion in shaping the lived experiences and responses of trafficked women — a pervasive global issue with profound human rights and social implications.

Methodology: Following the PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive and systematic literature search was conducted, resulting in the inclusion of 33 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2024. Records were identified through multiple academic databases, screened for eligibility, and evaluated against predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. A qualitative synthesis focused on the factors that entrap women in human trafficking networks and the continuum between perceived voluntary participation and coercive circumstances.

Keywords:

Human trafficking, trafficked women, consent, coercion continuum, compassionate care, trauma-informed rehabilitation; socioeconomic vulnerability, gender-based power imbalances; survivor support interventions; legal assistance strategies; community-bas

关键词：人口贩运、被贩运妇女、同意、胁迫连续体、富有同情心的护理、创伤知情康复；社会经济脆弱性、基于性别的权力不平衡；幸存者支持干预；法律援助策



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Main Findings: The findings reveal that sociocultural determinants, including economic vulnerability, gendered power imbalances, and institutionalized coercion, critically facilitate the recruitment and retention of women in trafficking contexts. Identified rehabilitation strategies include trauma-informed care, comprehensive legal assistance, and community-based reintegration programs. This review highlights the critical need to balance accountability mechanisms for perpetrators with survivor-centered, compassion-based support systems for victims.

Applications: These findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, practitioners, and advocacy groups seeking to develop more effective, victim-sensitive anti-trafficking interventions and support frameworks.

Novelty/Originality: This review contributes a novel conceptual lens by critically analyzing the blurred boundaries between consent and coercion, and by emphasizing the role of compassion as both a protective and empowering factor in the recovery and reintegration of trafficked women, as this aspect remains underexplored in existing literature.

摘要：

研究目的：

本次系统评价的目的是研究同意、胁迫和同情在塑造被贩卖妇女的生活经历和反应方面的复杂相互作用——这是一个普遍存在的全球性问题，具有深远的人权和社会影响。

研究方法：

根据 PRISMA 指南，我们进行了全面而系统的文献检索，最终纳入了 33 篇发表于 2020 年至 2024 年期间的同行评审文章。研究记录通过多个学术数据库进行筛选，符合条件后，根据预先设定的纳入和排除标准进行评估。定性综合研究重点关注导致女性陷入人口贩运网络的因素，以及感知到的自愿参与与胁迫环境之间的连续性。

主要发现：

研究结果表明，社会文化决定因素，包括经济脆弱性、性别权力失衡以及制度化的胁迫，对贩运环境中女性的招募和留任至关重要。已确定的康复策略包括创伤知情护理、全面的法律援助以及以社区为基础的重返社会项目。本研究强调，在针对施暴者的问责机制与以幸存者为中心、以同情心为基础的受害者支持系统之间取得平衡至关重要。

应用价值：

这些发现为寻求制定更有效、更注重受害者的反贩运干预措施和支持框架的政策制定者、从业人员和倡导团体提供了宝贵的见解。

创新性/独创性：

本评论通过批判性地分析同意和胁迫之间的模糊界限，并强调同情心在被贩运妇女的康复和重新融入过程中作为保护和赋权因素的作用，贡献了一个新颖的概念视角，因为这一方面在现有文献中仍未得到充分探索。

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking (HT) is a highly profitable and transnational criminal enterprise, generating billions of

euros annually. The substantial financial gains associated with this illicit activity serve as a key motivator for traffickers and complicit networks to sustain these

exploitative practices. According to the International Labor Organization and Walk Free Foundation (2018), approximately 24.9 million people are affected by forced labor and human trafficking globally.

Over the past two decades (2004–2020), human trafficking has emerged as a critical non-traditional security threat, particularly in Southeast Asia (Haney et al., 2020). Recent data indicate that more than 50% of trafficking victims are women who are primarily exploited through sexual trafficking, as reported by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023).

Sex trafficking, often described as a form of “modern slavery,” affects nearly 40 million individuals worldwide who are trapped in complex systems of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and coerced marriages (ILO & Walk Free Foundation, 2018). Despite the severity and global scale of this issue, academic discourse on human trafficking remains underdeveloped, particularly with regard to the nuanced dynamics of consent, coercion, and victim agency.

Fedina et al. (2019) emphasized the challenges in understanding human trafficking due to the ambiguous nature of consent and the widespread underreporting of such cases. Furthermore, the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report (2023) highlights that, despite the existence of legislative frameworks such as the Anti-Trafficking in Persons and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act 2007 (ATIPSOM), gaps in implementation, corruption, and weak enforcement mechanisms significantly undermine their effectiveness.

These findings underscore the urgent need for comprehensive research and robust policy implementation to address the multifaceted dimensions of human trafficking (HT). The research objective was selected based on its relevance to the persistent and complex nature of HT, particularly from a social science perspective. The selection criteria included the prevalence of trafficking cases, ensuring that the study focuses on issues that are both significant and widespread.

Additionally, the availability of robust empirical data, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative studies, was a critical factor in providing comprehensive insights into the lived experiences of trafficked women. The potential for practical application of these findings was also a key criterion in the study’s design, with the aim of informing evidence-based interventions and policy reforms that enhance rehabilitation and reintegration outcomes for survivors.

The findings are intended to offer actionable insights for policymakers, social workers, and researchers working in the field of human trafficking. By examining the experiences of sex-trafficked women following rescue and during their stay in shelter homes, the study highlights key challenges in their rehabilitation and the risk of re-exploitation.

Understanding how traffickers negotiate consent and coercion provides critical insights into the psychological manipulation and threats used to control victims, which can inform the development of more effective legal frameworks and protective measures. Furthermore, the study advocates for a comprehensive and compassionate approach to victim support services, including trauma-informed care, legal assistance, and community-based interventions.

Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of adopting balanced strategies that hold perpetrators accountable while ensuring survivor-centered, compassionate responses for victims. These insights contribute to evidence-based policy recommendations and highlight the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to address the complex realities of human trafficking.

2. Literature Review: Concepts of Consent, Coercion and Compassion

Sex trafficking constitutes a multibillion-dollar sector within the global criminal economy, driven largely by economic disparities and the persistent demand for commercial sexual services. According to US Department of State (2025), approximately USD 150 billion is generated annually through forced labor and sexual exploitation, with a significant portion attributed to sex trafficking. In the context of trafficking, the concept of “consent” is complex and frequently misunderstood, as it often exists within a continuum shaped by coercion, manipulation, and socio-economic vulnerabilities.

While traffickers may present seemingly consensual arrangements to obscure the exploitative nature of their actions, the reality is that many women are lured through deceptive promises of employment, education, or improved living conditions. Structural inequalities, including poverty, limited access to education, and gender-based discrimination, further compromise women’s capacity to provide genuine, informed consent.

Bassil (2019) highlights that coercion in human trafficking often operates under the guise of deception, with traffickers employing tactics such as feigned affection and financial dependency to recruit women into sex or labor trafficking. These manipulative strategies frequently leave victims with little or no choice but to comply with traffickers’ demands, as the threat of severe repercussions looms over any attempt at resistance.

In contrast, Kennedy et al. (2007) argue that physical abuse is rarely the primary means of control in sex trafficking; rather, psychological coercion and deceptive promises are more commonly used to entrap victims in commercial sexual exploitation. Deception and false assurances of better opportunities often serve as entry points into exploitative situations. Cultural and language barriers further exacerbate victims’ vulnerability and isolation, limiting their access to support and reinforcing their subjugation. Moreover, traffickers deliberately isolate victims from their social support networks,

intensifying their dependence and restricting any potential avenues for escape. This strategic isolation plays a central role in maintaining control and perpetuating exploitation.

The concept of “compassion” – or, more notably, the lack of it – is evident in how legal and social systems respond to trafficked survivors. Hamid (2022) argues that this absence of compassion not only re-victimizes trafficked women but also discourages them from seeking help or escaping exploitative situations.

Similarly, Oram (2019) emphasize trauma-informed care as a critical expression of compassion in the treatment of sex trafficking survivors. Survivors often endure severe physical and psychological abuse, and their recovery requires a long-term, sensitive, and patient-centered process grounded in non-judgmental support.

In a similar vein, Gibbons et al. (2020) assert that compassion within trauma-informed care is essential in empowering survivors to regain control over their lives. Importantly, this compassion extends beyond the alleviation of immediate suffering, focusing instead on fostering resilience, agency, and long-term recovery.

While research on sex trafficking has expanded in recent years, significant gaps remain in the literature. Existing studies often emphasize macro-level analyses, such as trafficking routes and legal frameworks, while paying limited attention to the lived experiences of survivors and the socio-cultural dynamics that perpetuate trafficking.

Furthermore, the role of digital technologies in both facilitating and combating trafficking remains underexplored. Quantitative data on trafficking are frequently inconsistent and incomplete, while qualitative studies often encounter challenges in accessing and accurately representing vulnerable populations. These limitations underscore the need for a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge to inform more effective, evidence-based policies and interventions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. The PRISMA Method

This article presents a systematic literature review aimed at analyzing and synthesizing empirical studies to expand current knowledge on the specified research topic. The research followed the systematic, transparent, and replicable methodology proposed by Vrontis and Christofi (2021) to address the research questions formulated at the outset of the study.

The methodology was structured around four research questions. The PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, as outlined by Page et al. (2021), were adopted to ensure methodological rigor. The process included four key stages: (a) identification of relevant studies, (b) screening for relevance, (c) eligibility assessment, and (d) inclusion and exclusion based on

predefined criteria. This was followed by qualitative synthesis and evaluation of the findings (see Figure 1).

The PRISMA method was employed to identify and select articles for final analysis, with a focus on the development of research on human trafficking (HT) within the social sciences. Scholars, including Moher et al. (2009), recognize PRISMA as a robust framework for examining the evolution of HT-related research in this field.

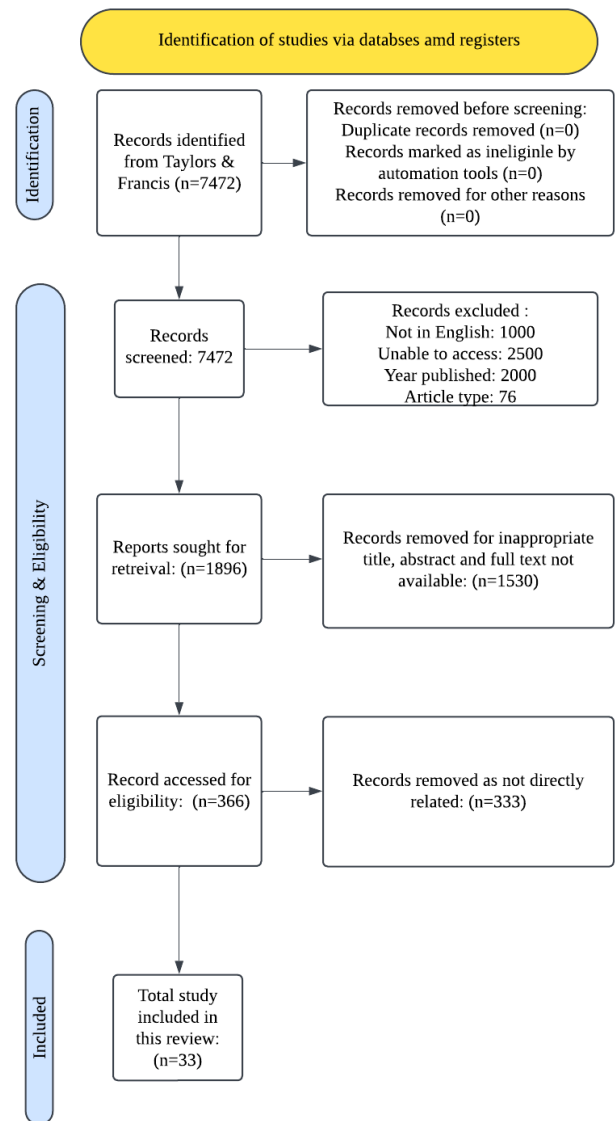


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Chart. Source: Filtering and selection process of the PRISMA flow stream (Page et al. 2021)

Identifying appropriate keywords for this systematic literature review involved multiple iterations. Initial attempts using broad search terms often yielded inconsistent or irrelevant results, while overly specific terms limited the retrieval of relevant prior studies. To address this challenge, the search strategy was refined to ensure alignment between the search algorithm and the research questions, which guided the subsequent screening process.

Ultimately, an effective combination of search terms was developed through iterative testing across multiple databases. To further enhance the comprehensiveness of the literature search, a snowballing technique, incorporating both backward and forward citation tracking, was employed.

The primary objective at this stage was to expand the pool of relevant literature by identifying articles that either cited or were cited by the core studies included in the initial search. Following the selection process, backward snowballing was conducted to a defined depth, and relevant references were added during the data extraction phase to enrich the analytical depth and contextual understanding.

The first step in the literature review involved identifying eligible research articles. The articles included in this review were sourced from the Taylor & Francis database, with a focus on studies published between 2020 and 2024 within the social sciences. The notable increase in human trafficking (HT) research during this period can be attributed to a combination of interrelated factors reflecting the growing urgency of addressing this global issue.

Heightened global awareness — driven by increased media coverage, high-profile advocacy movements such as #MeToo, and international anti-trafficking campaigns — has significantly elevated both public consciousness and scholarly interest in HT. In parallel, the expansion of corporate responsibility initiatives, which urge businesses to address trafficking risks within their supply chains, has stimulated academic inquiry into ethical labor practices and corporate accountability.

Finally, increased funding from governments and international organizations has enabled a broader and deeper exploration of trafficking-related issues.

Together, these developments highlight the multifaceted nature of human trafficking and underscore its growing prominence in both academic discourse and policy agendas over the past few years.

3.2. Descriptive Analysis

This section presents a descriptive analysis of sex trafficking, focusing on the key themes identified across the reviewed articles to support a comprehensive evaluation of the literature. The 33 peer-reviewed studies included in this review were published between 2020 and 2024, reflecting the increasing academic interest in sex trafficking, as illustrated in Figure 2.

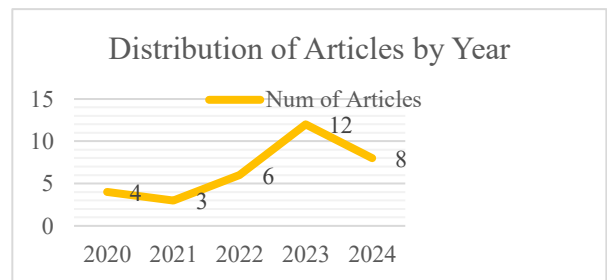


Figure 2. Distribution of Articles by Year (authors' design)

In 2020 (n = 4) and 2021 (n = 3), the research primarily addressed trauma experiences, systemic failures, and regional trafficking dynamics. By 2022 (n = 6), the focus expanded to include victim-blaming attitudes and coercive tactics used by traffickers. The year 2023 (n = 12) marked a peak in scholarly output, with an emphasis on healthcare responses, survivor-centered approaches, and systemic reforms aimed at addressing trafficking.

Establishing the research objectives	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To systematically examine the reported lived experiences of sex-trafficked women post-rescue, with a focus on their rehabilitation processes and risk of re-exploitation, as presented in the existing literature. To analyze how the concepts of consent and coercion are represented and negotiated in the narratives and case studies of sex-trafficked women across published studies. 	
Setting the inclusion criteria	
<p>Inclusion Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer reviewed articles from 2018 to 2024 Focus on HT (particularly sex trafficking); must address consent, coercion, or compassion within Malaysia or Southeast Asia. Qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods studies; empirical data or theoretical studies. English language publications or studies available in English translation. Studies focusing on female victims of trafficking, including research on coercion, consent, and interventions. 	<p>Exclusion Criteria</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Studies that do not focus on sex trafficking or HT; studies focusing on male victims or labor trafficking. Non-peer-reviewed studies, opinion pieces, editorials, and theoretical papers without empirical data. Studies with poor methodology, inadequate sample sizes, unclear design, or high risk of bias. Non-English language studies or studies with unreliable translations. Studies that do not engage with the key themes of coercion, consent, or compassionate care in trafficking contexts. Studies not focused on Malaysia or Southeast Asia unless they offer relevant comparative insights.
Discussing the search outcomes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Validating data coding includes comparing the coding outcomes Re-examining recoded articles Ensuring the reliability of the inter-rater assessments. 	

Figure 3. Summary of the SLR process. Source: Modified from Nolan & Garavan (2015)

In 2024 (n = 8), research began to explore trauma-informed care, the role of digital technologies in both facilitating and combating trafficking, and innovative frameworks for survivor support. This chronological trend underscores the growing scholarly engagement with the evolving complexities of sex trafficking and highlights the shift toward more holistic and victim-sensitive research approaches.

This systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted in accordance with a structured methodology adapted from Nolan and Garavan (2015), which emphasizes transparency, rigor, and replicability in the review process (Figure 3). The SLR framework guided the identification, screening, and synthesis of relevant studies, ensuring a comprehensive and evidence-based analysis of the interplay between consent, coercion, and compassion in sex trafficking contexts.

The pie chart presented in Figure 4 further illustrates the methodological distribution of the studies included in this systematic literature review (SLR). It highlights the diversity in research approaches and provides insight into how different methodologies have contributed to the understanding of key themes, particularly consent,

coercion, and compassion, in the context of sex trafficking.

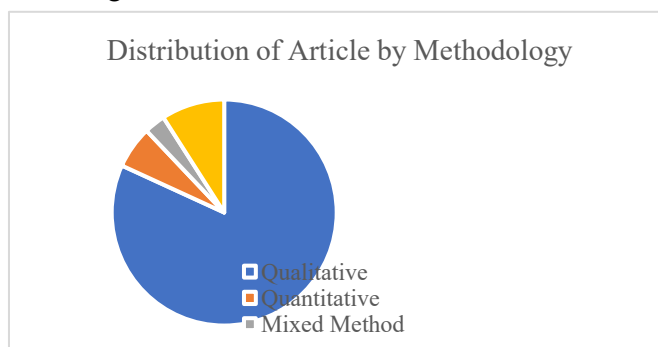


Figure 3. Distribution of articles by methodology (authors' design)

The reviewed studies were distributed as follows: 27 qualitative studies, 2 quantitative studies, 1 mixed-methods study, and 3 desktop reviews. This methodological spread reflects a strong emphasis on qualitative inquiry, which is particularly valuable for exploring the complex and often subjective experiences of trafficked individuals.

Table 1. Exploring the lived experiences of sex-trafficked women following their rescue and during their time in shelter homes, emphasizing their rehabilitation and the risk of relapse into exploitation (compiled by the authors)

#	Authors	Year	Title	Research Methodology	N	Findings
1.	Kaitlin Casassa, Gwen England, and Sharvari Karandikar	2023	“I Needed People to Tell Me No:” Exploring How Participants in a HT Specialty Docket Affect Survivors’ Sex Trafficking Experiences of Trauma Bonding.	Qualitative (CBPR Phenomenological)	19	Impact of Supportive Relationships: The survivors highlighted that the love and support fueled by the docket staff significantly contributed in aiding the survivors to manage their trauma bonds. Diverse Perspectives on Program Changes: The research also shed light on how diverse opinions on changes happened at the specialty docket. The ex-survivors from the docket expressed their concern about how the current leniency will cloud the healing session.
2.	Irani Machado da Silva and Anuradha Sathiyaseelan	2019	Emotional needs of women after rescue from sex trafficking in India	Qualitative (Phenomenological Approach)	10	The most important theme that emerged was the survivor’s desire to have their emotional needs met. This covers the sub-themes of acceptance, respect, understanding, and the ability to develop trust in those around them. These are the crucial aspects for their recovery and reintegration into society. The research also highlighted the challenges that survivors encounter

						after being rescued. These include a lack of education and job opportunities, which hinder their ability to start anew. The survivors expressed a need for guidance and resources to help them overcome these obstacles.
3.	Tricia Ong, David Mellor & Sabrina Chettri	2019	Multiplicity of Stigma: Experiences, Fears and Knowledge of Young Trafficked Women in Nepal	Qualitative	6	This research covers how the trafficked women face multiple stigmas post-trafficking as it is deep-seated in societal and religious practices. This adds up to menstrual stigma, untouchability, seclusion, and restrictions on touch and sight, especially in some hard group settings.
4.	Frances Recknor, Robin Mason, Danielle Jacobson, Emma Kelly, Frances Montemurro, Rhonelle Bruder & Janice Du Mont	2023	Challenges in Supporting Domestically Sex-Trapped Persons: In-depth Interviews with Service Providers	Qualitative	15	The research highlights the structural obstacles that hinder service professionals from aiding in the healing and recovery process. These challenges include insufficient funding, lack of appropriate housing, and issues with health care access, among others.
5.	Amelia Wagner, Sarah Lockwood, Amy Farrell, Arlos Cuevas, Jennifer O'Brien, Rebecca Pfeffer, Jaclyn Kolnik, Alisa Lincoln	2024	Understanding the Retrospective and Current Health Care Needs and Service Experiences of Adult Survivors of Minor Sex Trafficking	Qualitative	35	Adverse health care experiences before, during, and after sex trafficking led to a lack of trust and confidence in health care systems among adults. Recommendations are offered to help overcome barriers to meeting health care needs and enhancing health care experiences for survivors of minor sex trafficking.
6.	Stephanie Elliott, C. Emma Kelly, Danielle Jacobson, Frances Montemurro, Rhonelle Bruder, Robin Mason, and Janice Du Mont	2023	Identification of Domestically Sex-Trapped Persons in Social Service Settings in Canada: A Qualitative Study	Qualitative	15	Providers identified sex-trafficked individuals using both common and unique indicators, drawing on tools established the formal practices or access to identify these individuals, leading to reliance on ad hoc processes that may perpetuate myths and stereotypes. To better support them, tailored training and resources should be provided while incorporating reflexivity to combat unconscious biases. Future research could enhance the effectiveness of the identification processes.
7.	Rebecca Pfeffer, Kelle Barrick, Terrick Galvan	2023	Barriers and Facilitators to Leaving a Trafficker: A Qualitative Analysis of the Accounts of People Who Have	Qualitative	158	The circumstances under which study participants exited trafficking situations were highly diverse. Many encountered significant challenges in their efforts to leave, and their methods of departure reflected these complexities.

			Experienced Trafficking	Sex			Despite these hurdles, most participants successfully escaped their traffickers. The study identified two primary methods of leaving trafficking situations: active and passive. Hence, these findings are taken into consideration for the stakeholders in fostering the autonomy and informed decision-making, to strengthen the survivors throughout their exiting process.
8.	Sharmila Parmanand	2022	The Many Faces of Care: A Comparative Analysis of Anti-Trafficking Approaches to Domestic and Sex Work in the Philippines	Discourse Analysis and Collaborative Research	50		This situation heightens the vulnerability of sex workers and unintentionally legitimizes sucking dry in other female-dominated jobs by framing prostitution as the “unacceptable replacement.” This research underscores that efforts by women’s rights groups to evoke sympathy by redefining sex work as victimhood have reinforced the divide between “good” and “bad” women, further marginalizing women who work as sex workers as a result of political advocacy. Additionally, the paper suggests that anti-trafficking organizations should frame sex workers together with the intimate labor as they further advocate for the rights-based interventions.
9.	Heather Evans	2020	The Integral Role of Relationships in the Experiences of Complex Trauma in Sex people who have experienced trafficking	Qualitative (Retrospective Study)	15		This research focuses on the viewpoints of the survivors’ voices and wisdom. This method focuses on defining and recommending functional interventions and support systems according to the patients’ needs. This research also highlights the consequences of trafficking with hindrance in reintegration. The research also looks out for different approach models that not only focus on trauma informed care but models that also takes responsibility toward stabilizing and enhancing the quality of life of the survivors.
10.	Uwafiokun Idemudia, Nnenna Okoli, Mary Goitom, and Sylvia Bawa	2021	Life after Trafficking: Reintegration Experiences of HT Survivors in Nigeria	Qualitative	13		The findings indicate that survivors’ capacity in securing their financial and social stability is crucial for their associating into new communities and significantly influences their post-trafficking lives. Therefore, it is essential for governments and NGOs to carefully

consider the receiving community when designing reintegration programs. This approach would help mitigate risks such as stigma that often arise in origin communities, while also addressing the socio-economic needs of survivors in new communities. Additionally, the assumption that vocational training leading to low-wage jobs is a sufficient solution to HT needs to be re-evaluated.

11.	Victoria H Chen, Esther L Beauchemin, Isabella T Chuan, Annum Sadana, Lolayemi Olulola-Charles, Julia E Leschi and Veronica Ades	2023	Sex Trafficking in New York City and Vulnerabilities to Re-Trafficking	Qualitative (Retrospective)	87	The research identified key vulnerabilities among re-trafficked individuals, who often had histories of lacking legal documentation and enduring childhood sexual and physical exploitation. Additionally, nearly half of the participants reported ongoing emotional effects from their trafficking experiences, regardless of whether they had been re-trafficked.
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Table 2. Understanding how consent and coercion are negotiated by traffickers in the experiences of sex-trafficked women (compiled by the authors)

#	Authors	Year	Title	Methodology	N	Findings
1.	Haezreena Begum Abdul Hamid	2022	Sex Traffickers: Friend or Foe	Qualitative	29	Individuals convicted of trafficking or prosecuted as traffickers can sometimes serve as “helpers” to women migrating in the quest for better prospects. Many participants in the study perceived their traffickers as regular members of their professional network and evaluated them based on their actions. Some participants mentioned experiencing acts of kindness and generosity from their traffickers, despite also suffering harm. Additionally, many women felt that their traffickers provided them with access to higher-paying work compared to other available options.
2.	Haezreena Begum Abdul Hamid	2023	Shelter Homes: Safe Haven or Prison?	Qualitative	41	These findings align with other research that highlights clear similarities between the experiences of trafficked individuals in semi-carceral institutions, such as shelter homes, and those in immigration detention centers and prisons. Trafficked women are recognized as victims and should be treated with dignity and respect. However, Malaysia's current shelter home system is highly inadequate due to limited space, poor living conditions, strict rules, a lack of activities, and insufficient medical care and counseling for victims.
3.	Ravi Mahalingam and Jatwan Sidhu	2021	Inside the Crime of Sex Trafficking in Sabah	Qualitative	18	Driven by economic aspirations, refugees from the Philippines and Indonesia, alongside lax oversight due to

						corrupt enforcement personnel, assemble in particular areas at specific times. These individuals intersect because of their mutual desire for money and profits. Sex traffickers and corrupt officials are primarily motivated by the pursuit of quick and easy money, while victims' aspirations for better-paying jobs in Sabah make them vulnerable to exploitation in the colloquial, which includes the demand for sex labor and services. This acts as drivers of sex trafficking in Sabah.
4.	Elise Juraschek, Alexander Legg, and Chitra Raghavan	2024	The reconsecration of the self: A qualitative analysis of sex trafficking survivors' experience of the body	Qualitative	79	This research paper presses on the need of a theoretical framework to grasp the mind-body relationship with regard to commercial sex and sex trafficking (CSST). This research focuses on compassionate interventions related to the survivors' bodies and self-perception. The findings of this research highlight how easily women are manipulated and trapped, showing a false dichotomy in claims of empowerment. Women who believed they were making empowered choices when opting for a job (commercial sex).
5.	Jonathan Alschech, Cheryl Regehr, Carmen H Logie and Michael C Seto	2020	Contributors to post-traumatic stress symptoms in women sex workers	Qualitative	314	This study underscores various factors including the trafficked survivors' racial identity, experiences of discrimination (done by police) and the situation where sex is commercialized contributes to the post-traumatic stress symptoms reported by the survivors.
6.	Inderjit K Basra, Tatum Kenney, Shandra Forrest-Bank, Lisa K. Zottarelli and Chitra Raghavan	2023	Predatory Helpfulness: An Empirical Framework to Identify Fraudulent Tactics Used by Pimps to Recruit and Commercially Sexually Exploit Young Girls and Women	Pilot Study	19	The study provides strong evidence supporting the Predatory Helpfulness framework as a useful tool for understanding the dynamics of sex trafficking. It highlights how traffickers manipulate relationships to exploit vulnerable individuals. The findings suggest that legal actors can better identify victims of sex trafficking by using the terminology and narratives provided by survivors, aligning with federal legal definitions. This approach can enhance the effectiveness of interventions and support for victims. Overall, the research emphasizes the importance of recognizing the preparation and employing tactics employed by traffickers, which can inform prevention strategies and victim support systems.
7.	Tatum Kenney and Chitra Raghavan	2024	Predatory Helpfulness: A Replication (and Expansion) Study Examining Grooming and Recruitment Tactics in Sex Trafficking	Qualitative	59	The research explores how women are coerced into sex trafficking through grooming tactics, recruitment tactics, and impact on social dynamics. Hence, this research sheds light on the importance of recognizing grooming tactics used by traffickers. The tactics used often involve building trust and good rapport with the survivors, making more room for exploitation. This insight

						is crucial to develop frameworks and interventions in preventive measures. The paper also highlights how the traffickers exploit women within social networks, making it essential to address these dynamics in prevention efforts. This finding underscores the need for community awareness and education.
8.	Jay S. Albanese, Rose Broad, David Gadd	2022	Consent, Coercion, and Fraud in HT Relationships	Desktop Research	-	The picture acknowledges the brutality and limited protections from violence that the often exploited endure. It calls for a more sophisticated acknowledgment from the respective stakeholders, emphasizing the need to address the factors highlighted.
9.	Kendra Doychak	2022	Coercive Control and Trauma-Coerced Attachment in Commercial Sexual Exploitation: A Mixed-Method Examination	Mixed-method	68	The finding stipulates that women are often manipulated and go through harsh forms of coercive control, which often lead to domestic violence context. Greater levels of coercive control were associated with heightened trauma-bonding attachment. Due to the unforeseen, detachment did not correlate with trauma-coerced attachment. This study offers critical guidelines for evaluating coercive control and trauma-coerced attachment in sex trafficking contexts, with implications for empirical research, clinical practice, and legal frameworks.
10.	Kendra Doychak and Chitra Raghavan	2020	No voice or vote:” trauma-coerced attachment in victims of sex trafficking	Qualitative	14	The study highlights the complicated conversation between survivors and the perpetrators, showing that multiple points contribute to situations where victims feel unready, scared, or reluctant to leave the relationship. In view of the personal experiences of women in these circumstances, their choices and attachments can be grasped better as necessary or logical for survival, rather than evaluating them from an outsider's moral viewpoint with preconceived notions.
11.	Haezreena Begum Abdul Hamid	2023	Consent in a Trafficking Paradigm: Exploring the Conflation between Sex Trafficking and Voluntary Sex Work	Desktop Research	-	The study’s findings reveal that the “consent” of trafficked individuals has been overlooked, ignored, denied, and disregarded during the post-trafficking phase, which includes acts of rescue, shelter, and prosecution.

Table 3. Developing a comprehensive and compassionate approach to victim support services (compiled by the authors)

#	Author	Year	Title	Methodology	N	Findings
1.	Zedny Immatong	2024	The victims who refused to be rescued: the lived experiences of victims of sex trafficking	Qualitative (Phenomenology)	5	The participants viewed their shift from being coerced victims to individuals who maintain their victimization as a profession. This change in perception is shaped by economic advantages, the deceit of pimps, and the influence of local culture.

2.	Ashley Hedrick McKenzie, Barbara Friedman, and Anne Johnston	2022	Adolescents' victim-blaming responses to narratives about sex trafficking: strategies for curriculum development	Quantitative	250	A large chunk of the survivors experienced victim-blaming and slut-shaming after seeing the texts. The survivors felt that they were not aware of the signs of trafficking.
3.	Marlaine M Monroig	2020	Reducing revictimization: counseling survivors of HT	Qualitative	7	The study underlines the experiences of counselors to offer valuable awareness for both current and future counselors and the authorities that work with the HT survivors. Due to the scarcity on the HT and mental health, this research sheds light on a comprehensive understanding on this topic as well as the challenges and future research that can be conducted on clinical treatment, training, research and policy.
4.	Arduizur C Richie-Zavaleta, Augusta M Villanueva, Lauren M Homicile, Liane A Urada	2021	Compassionate Care: Going the Extra Mile: Sex people who have experienced trafficking? Recommendations for Health care Best Practices	Qualitative	22	Participants suggested enhancing health care practices to meet their medical needs with compassion and care, emphasizing the importance of building trust, rapport, and instilling hope. Integrating empathetic care strategies for treating ST patients may enhance communication between health care providers and patients while fostering opportunities for effective intervention.
5.	Juhi Jain, Mackenzie Bennett, Mark D Bailey, Daniel Liaou	2022	Creating a Collaborative Trauma-Informed Interdisciplinary Citywide Victims Services Model Focusing on Health Care for HT Survivors	Qualitative	214	The main findings highlight the necessity of a comprehensive citywide evaluation, leveraging patient advocates, promoting collaborative care, and strengthening community alliances. These efforts seek to provide secure housing, transportation support, legal identification, health care coverage, job training, survivor engagement, peer mentorship, and integrated medical-legal assistance.
6.	David R Hodge	2024	Assisting Victims of HT: Strategies to Facilitate Identification, Exit from Trafficking, and the Restoration of Wellness	Desktop Research	-	This research focuses on how social workers recognize trafficking victims, assist them in escaping trafficking, and support their psychological recovery. Essentially, this article seeks to provide social workers with the tools to champion basic human and civil rights for some of the world's most exploited people.
7.	Mikaela Andersson and Karin Örmon	2024	Health care Providers' Experiences in Identifying and Caring for Women Subjected to Sex Trafficking: A Qualitative Study	Qualitative	9	Health care providers play a vital role in recognizing and bolstering HT victims. The providers are supposed to vigil toward the sign of HT, even if they had a small chance to communicate with the victims themselves. Healthcare providers are supposed to create a safe and supportive environment essential in identifying and supporting HT

victims. They need to be alert to the signs of trafficking, as victims often have few chances to communicate. Creating a safe and supportive environment is crucial due to the vulnerable position of these individuals in health care settings. Effective collaboration among health care providers and external networks, such as law enforcement and social services, is vital for comprehensive care and information sharing. These findings underscore the importance of vigilance, safety provision, and teamwork in addressing HT within health care contexts.

8.	Danielle Dimuzio	2020	Same Wheel, New Direction: Toward a Sex Trafficking-Specific Framework of Care	Qualitative	18	The research highlights how mental health and sex trafficked victims are interconnected. This includes PTSD, anxiety, and depression and is quite challenging to treat the survivors. Healthcare providers that use methods such as CBT, EMDR, and DBT are not sufficient for the critical needs of the victims. Most of the sex-trafficking victims tended to stress the importance and the need for specialized treatment or approach. The approach should contain trafficking-related information, ways to adapt the treatment methods and how collaboration works for social service providers to ensure the treatment works.
9.	Ankita Chakraborty and Dipa Dube	2024	Criminal Justice Responses to Sex Trafficking in West Bengal, India: A Representative Study from Victims' Lenses	Qualitative	40	The research indicates that current anti-trafficking strategies, mainly centered on "raid-to-rescue" tactics, fail to adequately meet the unique needs of sex-trafficked survivors. The authors emphasize the necessity for legal and procedural reforms to make the criminal justice system more responsive to the needs of victims.
10.	Kathleen M. Preble, Andrea Nichols and Ashley Cox	2022	Working with Survivors of HT: Results from a Needs Assessment in a Midwestern State	Quantitative	422	The study highlights the need for the centralization of aids, connections, mental health aids, and trauma-informed care approach. The findings apply broadly by offering a state-level framework, emphasizing regional differences, and providing scalable solutions for housing, legal aid, mental health, and training.

4. Results

The 33 studies included in this review were published between 2020 and 2024 and involved sample sizes ranging from 5 to 422 trafficked women. Additionally, three desktop reviews were incorporated to provide contextual background. This paper pursues two primary objectives: (1) to systematically examine the lived

experiences of sex-trafficked women following rescue, with a focus on rehabilitation processes and the risk of re-exploitation; and (2) to analyze how the concepts of consent and coercion are conceptualized and negotiated in published research on sex trafficking. The discussion is grounded in empirical findings and critical literature,

with an emphasis on trauma recovery, socio-cultural stigmatization, and institutional responses.

Five overarching themes emerged from the analysis:

1. Stigmatization and socio-cultural reintegration
2. Institutional spaces as sites of cardiovascular protection
3. Consent under duress: Grooming, dependency, and emotional coercion
4. State and structural coercion: Law, policy, and bureaucratic violence
5. Compassionate and survivor-centered interventions.

4.1. Stigmatization and Socio-Cultural Reintegration

Survivors of human trafficking often encounter significant challenges throughout their recovery and reintegration processes. These challenges include unresolved psychological trauma, persistent emotional distress, and the pervasive effects of social stigma and labelling. Cultural taboos surrounding sexuality, menstruation, and societal notions of moral purity and virginity further exacerbate the marginalization experienced by survivors (Ong, 2019).

Although trauma-informed care is increasingly recognized as a vital support mechanism, its inconsistent application can lead to re-traumatization or disengagement from formal support systems (Ismail et al., 2021; Litam & Neal, 2022). Such inconsistencies undermine trust in service providers and intensify the fragility of the recovery process.

This form of stigmatization not only affects women's mental health but also creates barriers to accessing essential healthcare and social services. Survivors' fear of judgment and social rejection often traps them in a cycle of silence and suffering, discouraging them from seeking assistance.

Effective intervention and reintegration strategies must therefore address these cultural stigmas and promote a more inclusive and supportive societal environment for survivors (Ong, 2019).

4.2. Institutional Spaces as Sites of Cardiovascular Protection

The term "institutional" in this context often refers to shelter homes and immigration detention centers, which are ostensibly designed to protect survivors but frequently function as carceral spaces resembling penal environments. These facilities impose strict controls on survivors' movements, restrict personal freedoms, and offer minimal psychosocial support (Reid, 2014).

This form of carceral protectionism can exacerbate trauma rather than alleviate it, as survivors are subjected to conditions that mirror those experienced during trafficking. In addition, weak inter-agency coordination further increases survivors' vulnerabilities and highlights the urgent need for an integrated, trauma-informed approach to post-rescue care.

4.3. Consent under Duress: Dependency and Emotional Coercion

The concept of consent in sex trafficking is complex and frequently obscured by subtle, coercive grooming processes. Perpetrators often manipulate survivors through deception, emotional dependency, and false promises of affection – tactics that distort survivors' perception of agency and further complicate the notion of voluntary participation (Kenney & Raghavan, 2024; Doychak & Raghavan, 2020).

These grooming strategies foster a deep sense of dependency, making it extremely difficult for survivors to recognize their exploitation or resist their perpetrators. Understanding how consent is negotiated under such coercive conditions requires careful consideration of the socio-economic constraints and survival pressures that shape survivors' decisions (Immatong, 2024; Hamid, 2022).

4.4. State and Structural Coercion: Law, Policy and Bureaucratic Violence

Legal and policy frameworks are often designed with the intent to combat human trafficking, yet, paradoxically, certain provisions replicate coercive patterns that blur the distinction between protection and punishment. Strict immigration controls, prolonged legal procedures, and the enforcement of anti-trafficking measures frequently result in the detention, deportation, or legal marginalization of survivors (Hamid, 2023).

Policies intended to safeguard trafficked individuals must be critically examined to ensure they do not inadvertently contribute to further trauma or exploitation (Hamid, 2023).

4.5. Compassionate and Survivor-Centered Interventions

Survivors' recovery and risk of relapse are closely linked to the nature and quality of the interventions they receive. Effective approaches include trauma-informed care, culturally sensitive support, and active survivor participation in decision-making processes. However, prevailing institutional paradigms often fail to incorporate these principles, instead relying on paternalistic models that neglect survivors' agency and discourage cooperation (Richie-Zavaleta et al., 2016; McKenzie et al., 2022).

Implementing compassionate care practices — such as building trust, fostering rapport, and prioritizing emotional safety — can significantly enhance the effectiveness of healthcare and social services for survivors. Long-term and sustainable reintegration requires a shift toward empathetic and compassionate frameworks that recognize survivors as active agents in their own recovery (McKenzie et al., 2022; Richie-Zavaleta et al., 2016).

4.6 Strengths, Limitations and Implications of the Findings

This review presents several key strengths. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on perspectives from criminology, psychology, public health, and feminist legal theory to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of sex trafficking. The regional focus on Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, contributes localized insights to a field that has been largely dominated by Western-centric narratives.

Furthermore, the inclusion of survivor-centered literature enhances the understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics that influence experiences of coercion and consent in trafficking contexts.

However, this review also has limitations. The absence of primary data from survivors, due to ethical and accessibility challenges, limits the depth and experiential richness of the analysis. Additionally, inconsistencies in quantitative findings across the reviewed literature, as well as the underrepresentation of certain countries within Southeast Asia, constrain the generalizability of the results.

The implications of these findings are both practical and scholarly. There is an urgent need for policy and legal reforms that recognize the complexities of coercion and the fluid, often contested, nature of consent within trafficking contexts. Institutions responsible for victim rehabilitation, particularly shelter homes, must shift toward trauma-informed, rights-based care models that emphasize dignity, autonomy, and long-term psychosocial well-being.

Public awareness campaigns should actively challenge victim-blaming attitudes and enhance societal understanding of the manipulative tactics employed by traffickers. Importantly, future research should adopt participatory and feminist methodologies that position survivors as co-creators of knowledge, rather than passive subjects of study.

Further exploration of under-researched areas, such as digital trafficking, systemic re-traumatization, and survivor-led recovery pathways, has the potential to significantly enrich both academic discourse and real-world interventions in the field of human trafficking.

4.7 Academic Contribution

This research advances academic discourse on human trafficking (HT) by synthesizing contemporary literature and offering novel insights into the socio-cultural dynamics of consent, coercion, and compassion. It uniquely foregrounds the lived experiences of sex-trafficked women — particularly within the Southeast Asian and Malaysian contexts — and highlights the dual role of traffickers as both perceived protectors and perpetrators of exploitation. This perspective challenges conventional victim-perpetrator binaries and disrupts simplistic narratives of agency and victimhood.

By critically examining the blurred boundaries between agency and exploitation, the study contributes a nuanced feminist criminological framework that questions dominant legal and institutional discourses. It

calls for more context-sensitive interpretations of trafficking experiences, grounded in the voices and realities of survivors.

Furthermore, this study deepens the discourse on post-rescue care by emphasizing the critical importance of trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and survivor-led interventions. It not only illuminates the psychological and emotional needs of survivors but also critically examines the structural shortcomings of shelter systems and victim support services, which often reproduce institutional control rather than facilitate healing.

Through its interdisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from criminology, sociology, law, and public health, the research bridges academic silos and advocates for integrated, cross-sectoral solutions that align policy, practice, and survivor agency in a cohesive response to human trafficking.

Importantly, this research introduces a regional perspective that is often underrepresented in global trafficking discourse, thereby enriching the literature with localized insights from Malaysia and the broader Southeast Asian context. These contributions offer a valuable foundation for future participatory research and inform the development of ethically grounded policies, survivor-centered frameworks, and sustainable strategies for social reintegration and justice.

5. Discussion

This systematic review highlights the lived experiences of trafficking survivors following rescue, shedding light on the interrelated themes of trauma, stigma, institutional care, and the complex negotiation of consent. The findings indicate that physical and psychological recovery does not necessarily coincide with successful reintegration into society. Survivors' healing is often hindered by emotional distress, social exclusion, and structural violence.

In many cases, survivors transition from one coercive environment to another under the guise of protection — a phenomenon that reflects carceral logic. Institutions intended to provide safety frequently impose rigid controls and offer minimal psychosocial support. As a result, these spaces often fail to address the deep-rooted trauma experienced by survivors (McCarthy, 2018).

Despite the increasing recognition of trauma-informed care as essential in post-trafficking support, the literature consistently identifies gaps in its effective implementation. Survivors frequently report a lack of culturally sensitive and compassionate responses, particularly in areas involving moral stigmatization, such as sexuality and notions of purity, which remain deeply entrenched in many societies. These narratives not only hinder survivors' reintegration into society but also affect their acceptance within families and communities. As a result, survivors may become reluctant to engage with institutional support services. Reintegration processes are further complicated by prevailing social and legal paradigms that question survivors' agency and choices.

Survivors who experienced emotional grooming and financial dependency often reconsider their initial decisions, as these were made under conditions of constraint rather than genuine consent. Loomba (2017) supports this view, emphasizing that many survivors' decisions were shaped by emotional manipulation rather than autonomous choice, effectively functioning as survival strategies under conditions of limited agency and coercive relationships.

On the other hand, many interventions inadvertently replicate the coercive tactics previously used by traffickers, including immigration raids, arbitrary detentions, and deportations. Despite being framed as rescue operations, these actions often instill a sense of fear and helplessness among survivors (McCarthy, 2018). Such institutional practices not only retraumatize survivors but also challenge the simplistic victim-agent dichotomy by placing survivors in a continuous state of threat and control (Hamid, 2022).

Filling these gaps requires a paradigm shift from paternalistic and rescue-driven models to trauma-informed, survivor-centered approaches. Interventions that are grounded in survivors' experiences and cultural realities, involve them in decision-making processes, and support both their economic and emotional autonomy are more likely to lead to sustainable reintegration outcomes.

By centering survivors' voices and perspectives, the risks of relapse and retraumatization can be significantly reduced. In conclusion, this review demonstrates that post-rescue efforts involve more than physical extraction; they require sustained support in navigating emotional crises, rebuilding trust, and overcoming institutional and structural barriers that persist after trafficking.

Ultimately, addressing sex trafficking demands a sustainable and ethical approach that prioritizes women's empowerment, compassion, and respect for survivor agency – moving away from coercive and containment-based practices toward holistic, rights-based interventions.

6. Conclusion

This study conducted a systematic literature review to synthesize existing research on sex trafficking, identify key thematic patterns, and develop a conceptual framework for future inquiry. A comprehensive search was performed using relevant keywords across academic databases, including Taylor & Francis, Emerald Insight, and ResearchGate. After applying predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, 33 peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2024 were selected for in-depth analysis.

The findings are organized into two main thematic areas: (1) the lived experiences of sex-trafficked women, with a focus on the complex interplay between consent and coercion; and (2) interventions and tools designed to prevent and respond to sex trafficking.

6.1. Recommendations

Developing tailored training programs and resources for service providers is essential to ensure effective support for sex trafficking survivors. The implementation of trauma-informed care (TIC) in healthcare and social services is critical to guarantee that survivors receive compassionate, respectful, and contextually appropriate support.

Training initiatives should emphasize the development of empathy, a deep understanding of trauma, and practical skills for delivering individualized care. For instance, equipping healthcare providers with the ability to recognize indicators of trafficking and apply trauma-informed principles can significantly enhance the quality of care delivered to survivors.

Similarly, social service providers must be equipped with the knowledge and tools necessary to address the multifaceted needs of trafficking survivors, including mental health services, legal advocacy, housing assistance, and vocational rehabilitation. By strengthening support systems through targeted training and integrated service delivery, survivors can access holistic, survivor-centered care that supports long-term recovery and successful reintegration into society.

Advocating for policy reforms to strengthen the protection and support of trafficking survivors is essential. Enhancing enforcement mechanisms and institutional accountability ensures that traffickers are held legally responsible for their crimes. Legal frameworks should be strengthened to reinforce anti-trafficking legislation, improve victim protection measures, and guarantee access to comprehensive support services, including legal aid, healthcare, and safe housing.

For example, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in the United States provides a comprehensive model encompassing prevention, prosecution, and protection — components that can inform policy development in other regions. However, effective anti-trafficking responses require not only robust laws but also consistent and rights-based enforcement.

This includes specialized training for law enforcement personnel, prosecutors, and judges to handle trafficking cases with sensitivity, cultural competence, and technical expertise. Equally important, policies must prioritize survivor-centered support systems, such as emergency and transitional housing, trauma-informed medical care, mental health services, and legal advocacy, to facilitate recovery and reintegration. By strengthening both legal frameworks and implementation practices, governments can create a more supportive and just environment for survivors while ensuring greater accountability for perpetrators.

Establishing interdisciplinary teams and community-based partnerships is essential for addressing the multifaceted nature of sex trafficking. Effective communication and coordination among stakeholders are critical to align efforts toward shared goals and ensure a cohesive response. Collaborative initiatives

should include regular interagency meetings, joint training programs, and the sharing of resources and best practices. Community partnerships play a vital role in raising public awareness, expanding access to support services, and creating integrated networks of care for survivors.

Effective collaboration among law enforcement agencies, healthcare providers, social service organizations, and community groups enhances the overall capacity to identify, assist, and protect trafficking victims. For instance, interdisciplinary teams can develop comprehensive, individualized care plans that address the medical, psychological, legal, and social needs of survivors.

Furthermore, community partnerships contribute significantly to prevention by educating vulnerable populations about trafficking risks and providing accessible resources and safe alternatives. By fostering sustained interdisciplinary collaboration, stakeholders can deliver a coordinated, survivor-centered, and evidence-informed response to sex trafficking.

7. Research Perspectives

Future research should prioritize the exploration of digital technologies in both facilitating and combating human trafficking, as well as the socio-cultural dynamics that perpetuate vulnerability to exploitation. Quantitative studies should aim to generate consistent, reliable, and comprehensive data to support evidence-based policy development. At the same time, qualitative research must adopt ethical and methodologically sound approaches to effectively access, engage, and represent vulnerable populations without risking further harm.

Furthermore, longitudinal investigations are needed to assess the long-term outcomes of rehabilitation and support interventions, with the goal of identifying best practices and areas requiring improvement. By building on the findings of this study, researchers can deepen the understanding of human trafficking (HT) and contribute to the development of more effective, survivor-centered, and contextually responsive strategies to address this pervasive global challenge.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, J.; methodology, J., and N.K.T.; software, N.K.T.; validation, J., and N.K.T.; formal analysis, J.; investigation, J., and N.K.T.; resources, J.; data curation, J.; writing-original draft preparation, all authors contributed equally; writing-review and editing, N.K.T.; visualization, N.K.T.; supervision, J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

With reference to the above, I would like to inform you that your application for research ethics clearance was discussed in the 13th Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-medical) meeting4/2024 on December 2, 2024. Your application for research ethics has been approved. UNIMAS/TNC(PI)/09-65/02 Jld.2 (34)

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and other individuals and institutions that are perceived as inappropriately influencing the presentation and interpretation of results, reporting of research findings, and the decision to publish this article.

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