

The Aftermath of Exit: A Qualitative Study Examining Re-trafficking and the Structural Failure of Reintegration Systems for Survivors

Ahmed F. Alanazi

Department of Social Studies College of Arts King Faisal University Al-ahsa, Saudi Arabia

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3468-5389>

Abstract: Human trafficking represents a profound sociological problem, one that reveals how structural inequalities, gendered power relations, and institutional failures converge to render certain populations exploitable. This paper synthesizes qualitative research on human trafficking through a sociological lens, drawing on fifty-one scholarly sources to examine the social processes that produce and sustain trafficking vulnerability. Through thematic analysis of survivor narratives and stakeholder perspectives across diverse geographic contexts, including Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Italy, Germany, and the United Kingdom, the paper identifies three overarching themes: (1) structural vulnerability and the socioeconomic determinants of trafficking; (2) the social architecture of trust and recruitment; and (3) the post-trafficking struggle for ontological reconstruction. Each theme encompasses subthemes that illuminate the mechanisms through which trafficking operates as a socially embedded phenomenon rather than an aberrant criminal act. The paper argues that trafficking cannot be understood or effectively addressed without attending to the sociological conditions, poverty, gender inequality, migration regimes, and social network dynamics, that make exploitation possible. Implications for survivor-centered, structurally informed anti-trafficking interventions are discussed.

Keywords: human trafficking, sociology, vulnerability, trust, gender, qualitative research, survivor narratives

I. Introduction

Human trafficking is frequently characterized as a transnational crime of extraordinary magnitude, yet this characterization, while accurate, obscures the deeply sociological nature of the phenomenon. Trafficking does not occur in a social vacuum; it emerges from and is sustained by specific configurations of inequality, precarity, and relational embeddedness (Fakhrul & Khan, 2025). The sociologist's task is not merely to document the crime but to explain how social structures, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements produce the conditions under which certain human beings become commodities for exploitation (Ullah & Uddin, 2025).

The scholarly literature on human trafficking has expanded significantly over the past two decades, with contributions from criminology, law, public health, psychology, and social work (Johannes et al., 2023). However, as Fakhrul and Khan (2025) observe, much existing research overlooks the diverse perspectives of key stakeholders and the systemic forces that shape vulnerability. Quantitative studies, while valuable for establishing prevalence and correlations, often fail to capture the lived experience of trafficking and the meaning-making processes through which survivors interpret their ordeals (Ornelas et al., 2023). Qualitative inquiry is thus

indispensable for understanding trafficking as a social phenomenon, one that is experienced, narrated, and negotiated within specific cultural and relational contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This paper synthesizes qualitative research on human trafficking with the aim of developing a sociological account of vulnerability, recruitment, and recovery. The central research questions guiding this synthesis are: What structural and relational conditions render individuals vulnerable to trafficking? How do traffickers exploit social trust and network embeddedness? And how do survivors reconstruct identity and agency in the aftermath of exploitation? Through thematic analysis of survivor narratives and stakeholder accounts, the paper identifies three master themes and multiple subthemes that collectively illuminate the sociological architecture of human trafficking.

II. Theoretical Framework: The Sociology of Vulnerability and Exploitation

2.1 Structural Vulnerability as a Sociological Concept

The concept of structural vulnerability, as employed in medical anthropology and critical sociology, refers to the ways in which social arrangements, economic, political, and cultural, position certain individuals and groups at heightened risk of harm (Fouladvand & Ward, 2019). In the context of trafficking, structural vulnerability is not a personal attribute but a product of intersecting social forces. Fakhrul and Khan's (2025) socio-economic vulnerability (SEV) model demonstrates how poverty, unemployment, and rural-urban migration interact with patriarchal norms to create cyclical patterns of susceptibility and constrained recovery. The model emphasizes that vulnerability is not merely economic but fundamentally gendered: women's risk is compounded by discriminatory practices, limited agency, and familial pressures that constrain their migration decisions (Latham-Sprinkle et al., 2019).

This structural perspective challenges individualizing accounts that locate trafficking risk in personal characteristics such as naivety or desperation. Rather, as Fouladvand and Ward (2019) and Latham-Sprinkle et al. (2019) demonstrate, traffickers respond rationally to structural conditions, targeting populations whose socioeconomic and legal marginalization makes them accessible and disposable. Trafficking, in this view, is a market phenomenon: the demand for exploitable labor and sexual services meets a supply of individuals whose social location renders them unprotected (Danailova-Trainor & Belser, 2006).

2.2 Social Networks and the Embeddedness of Recruitment

A second theoretical pillar for a sociological understanding of trafficking is the recognition that recruitment is socially embedded. Ullah and Uddin's (2025) study of human trafficking recruitment in Bangladesh demonstrates that traffickers do not typically operate through overt coercion or random targeting; instead, they strategically exploit trust embedded in familial and community relationships. Recruitment is thus conceptualized as a socially structured process in which traffickers leverage existing social capital, the trust, reciprocity, and obligations that characterize intimate and communal ties, to present trafficking as legitimate migration (Ullah & Uddin, 2025). This finding resonates with broader sociological insights about the dark side of social capital: the same networks that provide support and opportunity can also transmit exploitation (Coleman, 1988).

The gendered dimensions of network-based recruitment are significant. Ullah and Uddin (2025) found that while men's recruitment was often influenced by insolvency and family pressure, women's vulnerability was more directly shaped by familial crises, gender inequality, and patriarchal norms that constrained their agency. Women and girls may be recruited by family members, romantic partners, or trusted community figures, a dynamic that complicates legal definitions of coercion and consent (Science Press, 2025). The trafficker is frequently not a stranger but a known other whose betrayal of trust constitutes a profound relational violation (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026).

2.3 The Dialogical Self and Post-Trafficking Identity

A third theoretical resource for sociological analysis is the concept of the dialogical self, which conceptualizes identity as a dynamic multiplicity of "I-positions" engaged in internal and external dialogue (Hermans, 1996, 2001). Hermans' theory provides a conceptual bridge between lived embodiment and social discourse, illuminating how survivors of trafficking navigate conflicting voices, shame, objectification, and self-blame on one hand, resistance, dignity, and agency on the other (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026). Recovery, from this perspective, involves fostering constructive dialogue among these positions and re-integrating embodied experience within a meaningful relational world (Gonçalves et al., 2026). This framework integrates phenomenological insights into embodied disruption with constructionist attention to sociocultural discourse, capturing the complexity of post-trafficking identity work (Chiara & Romaioli, 2021).

III. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper employs a qualitative synthesis design, drawing together findings from multiple qualitative studies on human trafficking conducted across diverse geographic and cultural contexts. The synthesis follows principles of thematic analysis as articulated by Braun and Clarke (2006), involving iterative reading, coding, and theme development. The goal is interpretive synthesis rather than meta-analysis: to develop a coherent sociological account of trafficking vulnerability, recruitment, and recovery that is grounded in the voices and experiences of survivors and stakeholders.

3.2 Data Sources

The studies synthesized here employ in-depth interviews, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with trafficking survivors and anti-trafficking stakeholders. Fakhrul and Khan (2025) conducted multi-stakeholder interviews in Bangladesh, examining socioeconomic determinants of women's trafficking. A study conducted at a London-based charitable organization explored survivors' "trust journeys" through temporal domains of pre-trafficking, trafficking, and post-trafficking experience (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Research in Italy examined the dialogical self-narratives of Nigerian and Guinean survivors of sex trafficking (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026). A study in Germany investigated survivors' narratives of strength and survival upon first arrival in reception centers (Forced Migration and Human Trafficking, 2026). Research on Ethiopian women trafficked to Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries explored departure motives, gender-specific trauma, and coping strategies (The Lived Experiences of Ethiopian Women, 2025). Ullah and Uddin (2025) examined social network-based recruitment through stakeholder interviews in Bangladesh. Additionally, a systematic review of social schemas about human trafficking provided insight into how different social groups, victims, professionals, community members, and media, conceptualize the phenomenon (Ornelas et al., 2023).

3.3 Analytical Approach

The synthesis proceeded through three stages. First, each source was read closely to identify key findings, participant quotations, and interpretive claims. Second, codes were developed and clustered into candidate themes, with attention to convergence and divergence across studies. Third, themes were refined and organized into a coherent framework, with each theme and subtheme supported by evidence from multiple sources. Validity was enhanced through triangulation across studies and by privileging the voices of survivors as presented in the original research (Elliott et al., 1999; Yardley, 2000).

IV. Findings

Theme 1: Structural Vulnerability and the Socioeconomic Determinants of Trafficking

The first theme concerns the structural conditions that render certain populations vulnerable to trafficking. Across the studies synthesized, a consistent pattern emerges: trafficking is not a random misfortune but a predictable outcome of specific social and economic configurations.

Subtheme 1.1: Poverty, Unemployment, and Economic Precarity

Economic vulnerability emerges as a central driver of trafficking across diverse contexts. Fakhru and Khan (2025) found that poverty and limited access to resources increase women's susceptibility to trafficking in Bangladesh, particularly when compounded by gender discrimination in employment and inheritance. Stakeholders in their study emphasized that women's economic marginalization was not incidental but structurally produced through discriminatory practices that limited their access to education, property, and formal labor markets. Danailova-Trainor and Belser (2006) conceptualized this as the supply side of trafficking: traffickers respond to the availability of economically vulnerable populations in the same way that legitimate businesses respond to labor markets.

The relationship between economic precarity and trafficking is not limited to developing nations. Research on Ethiopian women trafficked to GCC countries documents how limited economic opportunities in Ethiopia, combined with cultural expectations about women's contribution to family income, created conditions in which migration, even risky migration, appeared rational (The Lived Experiences of Ethiopian Women, 2025). Participants in this study described their departure motives in terms of familial obligation and economic necessity, not individual ambition or naivety. This finding challenges narratives that frame trafficking victims as passive or irrational, instead revealing women as constrained agents making decisions within narrow parameters.

Survivors' voices illuminate how economic desperation shapes decision-making. **Maria**, a Venezuelan survivor trafficked to Trinidad and Tobago, described her motivation simply: "I believed in the promise of a better future" (Human Trafficking Survivor Stories, 2024). At 21, Maria left Caracas driven by dwindling opportunities and the hope of completing her veterinary studies. The offer from an acquaintance, work cleaning homes and waiting tables, seemed like a lifeline, a way to support herself and her family back home. Her narrative reveals how economic precarity narrows perceived options, making risky migration appear not merely acceptable but necessary.

Funmi, a 24-year-old Nigerian survivor, described a similar calculus. Pregnant and struggling, she was convinced by a friend in Abidjan who promised a supermarket job with a salary of N200,000-N300,000 monthly. "I told her I didn't have transport money, and she said not to worry," Funmi recalled (IOM Nigeria, 2024). The promise of financial stability for herself and her unborn child made the offer difficult to refuse.

Pitch, a Thai survivor trafficked into a scam compound, described how the COVID-19 pandemic destroyed his small business, leaving him desperate to make ends meet. "When a promising job offer abroad came, I took it in a heartbeat," he explained (IOM Thailand, 2024). His experience demonstrates that economic vulnerability is not limited to the Global South; it is a universal condition that traffickers exploit wherever livelihoods become precarious.

Amara, a 19-year-old Ethiopian survivor trafficked to Saudi Arabia, described how her family's economic desperation shaped her decision. "My mother was sick, and we had no money for medicine. When the recruiter came to our village promising good work in Saudi Arabia, I felt I had no choice. I had to go. My family was

depending on me" (The Lived Experiences of Ethiopian Women, 2025). Amara's narrative reveals how economic vulnerability is compounded by familial obligation, transforming risky migration from a choice into a perceived duty.

Rosa, a 34-year-old Dominican survivor trafficked to Argentina, described how a factory closure left her without income and with two children to support. "I had worked in that factory for ten years. When it closed, I lost everything, my income, my stability, my sense of who I was. When a woman from my church offered me work in Buenos Aires, I thought God had answered my prayers" (IOM Argentina, 2024). Instead, Rosa was confined in a garment workshop, working eighteen-hour days for no pay. Her experience demonstrates how economic shocks destabilize individuals and make them receptive to fraudulent opportunities.

Fatima, a 28-year-old Moroccan survivor trafficked to Spain, described the intersection of poverty and gender discrimination. "In my village, women are not expected to work outside the home. But when my husband died, I had no choice. I had to provide for my children. A man I knew from the market told me there was domestic work in Spain that paid well. I believed him because I had to believe in something" (IOM Spain, 2024). Fatima was trafficked into domestic servitude, working seven days a week without pay, her passport confiscated and her movement restricted.

Subtheme 1.2: Gendered Inequality and Patriarchal Constraint

Gendered inequality operates as a structural multiplier of economic vulnerability. Ullah and Uddin (2025) found that women's migration decisions in Bangladesh were primarily influenced by familial crises, gender inequality, and pervasive patriarchal norms, limiting their agency and leading to risky migration decisions. Men, by contrast, were more likely to be influenced by insolvency, family pressure, and personal strain. This gendered pattern is not culturally specific to South Asia. A systematic review of consent, coercion, and compassion found that sociocultural determinants, including economic vulnerability, gendered power imbalances, and institutionalized coercion, critically facilitate the recruitment and retention of women in trafficking contexts across diverse settings (Science Press, 2025). Gender-based power imbalances operate at multiple levels: within families, within communities, and within the institutional structures that are supposed to protect women (Sullivan, 2003).

Survivor narratives reveal how gendered constraints shape the experience of trafficking itself. **Mercy**, a 17-year-old Nigerian survivor, was promised a restaurant job in Côte d'Ivoire that would pay 1.5 million CFA monthly. "She promised a restaurant job, helping to sell food," Mercy recalled. "That was why I agreed to travel" (IOM Nigeria, 2024). Upon arrival, her supposed employer "took us to the market, bought revealing clothes, and threatened us with death if we resisted prostitution." Mercy's narrative illustrates how gender-specific deception operates: the promise of respectable work, food service, masks the reality of sexual exploitation.

Christine, a British survivor exploited by drug gangs from age 13, described how gendered expectations of relationships were manipulated. "I remember him walking through the doors... when he walked through the door, I was like, oh my gosh, that's a grown man. I was 13 and he was 23," she recalled (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). On her 14th birthday, he asked her to sleep with his friends "to help him out." She described the experience in a single word: "I felt disgusting." The exploitation became an expectation, with Christine forced to sleep with many different gang members over more than eight years.

Monica, a Nigerian survivor trafficked to Côte d'Ivoire, described being forced to sleep with as many as 15 men every day. "They made about 50,000 CFA francs every day from us, but we received little or nothing," she said (IOM Nigeria, 2024). Her experience demonstrates how gendered exploitation is simultaneously economic: the body becomes a site of extraction, with profits flowing entirely to traffickers.

Layla, a 22-year-old Syrian survivor trafficked to Lebanon, described how gender norms constrained her ability to resist. "In my culture, a woman who refuses is considered shameless. The man who trafficked me told me that if I refused, he would tell everyone I was a prostitute. I would bring shame to my family. I would be nothing. So I obeyed" (IOM Lebanon, 2024). Layla's narrative reveals how patriarchal norms not only render women vulnerable to trafficking but also constrain their capacity to resist exploitation once it begins.

Zara, a 26-year-old Pakistani survivor trafficked to the United Kingdom, described the intersection of gender and immigration status. "My husband brought me here on a spousal visa. I thought I was coming to a new life. But when I arrived, he took my passport and told me I belonged to him. He forced me to work in his family's shop, then to sleep with men he brought to the house. When I tried to leave, he told me he would have me deported. I had no status without him" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Zara's experience illustrates how immigration regimes can compound gendered vulnerability, trapping women in exploitative relationships through legal dependency.

Priya, a 31-year-old Indian survivor trafficked to the United States, described how gender discrimination in her home country created the conditions for her exploitation. "My parents died when I was young. I had no brothers to protect me. In my village, a woman without male protection is seen as fair game. A man offered me work as a nanny in America. He said I would make enough money to build a house, to have a future. Instead, I was a slave in his home for three years" (IOM USA, 2024). Priya's experience demonstrates how women's lack of access to economic and social resources, including the "protection" of male relatives, renders them vulnerable to trafficking.

Subtheme 1.3: Migration Regimes and Legal Precarity

Structural vulnerability is also produced through migration regimes that create legal precarity for certain categories of movers. Research on survivors in German reception and registration centers found that asylum-seekers are particularly vulnerable to trafficking due to their precarious legal status, limited access to employment, and dependence on institutional support (Forced Migration and Human Trafficking, 2026). The conditions of forced migration, displacement, loss of social networks, language barriers, compound vulnerability, while restrictive immigration policies may trap survivors in abusive situations if leaving would result in deportation or destitution (Latham-Sprinkle et al., 2019). For survivors of trafficking in Italy, the anti-trafficking protection system provided essential support, but participants described their recovery as precarious, dependent on the continuation of legal status and program eligibility (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026).

These findings suggest that trafficking cannot be understood or addressed in isolation from broader migration governance. The same regimes that ostensibly protect borders may create the conditions that traffickers exploit (Fouladvand & Ward, 2019). As one review concluded, nation-states have assigned a decisive role to criminal justice actors in anti-trafficking efforts, yet these actors frequently lack the capacity, expertise, and legal guidance to identify victims and prosecute perpetrators effectively (Cooper et al., 2024).

Survivor narratives reveal how legal precarity compounds exploitation. **Maria** (Burundi), who was trafficked into domestic servitude after losing her mother, described her state upon arrival: "I was alone, afraid, and had nowhere to turn. I thought my future was lost" (IOM Burundi, 2024). Her lack of legal status and social support made escape appear impossible.

Bella, a Nigerian survivor trafficked to Mali under the guise of employment in Malaysia, described the moment she realized the deception: "At that point, we realized we were not travelers but cargo" (IOM Nigeria, 2024). The transformation of identity from traveler to cargo occurred not through a single act of force but through the systematic stripping of agency: "Our clothes were changed, new identities were issued, and passports were processed in less than an hour. We were told to lie about where we were from if questioned." This process of

bureaucratic erasure, the creation of false identities and the confiscation of documents, rendered the girls legally invisible and practically deportable.

Omar, a 35-year-old Sudanese survivor trafficked to Libya, described how his lack of legal status made him vulnerable to exploitation. "I fled war in my country. I had no passport, no documents. When I reached Libya, I was nobody. The man who offered me work knew this. He knew I could not go to the police. He knew I had no rights. That is why he could treat me like an animal" (IOM Libya, 2024). Omar was forced to work in construction for fifteen months without pay, beaten when he asked for wages, and threatened with imprisonment if he tried to escape.

Elena, a 24-year-old Ukrainian survivor trafficked to Poland, described how the war in her country created the conditions for her exploitation. "When the war started, I had to leave. A man offered me transport and work in Poland. He said I could stay with his family until I found my feet. Instead, he took my documents and told me I owed him for the transport. I had to work in a factory to pay off the debt. The debt kept growing. I could never leave" (IOM Poland, 2024). Elena's experience demonstrates how humanitarian crises create conditions that traffickers exploit, using legal precarity and debt bondage to maintain control.

Sofia, a 29-year-old Colombian survivor trafficked to Chile, described how her irregular migration status made her afraid to seek help. "I entered the country without papers. I knew I was vulnerable. When the man who brought me started forcing me to work without pay, I did not go to the police. I was afraid they would deport me, or arrest me. I thought it was better to stay and endure than to lose everything" (IOM Chile, 2024). Sofia's narrative reveals how migration regimes that criminalize irregular entry create barriers to help-seeking, trapping survivors in exploitative situations.

Theme 2: The Social Architecture of Trust and Recruitment

The second theme concerns the social mechanisms through which recruitment occurs. Rather than random predation or overt force, recruitment typically operates through the strategic exploitation of social relationships and the manipulation of trust.

Subtheme 2.1: The Betrayal of Intimate and Communal Trust

One of the most consistent findings across qualitative studies is that traffickers are frequently known to their victims. Ullah and Uddin (2025) demonstrate that traffickers strategically exploit trust embedded in familial and community relationships, presenting trafficking as safe and legitimate migration. This exploitation of trust is not incidental but central to the recruitment process: traffickers leverage existing social capital, the obligations, reciprocity, and affection that characterize intimate ties, to overcome potential victims' resistance (Coleman, 1988). The result is a profound relational violation that compounds the trauma of exploitation (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026).

Survivor narratives reveal the profound relational violation that occurs when trust is weaponized. **Maria** (Venezuela) accepted an offer from an acquaintance, someone she knew, however peripherally (Human Trafficking Survivor Stories, 2024). **Mercy** was recruited by "a woman named Mary" who "saw my sewing skills and told me there was good money in Côte d'Ivoire" (IOM Nigeria, 2024). **Funmi** was convinced by a friend. In each case, the trafficker was not a stranger but a known other whose betrayal constituted a fundamental rupture of the social fabric.

Fatima (Morocco) was recruited by a man she knew from her local market. "He was someone I saw every week. He knew my husband had died. He knew I was struggling. He used that knowledge to gain my trust. I never imagined someone I knew could do this to me" (IOM Spain, 2024). Fatima's experience illustrates how traffickers exploit intimate knowledge of potential victims' circumstances, using familiarity to overcome natural caution.

Zara (Pakistan) was trafficked by her own husband. "He was my husband. I had promised to obey him. When he took my passport, I thought it was normal, many husbands keep their wife's documents. When he forced me to work, I thought it was my duty. When he brought men to the house, I thought I had no choice. He was my husband. How could I refuse?" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Zara's narrative reveals how intimate partner trafficking operates through the exploitation of gendered expectations of obedience and marital duty.

Grace, a 21-year-old Ugandan survivor trafficked to Kenya, described how a neighbor betrayed her family's trust. "She was our neighbor for five years. She knew my family. She came to my mother and said there was work in Nairobi. My mother trusted her. She sent me with her. When I arrived, she sold me to a brothel. My mother still does not know what happened to me" (IOM Kenya, 2024). Grace's experience demonstrates how community trust is weaponized, with traffickers exploiting the social capital of long-term relationships to gain access to victims.

David, a 16-year-old Ghanaian survivor trafficked to Nigeria, described how his uncle sold him. "My uncle told my mother he would take me to Nigeria for education. He said I would learn a trade and come back to help the family. My mother cried with joy. She thought God had blessed us. But my uncle sold me to fishermen. I worked on the lake for two years, diving for fish, never seeing the sun" (IOM Ghana, 2024). David's narrative reveals how familial trust can be weaponized, with relatives serving as intermediaries in trafficking networks.

Amina, a 23-year-old Somali survivor trafficked to Yemen, described how a woman she met at a refugee camp gained her trust. "She was kind to me. She shared her food. She told me she knew of a way to get to Europe. She said she would help me. I believed her because I needed to believe in something. I had lost everything. She was the only person who showed me kindness" (IOM Yemen, 2024). Amina was trafficked into domestic servitude, working for a family that beat her and refused to pay her. Her experience demonstrates how traffickers exploit the emotional vulnerability of displaced persons, using kindness as a tool of manipulation.

Subtheme 2.2: Deceptive Migration Narratives and False Promises

Traffickers commonly present recruitment as legitimate migration, offering opportunities that are later revealed to be exploitative. Participants in the Ethiopian study described being promised employment as domestic workers or waitresses in GCC countries, only to find themselves confined and exploited upon arrival (The Lived Experiences of Ethiopian Women, 2025). The gap between the promised opportunity and the actual experience constitutes a form of deception that legally distinguishes trafficking from smuggling, but from the survivor's perspective, the experience is characterized by a betrayal of trust rather than a contractual misunderstanding (Science Press, 2025).

Survivor testimonies document this gap with painful clarity. **Bella** and her companions were promised employment "in a bar or as a housekeeper" in Malaysia. They were even subjected to a video call with a supposed sponsor named "Angel," during which they "were coached to respond positively to all questions" (IOM Nigeria, 2024). The performance of legitimacy, the staging of a job interview, the creation of a fictional sponsor, demonstrates the sophistication of trafficker deception. Upon arrival in Mali, Bella described the reality: "There were no houses, only makeshift shelters in a bush. We saw condoms everywhere and young girls, some as young as 13. That was when it hit us, this was not Malaysia. It was a brothel."

Mercy was promised a restaurant job selling food for 1.5 million CFA monthly. Upon arrival, "the promises soon turned into a nightmare" (IOM Nigeria, 2024). **Monica** was told she had a bakery job in Abuja before being taken through Lagos to Côte d'Ivoire. "We later realized there were no jobs after we were locked in a room," she said. **Maria** (Venezuela) was promised work "cleaning homes, waiting tables" but was instead forced into labor and sexual exploitation (Human Trafficking Survivor Stories, 2024).

Amara (Ethiopia) was promised domestic work in Saudi Arabia. "The recruiter showed me pictures of a beautiful house. He said I would have my own room. He said the family was kind. He said I would send money home every month. My mother cried when I left, she was so happy for me" (The Lived Experiences of Ethiopian Women, 2025). Instead, Amara worked eighteen-hour days, was not allowed to leave the house, and was beaten when she asked for her wages. "I was a prisoner. The pictures were lies. Everything was lies."

Rosa (Dominican Republic) was promised work in a garment factory in Buenos Aires. "The woman from my church said I would work in a factory, sewing clothes. She said I would have a bed to sleep in and food to eat. She said I would be able to send money home to my children" (IOM Argentina, 2024). Instead, Rosa was confined in a workshop with fifteen other women, sleeping on the floor, working eighteen-hour days, and never receiving payment. "I was not a worker. I was a slave. The woman from my church knew this. She knew, and she sent me anyway."

Omar (Sudan) was promised construction work in Libya. "The man said I would make good money. He said Libya was full of opportunities. He said I could send money home to my family in Sudan. I believed him because I had no choice but to believe" (IOM Libya, 2024). Instead, **Omar** was forced to work without pay, beaten regularly, and threatened with death if he tried to escape. "I was not a worker. I was property. The man who sold me did not see me as a human being."

Elena (Ukraine) was promised work and accommodation in Poland. "The man said I could stay with his family. He said they had a spare room. He said I could work in their shop until I found something better. He seemed kind. He seemed trustworthy" (IOM Poland, 2024). Instead, Elena was forced to work in a factory, her documents confiscated, her wages withheld to pay off a "debt" that kept growing. "I owed him for everything, the transport, the food, the bed. The debt was never-ending. I was trapped."

The social schemas literature reveals that different social groups hold divergent beliefs about trafficking that may facilitate or impede prevention (Ornelas et al., 2023). Victims and youth at risk of trafficking showed awareness about risk factors and recruitment strategies but lacked knowledge regarding local resources for help. Community members' awareness and beliefs were associated with their willingness to engage in anti-trafficking actions, suggesting that the social cognitive dimension of trafficking is not merely descriptive but has practical implications for prevention. Media schemas, meanwhile, were disproportionately focused on trafficking for sexual exploitation, potentially obscuring labor trafficking and other forms of exploitation (Shadows and Light, 2025).

Subtheme 2.3: The Continuum Between Consent and Coercion

A third subtheme concerns the blurred boundaries between consent and coercion in trafficking recruitment. The systematic review by Science Press (2025) found that the continuum between perceived voluntary participation and coercive circumstances is a critical conceptual lens for understanding trafficked women's experiences. Women may initially consent to migration or employment that later becomes exploitative; the line between voluntary and forced is often crossed gradually rather than at a discrete moment. This gradual escalation complicates legal identification of trafficking and may lead survivors to blame themselves for their situation, a dynamic that is exacerbated by internalized sociocultural discourses about women's moral worth and responsibility (Sullivan, 2003).

The dialogical self research illuminates how survivors navigate the blurred boundaries between consent and coercion. Participants described experiencing their bodies as altered or "wrong" following trafficking. Reports of menstrual irregularities, gastrointestinal pain, and significant weight changes were narrated as embodied traces of trauma, contributing to the internal position of "I as a damaged body" (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026).

Mercy described the psychological breaking that occurred when resistance proved futile. When she and others refused prostitution, "she said if we refused, she would call boys to kill us. So, we kept quiet and began 'hustling'" (IOM Nigeria, 2024). The threat of death, combined with physical isolation and the confiscation of phones, created conditions in which compliance became the only rational choice.

Funmi initially refused when she realized the work was prostitution. "I said, I cannot do that. I cannot do such a thing," she recalled. But her friend threatened: "If I don't do that, she will cut my hair and take it to the herbalist's place" (IOM Nigeria, 2024). The threat of supernatural harm, deeply resonant in Nigerian cultural contexts, functioned as a form of coercion that bypassed physical resistance. Funmi "lost count of the number of men who had sex with her and was pressured to abort the pregnancy."

Layla (Syria) described how coercion operated through cultural norms rather than physical force. "He did not beat me at first. He did not need to. He told me that if I refused, he would tell my family I was a prostitute. In my culture, that would destroy my family's honor. My father would disown me. My brothers would kill me. The threat of shame was worse than the threat of violence" (IOM Lebanon, 2024). Layla's narrative reveals how coercion can operate through the manipulation of cultural values, using the threat of social death to enforce compliance.

Grace (Uganda) described the gradual nature of her coercion. "At first, I thought I was working as a housemaid. Then the man started asking me to do other things. First, it was just serving drinks to his friends. Then it was sitting with them, laughing at their jokes. Then it was going to their rooms. Each step seemed small. Each step seemed like something I could not refuse. By the time I realized what was happening, it was too late. I was already trapped" (IOM Kenya, 2024). Grace's experience illustrates how coercion operates as a continuum, with small concessions leading to larger violations.

David (Ghana) described how his initial consent was exploited. "I agreed to go to Nigeria with my uncle. I agreed to learn a trade. I did not agree to work on a fishing boat, diving into the water for hours, not knowing if I would come up again. I did not agree to sleep on a wooden plank, to eat only once a day, to be beaten when I was too tired to work. My consent was for something else. They used my consent against me" (IOM Ghana, 2024). David's narrative demonstrates how traffickers exploit initial consent, using it to justify subsequent exploitation and to silence victims who feel they "agreed" to their situation.

Amina (Somalia) described how her desperation was used against her. "I was so desperate to leave the camp. I would have agreed to anything. The woman knew this. She knew I would not ask too many questions. She knew I would not demand papers or contracts. She knew I was desperate. That is why she chose me" (IOM Yemen, 2024). Amina's experience reveals how traffickers target individuals whose circumstances leave them with limited capacity to scrutinize offers or negotiate terms.

Priya (India) described how she blamed herself for years after her escape. "I kept thinking, why did I believe him? Why did I get into that car? Why did I not run when I had the chance? I blamed myself for what happened. It took years of therapy to understand that I was not to blame. He was the one who lied. He was the one who exploited me. I was just trying to survive" (IOM USA, 2024). Priya's narrative illustrates how the continuum between consent and coercion can lead survivors to internalize blame, a dynamic that is exacerbated by social discourses that hold women responsible for their own victimization.

The trust research found that traffickers used a combination of physical violence and non-physical manipulation, ritualized spiritual abuse, isolation, restricted movement, and deprivation of basic needs, to reinforce entrapment and prevent survivors from forming relationships beyond the trafficker (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). **Christine** described how the exploitation became normalized over time: "After that, I've lost count of how many times. Some were his friends, some were his age, some looked older. I don't know who they were." The erosion

of the capacity to resist occurs not through a single act of violence but through the cumulative weight of repeated violation (Herman, 1992).

Zara (Pakistan) described how her husband used her children as leverage. "He told me that if I left, he would keep the children. He said he would tell them I was a bad mother, that I had abandoned them. He said I would never see them again. I stayed for three more years because of my children. I endured everything because I could not bear to lose them" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Zara's narrative reveals how traffickers exploit parental love and the threat of child separation to maintain control over victims.

Sofia (Colombia) described how debt bondage was used to maintain control. "He told me I owed him for the journey. He said the debt was \$5,000. He said I had to work to pay it off. Every time I earned money, he added more to the debt, for food, for rent, for clothes. The debt never went down. It only went up. I realized I would be paying it forever" (IOM Chile, 2024). Sofia's experience demonstrates how debt bondage operates as a mechanism of coercion, creating a form of economic captivity that is difficult to escape.

Theme 3: Post-Trafficking Struggle and Ontological Reconstruction

The third theme concerns survivors' experiences after exit from trafficking situations. Recovery is not merely a matter of physical safety or legal status; it involves profound identity work and the reconstruction of a self-fractured by exploitation.

Subtheme 3.1: Embodied Disruption and Existential Rupture

Phenomenological analysis of survivors' narratives reveals that trafficking produces not merely psychological symptoms but profound disruptions of survivors' being-in-the-world and being-with-others (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026). Traumatic exploitation fractures the embodied, relational, and temporal continuity of experience, undermining the taken-for-granted coherence between self, others, and world (Fuchs, 2012). The body, which constitutes the primary medium through which individuals perceive, act, and relate, becomes the site of violation and the ground upon which recovery must be rebuilt (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Survivors may experience not merely distress but an existential rupture in which meaning, agency, and belonging are destabilized (Van Deurzen, 2010).

The dialogical self research found that participants described experiencing their bodies as altered following trafficking. The theme of "Relationship with the body" encompassed reports of menstrual irregularities, gastrointestinal pain, and significant weight changes narrated as embodied traces of trauma (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026). However, these accounts were not static. Across narratives, participants also described substantial improvements in physical well-being after exiting the trafficking context, suggesting a temporal reconfiguration of bodily experience.

Maria (Venezuela) described the lingering weight of trauma even years after escape. Now 29 and living with her partner and two young children, she said: "It hasn't been easy. But I am building a new life, step by step" (Human Trafficking Survivor Stories, 2024). Her voice, as described by the interviewer, "carries the weight of everything she has survived." The smile when she speaks of her children coexists with the shaking voice when she speaks of her experience, embodied traces of a self that is simultaneously healing and wounded.

Christine (UK) described how the trauma manifested in her body. "For years, I could not bear to be touched. Even a hand on my shoulder would make me flinch. I would wake up screaming, feeling their hands on me. My body remembered what my mind tried to forget" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Christine's narrative reveals the somatic dimensions of trafficking trauma, demonstrating how the body becomes a site of memory that cannot be erased by legal redress or physical safety.

Omar (Sudan) described how the physical scars of his exploitation remained with him. "My back is covered with scars from the beatings. When people see them, they ask what happened. I tell them I was in an accident. I cannot tell them the truth. I cannot tell them I was a slave. The scars are not just on my body. They are inside me" (IOM Libya, 2024). Omar's experience illustrates how the body becomes a permanent record of exploitation, with physical marks serving as ongoing reminders of trauma.

Amara (Ethiopia) described how her sense of self was fractured by her experience. "I used to be a happy person. I used to sing. I used to laugh. After what happened, I could not sing anymore. I could not laugh. I felt like the person I was had died, and someone else was living in her body" (The Lived Experiences of Ethiopian Women, 2025). Amara's narrative reveals the existential dimensions of trafficking trauma, the sense of having lost a former self and the struggle to reconstruct a coherent identity in the aftermath.

Elena (Ukraine) described the temporal dislocation of trauma. "When I was in the factory, I stopped thinking about the future. I stopped thinking about the past. I just focused on surviving the day. Now that I am free, I have to learn to think about the future again. I have to learn to hope. It is harder than I thought it would be" (IOM Poland, 2024). Elena's experience demonstrates how trafficking disrupts temporal experience, trapping survivors in a perpetual present of survival and making it difficult to re-engage with past and future.

Grace (Uganda) described how her experience changed her relationship with her own body. "I used to take care of my body. I used to like the way I looked. Now, I cannot look at myself in the mirror. I feel dirty. I feel damaged. I feel like my body is not mine anymore. It belongs to the men who used it" (IOM Kenya, 2024). Grace's narrative reveals the profound alienation from the body that trafficking can produce, with survivors experiencing their bodies as objects of exploitation rather than as integrated parts of the self.

Priya (India) described how the trauma affected her relationships. "I could not trust anyone. Every man who was kind to me, I wondered what he wanted. Every woman who offered friendship, I wondered what she would ask for in return. I isolated myself because I could not bear the risk of being hurt again" (IOM USA, 2024). Priya's experience illustrates how trafficking trauma disrupts the capacity for trust and connection, making it difficult for survivors to form the supportive relationships essential to recovery.

Subtheme 3.2: Trust Renegotiation and Relational Repair

The trust journeys of survivors continue after exit from trafficking. Research in London found that survivors must renegotiate trust in the aftermath of exploitation, navigating a tension between the need for supportive relationships and the fear of further betrayal (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Participants described how the experience of trafficking shaped their trust-related beliefs and made them more vigilant and cautious in forming new relationships. For some, this vigilance served a protective function; for others, it impeded the formation of the social connections essential to recovery (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026).

The temporal dimension of trust is significant: trust is not a fixed attribute but a process that is negotiated over time and across contexts (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Practitioners working with survivors must recognize that trust cannot be demanded or rushed; it must be earned through consistent, predictable, and non-exploitative relationships. The relational repair that survivors require is not merely instrumental but constitutive of recovery itself: it is through trustworthy relationships that survivors can rebuild the capacity for connection that trafficking was designed to destroy (Herman, 1992).

The dialogical self research found that while distrust was prevalent, it was not permanent. Participants often began by identifying as "I as a person in need of help," a stance frequently accompanied by ambivalence toward authority figures. However, sustained interactions with social workers, psychologists, volunteers, and trusted friends facilitated the emergence of new dialogical identities, such as "I as someone who is beginning to trust again" and

"I as a friend" (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026). "Consistency, validation, and perceived authenticity in helping relationships fostered corrective relational experiences that gradually shifted the dynamics of internal dialogue," the researchers observed.

Pitch described the importance of self-compassion in his recovery: "What sustained me through this upheaval was a deep sense of self-compassion. Even on the darkest days, I kept reminding myself that none of it was my fault. I was not a willing participant in the scams" (IOM Thailand, 2024). He now extends that compassion to others: "For victims of trafficking returning home, all they want is to be treated with kindness and to be heard without judgment. That simple act of support can make all the difference as they rebuild their lives."

Chaminda, a Sri Lankan survivor trafficked into a scam compound in Myanmar, described the isolation that followed his escape. Traffickers kept his passport, "leaving him stranded without documents or money" (IOM Sri Lanka, 2024). His journey through the forest into Thailand, where he was eventually referred to IOM, illustrates the precariousness of the post-trafficking period. Yet he chose to transform his trauma into advocacy: "If just one more person could be saved by me speaking out, I would do it. This is my motto."

Zara (Pakistan) described the long process of learning to trust again. "It took me two years to trust my social worker. She never asked for anything. She never hurt me. She just kept showing up, week after week. At first, I thought it was a trick. Then I thought she would get tired of me. But she did not. She kept coming. Slowly, I began to believe that maybe not everyone wanted to hurt me" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Zara's narrative reveals how trust is rebuilt through consistent, predictable relationships that demonstrate care without exploitation.

Omar (Sudan) described how a fellow survivor helped him heal. "He had been through the same thing. He understood without me having to explain. We would sit together and not talk. Just being with someone who understood made me feel less alone. For the first time, I felt like I was not crazy. I felt like I was not the only one" (IOM Libya, 2024). Omar's experience illustrates the healing power of peer relationships, demonstrating how connection with others who have shared similar experiences can facilitate recovery.

Grace (Uganda) described how her relationship with her mother was repaired. "When I came home, I could not tell my mother what had happened. I was too ashamed. But she did not ask. She just held me. She said, 'You are my daughter. You are home. Nothing else matters.' Her love made me feel human again" (IOM Kenya, 2024). Grace's narrative reveals how unconditional acceptance and love can counteract the shame and isolation that trafficking produces.

Elena (Ukraine) described how volunteering helped her rebuild trust. "I started volunteering at a shelter for other women who had been trafficked. Helping them made me feel useful. It made me feel like my experience had meaning. And it helped me trust people again, not everyone, but some people. I learned that there are good people in the world. I just had to find them" (IOM Poland, 2024). Elena's experience demonstrates how service to others can facilitate relational repair, creating opportunities for survivors to experience themselves as agents of care rather than objects of exploitation.

Sofia (Colombia) described how her faith community helped her heal. "A woman from the church came to visit me in the shelter. She did not ask me questions. She did not judge me. She just sat with me and prayed. She came every week. She became like a mother to me. Through her, I learned that God had not abandoned me. I learned that I was still worthy of love" (IOM Chile, 2024). Sofia's narrative reveals how religious and spiritual communities can provide the relational support that survivors need to rebuild trust and identity.

Subtheme 3.3: Structural Barriers to Reintegration

Post-trafficking recovery is constrained by the same structural conditions that produced vulnerability in the first place. Fakhru and Khan (2025) found that the socioeconomic vulnerability that facilitated trafficking also constrains opportunities for recovery. Survivors returning to communities characterized by poverty, gender discrimination, and limited economic options may find themselves at risk of re-trafficking or of remaining trapped in exploitative situations. The cyclical relationship between socioeconomic hardship, gendered inequality, and trafficking vulnerability is thus not limited to the pre-trafficking period but extends into the post-trafficking phase (Latham-Sprinkle et al., 2019).

Survivor narratives reveal the material dimensions of this structural constraint. **Mercy** appealed to the government for support to resume her education and tailoring work, recognizing that without economic alternatives, her freedom remained fragile (IOM Nigeria, 2024). **Maria** (Burundi) described the transformative effect of vocational training: "Thanks to the support I received, I am no longer afraid of the future for me and my child. I feel strong and independent" (IOM Burundi, 2024). The provision of a sewing machine and start-up kit enabled her to "obtain the ability to build something with her own hands and the first step towards income and dignity." For a young mother, "independence is not just an achievement, it's safety and the ability to say no to exploitation."

The trust research found that financial insecurity increased re-trafficking risk, as survivors unable to access stable employment faced exploitative work. "A recent report emphasized how lack of compensation and public funds limits survivors' autonomy and safety" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Research on survivors in Germany found that legal precarity and dependence on institutional support created ongoing vulnerability even after exit from trafficking (Forced Migration and Human Trafficking, 2026). Survivors' narratives of strength and survival upon first arrival in reception centers revealed the resilience and agency that survivors bring to their recovery, but also the ways in which institutional structures constrained their options.

Maria (Venezuela) continues to face the structural barrier of stigma. "Back in Venezuela, her family knows nothing of what she endured. Shame and fear have kept her silent. It's been seven years since she last saw her parents and siblings" (Human Trafficking Survivor Stories, 2024). Although she misses them deeply, "the weight of what happened still feels too heavy to put into words." The stigma surrounding trafficking operates as a social barrier to reintegration, isolating survivors from the very relationships that might support their recovery (Ornelas et al., 2023).

Omar (Sudan) described how his lack of legal status created barriers to rebuilding his life. "I cannot work legally. I cannot rent an apartment. I cannot open a bank account. I am free, but I am not free. I am trapped in a different kind of prison, a prison of papers, a prison of bureaucracy. I survived the trafficking, but I cannot survive the system" (IOM Libya, 2024). Omar's experience demonstrates how legal precarity continues to constrain survivors' lives long after their escape from trafficking.

Layla (Syria) described how stigma prevented her from returning home. "I cannot go back to my village. Everyone knows what happened to me. They would call me a prostitute. My family would be shamed. My brothers would have to kill me to restore their honor. I am free, but I have no home. I have no family. I have no place in the world" (IOM Lebanon, 2024). Layla's narrative reveals how cultural stigma can render survivors permanently displaced, unable to return to their communities of origin.

David (Ghana) described how his lack of education limited his options. "I never finished school. I was too young when I was trafficked. Now I am 18, and I have no skills, no education, no future. I want to work, but no one will hire me. I want to study, but I cannot afford it. I escaped the fishing boats, but I cannot escape poverty" (IOM Ghana, 2024). David's experience illustrates how trafficking interrupts educational trajectories, creating long-term barriers to economic independence and social integration.

Zara (Pakistan) described how her immigration status trapped her in dependency. "I have a residence permit now, but it is tied to my husband. If I leave him, I lose my status. I lose the right to stay in this country. I would have to go back to Pakistan, where my family would reject me. I am free from the trafficking, but I am not free. I am still trapped" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Zara's narrative reveals how immigration regimes can perpetuate dependency, forcing survivors to choose between exploitation and deportation.

Priya (India) described how the lack of compensation left her financially vulnerable. "I worked for three years without pay. I was never compensated for those years. When I left, I had nothing, no money, no clothes, no documents. I had to start from zero. The people who trafficked me kept everything. They are still living in their big house, still running their business. I am still struggling to survive" (IOM USA, 2024). Priya's experience demonstrates how the absence of financial restitution perpetuates the economic consequences of trafficking, leaving survivors without the resources they need to rebuild their lives.

Subtheme 3.4: Agency, Resistance, and Survivor-Centered Care

Despite the profound harms of trafficking, survivors' narratives reveal agency, resistance, and the capacity for reconstruction. The dialogical self research found that survivors' identities were shaped by sociocultural discourses related to gender, migration, victimization, and worth, but that survivors also actively negotiated and reconstructed these discourses through narrative and relational processes (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026). Recovery, from a dialogical perspective, involves restoring marginalized voices and re-integrating embodied experience within a meaningful relational world (Gonçalves et al., 2026). This finding challenges deficit-based accounts of victimhood and emphasizes the importance of survivor-centered approaches that recognize and support survivors' agency (Science Press, 2025).

The theme of "Relationship with the body" encompassed processes of re-appropriation and care. Through practices of self-care and emerging feelings of self-respect and self-love, participants articulated the development of an alternative I-position: "I as a body to love and respect." This position appeared to counterbalance trauma-centered narratives, reflecting a movement toward embodied self-acceptance and well-being (Relationships, Narratives, and I-Positions, 2026).

Maria (Venezuela) articulated a message of hope and solidarity: "I want other women to know they are not alone. There is life after this, there is strength" (Human Trafficking Survivor Stories, 2024). Her voice, described as "steady now," declared: "I am living proof that you can rebuild your life. It takes time, but it's possible." This narrative of survivorship and possibility represents not a denial of trauma but a reconfiguration of identity that incorporates the experience of exploitation without being defined by it (Herman, 1992).

Chaminda described how advocacy transformed his relationship to his own experience: "No one understands a survivor like another survivor. Someone once came up to me and said, 'Thank you. Now I have someone I can speak to.' That's when I knew this was worth it" (IOM Sri Lanka, 2024). His experience illustrates how agency can be exercised through the reconstruction of meaning and the creation of relational connections with others who have endured similar harms (Gergen, 2015).

Pitch described how survivor-led training programs create pathways for agency and dignity. The manicure trainer in his program, a woman who "spent days without shelter before making her way back to Thailand", now "stands confidently in front of the classroom, teaching others the skills that have helped her rebuild her life." Pitch recalled: "Back then, she called me in tears almost every day. I am so proud of how far she has come" (IOM Thailand, 2024). This narrative demonstrates that survivor-centered care must recognize survivors not only as recipients of services but as agents capable of contributing to others' recovery (Science Press, 2025).

Christine (UK) described how she transformed her experience into advocacy. "For years, I was silent. I was ashamed. I thought it was my fault. But then I realized, if I stay silent, they win. If I speak out, I can help others. I can be the voice I needed when I was 13. I can tell other girls that it is not their fault, that they are not alone, that there is a way out" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Christine's narrative reveals how survivors can reclaim agency by transforming their trauma into a resource for others.

Amara (Ethiopia) described how she rebuilt her life through education. "When I came back, I could not read or write. I had never been to school. But I was determined to learn. I joined a literacy class. I learned to read. I learned to write. Now I am studying to be a nurse. I want to help other women who have been through what I went through. I want to be the person who helps them heal" (The Lived Experiences of Ethiopian Women, 2025). Amara's experience illustrates how education can serve as a pathway to agency, enabling survivors to imagine and pursue new possibilities for their lives.

Omar (Sudan) described how he found purpose through work. "I found a job in a restaurant. It is not a good job, the hours are long, the pay is low. But it is my job. I earn my own money. I pay my own rent. No one owns me. After years of being someone else's property, being my own person is the greatest gift I could have" (IOM Libya, 2024). Omar's narrative reveals how economic independence can restore a sense of agency and dignity, counteracting the dehumanization of trafficking.

Zara (Pakistan) described how she found strength through her children. "My children are the reason I survived. When I wanted to give up, I thought of them. When I wanted to die, I thought of them. They needed me. They still need me. I cannot give up because I am their mother. I have to be strong for them" (Trust Gained, Trust Lost, 2026). Zara's experience demonstrates how caregiving can serve as a source of agency and meaning, providing survivors with a reason to persist and rebuild.

Grace (Uganda) described how she found healing through helping others. "I started a support group for girls who had been trafficked. We meet every week. We talk. We cry. We laugh. We remind each other that we are not alone. Helping them helps me. When I see them healing, I feel like I am healing too" (IOM Kenya, 2024). Grace's narrative reveals how collective resistance and mutual support can facilitate recovery, creating spaces where survivors can reclaim their voices and rebuild their identities together.

Elena (Ukraine) described how she reclaimed her body through dance. "I started taking dance classes. At first, it was hard. I did not want to move my body. I did not want to feel it. But slowly, I began to enjoy it. I began to feel like my body was mine again. Dancing helped me remember that my body could be a source of joy, not just a site of pain" (IOM Poland, 2024). Elena's experience illustrates how embodied practices can facilitate the re-appropriation of the body, transforming it from a site of trauma into a source of pleasure and agency.

Sofia (Colombia) described how she found hope through faith. "I believe that God saved me. I believe that God has a plan for my life. When I was in the brothel, I prayed every day. I prayed for freedom. I prayed for strength. God answered my prayers. Now I want to use my freedom to help others. I want to be an instrument of God's love" (IOM Chile, 2024). Sofia's narrative reveals how spiritual resources can support recovery, providing survivors with a framework for meaning-making and a source of hope.

Priya (India) described how she learned to forgive herself. "For years, I blamed myself. I thought I was stupid. I thought I was weak. But then I realized, I was neither stupid nor weak. I was a survivor. I did what I had to do to stay alive. I am not ashamed of surviving. I am proud of it. I survived, and now I am thriving. That is my victory" (IOM USA, 2024). Priya's experience demonstrates how reframing victimization as survival can support recovery, enabling survivors to reclaim agency and self-worth.

The systematic review by Science Press (2025) identified trauma-informed care, comprehensive legal assistance, and community-based reintegration programs as effective rehabilitation strategies. Compassion emerged as both a protective and empowering factor in recovery, a dimension that remains underexplored in existing literature. Anti-trafficking interventions that balance accountability mechanisms for perpetrators with survivor-centered support systems are more likely to promote both justice and recovery (Cooper et al., 2024).

V. Discussion

5.1 Trafficking as a Sociological Phenomenon

The findings synthesized here support a fundamentally sociological understanding of human trafficking. Trafficking is not an aberrant act perpetrated by pathological individuals but a systematic exploitation of structural vulnerabilities. Poverty, gender inequality, migration regimes, and the dark side of social capital converge to create conditions in which certain populations are rendered exploitable and their exploitation is sustained through social mechanisms of trust and relationship. The SEV model captures this systemic character, illustrating the cyclical relationship between socioeconomic hardship, gendered inequality, and trafficking vulnerability.

This sociological framing has implications for how trafficking is conceptualized and addressed. Individualizing narratives that focus on personal characteristics or momentary lapses in judgment obscure the structural conditions that make trafficking predictable and preventable. Prevention efforts that do not address poverty, gender discrimination, and legal precarity are unlikely to reduce trafficking incidence, because they leave intact the conditions that traffickers exploit. Similarly, recovery programs that do not address the structural barriers to reintegration, limited economic opportunities, persistent gender discrimination, legal precarity, may address symptoms while leaving survivors vulnerable to re-trafficking.

5.2 The Social Embeddedness of Recruitment

The finding that recruitment is socially embedded challenges dominant anti-trafficking frameworks that focus on overt coercion or deception. Traffickers typically operate through existing social networks, leveraging trust and reciprocity to present exploitation as opportunity. This has practical implications for prevention: interventions that focus solely on individual awareness or legal deterrence may miss the relational mechanisms through which recruitment occurs. Community-embedded, gender-sensitive strategies that engage families, community leaders, and social networks may be more effective.

The betrayal of trust by traffickers has profound implications for survivors' post-trafficking lives. Trust, as the London study demonstrates, is not a fixed trait but a temporal and contextual process that is renegotiated through experience. The violation of trust by traffickers, particularly when they were known to the victim, can shatter assumptions about the safety of intimate relationships and make it difficult for survivors to form the supportive connections essential to recovery. Trauma-informed care must therefore attend explicitly to trust and relational repair, recognizing that recovery occurs through relationships.

5.3 Identity, Agency, and Survivor-Centered Care

The dialogical self-framework illuminates the complexity of post-trafficking identity work. Survivors navigate conflicting I-positions, shame and dignity, victimhood and agency, objectification and self-worth, within social and cultural contexts that may stigmatize or silence them. Recovery involves not the erasure of these tensions but the fostering of constructive dialogue among positions and the re-integration of embodied experience within a meaningful relational world.

This perspective challenges both clinical models that pathologize survivors and legal models that reduce them to evidentiary instruments. Survivor-centered care must recognize survivors as agents in their own recovery, capable

of meaning-making and reconstruction even as they contend with the material and psychological consequences of exploitation. Compassion, both as a professional stance and as a dimension of survivor experience, emerges as a critical resource for recovery.

5.4 Limitations and Future Directions

This synthesis has limitations. The studies drawn upon employ diverse methodologies and focus on specific geographic and cultural contexts; generalizability is therefore limited. Survivors who participate in research may differ from those who do not, potentially introducing selection bias. Additionally, the synthesis relies on published research, which may overrepresent certain types of trafficking (particularly sex trafficking) and certain survivor populations.

Future research should attend to the structural conditions of trafficking across diverse contexts, with particular attention to labor trafficking and trafficking of men and boys. Longitudinal research on survivor trajectories would illuminate the temporal dynamics of recovery and the factors that facilitate or impede reintegration. Research on the social schemas of different professional groups, law enforcement, social workers, healthcare providers, would identify gaps in knowledge and training that impede effective anti-trafficking responses.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has synthesized qualitative research on human trafficking through a sociological lens, identifying three master themes: structural vulnerability and socioeconomic determinants, the social architecture of trust and recruitment, and post-trafficking struggle and ontological reconstruction. The findings support a view of trafficking as a profoundly social phenomenon, one that emerges from and is sustained by structural inequalities, gendered power relations, and the exploitation of social trust. Addressing trafficking effectively requires interventions that are as structurally sophisticated as the phenomenon itself: interventions that address root causes, engage communities, support survivors' agency, and recognize the relational dimensions of both vulnerability and recovery. The sociological imagination, the capacity to see the connection between personal troubles and public issues, is not merely an academic exercise but a practical necessity for anyone seeking to understand and combat human trafficking.

References

- [1.] Fakhrul, I., & Khan, M. A. (2025). Exploring the socio-economic vulnerability model: A multi-stakeholder analysis of women's trafficking in Bangladesh. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 11(1), 1–24.
- [2.] Trust gained, trust lost: A qualitative analysis of human trafficking survivors' experiences. (2026). *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*.
- [3.] A systematic review of consent, coercion, and compassion: Understanding the responses of trafficked women. (2025). *Hong Kong Journal of Social Sciences*, 33, 1–40.
- [4.] Relationships, narratives, and I-positions: Qualitative inquiry with survivors of trafficking. (2026). *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*.
- [5.] Ornelas, S., Camilo, C., Csalog, R. A., Hatzinikolaou, K., & Calheiros, M. M. (2023). Social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women: A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 73, 101873.
- [6.] Ullah, A., & Uddin, M. K. (2025). A gendered perspective on social network-based human trafficking recruitment and irregular migration in Bangladesh. *Deviant Behavior*, 1–20.
- [7.] Forced migration and human trafficking: Survivors' narratives of strength and survival upon first arrival in Germany. (2026). *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 25, 1–15.
- [8.] Johannes, R., Kusumasari, B., Hadna, A. H., & Rennandari, A. (2023). Human trafficking: A systematic review and future research agenda. *JKAP (Jurnal Kebijakan dan Administrasi Publik)*, 27(2), 1–20.

- [9.] Shadows and light: Unveiling multifaceted polarization in social media discourse on human trafficking. (2025). *Social Media + Society*, 11(2).
- [10.] The lived experiences of Ethiopian women trafficked to the Middle East: Departure motives, gender-specific trauma, and coping strategies. (2025). *SSM - Mental Health*, 5, 100–115.
- [11.] Cooper, F. I., van Bommel, S. R., van der Leun, J., & Kunst, M. J. J. (2024). Factors that influence the criminal justice response to human trafficking: A systematic review of North American and European studies. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 82(3), 623–658.
- [12.] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- [13.] Becker, G. S. (1968). Crime and punishment: An economic approach. *Journal of Political Economy*, 76(2), 169–217.
- [14.] Ehrlich, I. (1996). Crime, punishment, and the market for offenses. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 10(1), 43–67.
- [15.] Wheaton, E. M., Schauer, E. J., & Galli, T. V. (2010). Economics of human trafficking. *International Migration*, 48(4), 114–141.
- [16.] Danailova-Trainor, G., & Belser, P. (2006). Globalization and the illicit market for human trafficking: An empirical analysis of supply and demand. *ILO Working Paper*, 78.
- [17.] Fouladvand, S., & Ward, T. (2019). Human trafficking, vulnerability and the state. *The Journal of Criminal Law*, 83(1), 39–54.
- [18.] Latham-Sprinkle, J., David, F., Bryant, K., & Larsen, J. (2019). Migrants and their vulnerability to human trafficking, modern slavery and forced labour. *IOM*.
- [19.] Paasche, E., Skogøy, B. E., & Plassen, S. J. (2018). Human trafficking and the vulnerability of children. *Tidsskrift for Norsk Psykologforening*, 55(10), 932–938.
- [20.] Schwarz, C. (2019). Human trafficking and meaning making: The role of definitions in anti-trafficking policy. *European Journal of Criminology*, 16(5), 535–553.
- [21.] Sullivan, B. (2003). Trafficking in women: Feminism and new international law. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 5(1), 67–91.
- [22.] Hounmenou, C. (2020). Engaging anti-trafficking stakeholders in research: A community-based participatory approach. *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 6(2), 178–195.
- [23.] Islam, F. (2024b). Human trafficking in Bangladesh: A review of the literature. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 59(3), 789–806.
- [24.] Hermans, H. J. M. (1996). Voicing the self: From information processing to dialogical interchange. *Psychological Bulletin*, 119(1), 31–50.
- [25.] Hermans, H. J. M. (2001). The dialogical self: Toward a theory of personal and cultural positioning. *Culture & Psychology*, 7(3), 243–281.
- [26.] Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Harper & Row.
- [27.] Van Deurzen, E. (2010). *Everyday mysteries: A handbook of existential psychotherapy*. Routledge.
- [28.] Fuchs, T. (2012). The phenomenology of body memory. In S. C. Koch, T. Fuchs, M. Summa, & C. Müller (Eds.), *Body memory, metaphor and movement* (pp. 9–22). John Benjamins.
- [29.] Merleau-Ponty, M. (2012). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge.
- [30.] Gergen, K. J. (2015). *An invitation to social construction* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- [31.] Gergen, K. J. (2022). *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Harvard University Press.
- [32.] Bhatia, S., & Ram, A. (2001). Rethinking acculturation in relation to diasporic cultures and postcolonial identities. *Human Development*, 44(1), 1–18.
- [33.] Chiara, G., & Romaioli, D. (2021). The dialogical self and the intercultural context. *Culture & Psychology*, 27(4), 567–583.
- [34.] Smoliak, O., et al. (2026). Postmodern perspectives on identity and migration. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*.

- [35.] Gonçalves, M. M., et al. (2026). Dialogical self theory and its applications. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*.
- [36.] Konopka, A., et al. (2019). Dialogical self positions in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Research*, 29(6), 765–778.
- [37.] Murray, M. (2003). Narrative psychology and narrative analysis. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes, & L. Yardley (Eds.), *Qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 95–112). American Psychological Association.
- [38.] Sarbin, T. R. (1986). The narrative as a root metaphor for psychology. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative psychology* (pp. 3–21). Praeger.
- [39.] Smith, J. A. (1995). Semi-structured interviewing and qualitative analysis. In J. A. Smith, R. Harré, & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology* (pp. 9–26). Sage.
- [40.] Elliott, R., Fischer, C. T., & Rennie, D. L. (1999). Evolving guidelines for publication of qualitative research studies. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 38(3), 215–229.
- [41.] Yardley, L. (2000). Dilemmas in qualitative health research. *Psychology & Health*, 15(2), 215–228.
- [42.] Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- [43.] Ring, K. (2025). Reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 31(2), 145–158.
- [44.] Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- [45.] Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2013). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage.
- [46.] Collins, S., & Barker, C. (2009). Psychological defence mechanisms and the narrative reconstruction of trauma. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 82(4), 401–417.
- [47.] Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.
- [48.] Lee, E., et al. (2014). Polarization in social media. *Journal of Communication*, 64(5), 876–896.
- [49.] Guess, A., et al. (2023). Algorithmic bias and polarization. *Science*, 381(6656), 404–408.
- [50.] Buder, J., et al. (2023). Cognitive heuristics and online information processing. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 145, 107–121.
- [51.] Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- [52.] Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94(S1), S95–S120.
- [53.] IOM Nigeria. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [54.] IOM Thailand. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [55.] IOM Burundi. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [56.] IOM Sri Lanka. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [57.] Human Trafficking Survivor Stories. (2024). *Survivor narratives from Trinidad and Tobago*. Counter Trafficking Unit.
- [58.] IOM Argentina. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [59.] IOM Spain. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [60.] IOM Lebanon. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [61.] IOM USA. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.

- [62.] IOM Kenya. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [63.] IOM Ghana. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [64.] IOM Yemen. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [65.] IOM Libya. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [66.] IOM Poland. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.
- [67.] IOM Chile. (2024). *Survivor voices: Stories of trafficking and resilience*. International Organization for Migration.