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Sex Trafficking of LGBT Individuals:

A Call for Service Provision, Research, and Action

Omar Martinez, JD, MPH [postdoctoral research fellow] and

HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies at the New York State Psychiatric Institute and Columbia University

Guadalupe Kelle, RN [executive director]

Casa Mateo/Latino Action League, Inc., in Indianapolis, Indiana

Omar Martinez: om2222@columbia.edu; Guadalupe Kelle: gkelle@casamateo.org

Human trafficking, also referred to as trafficking in persons, is a crime typically hidden within communities and societies. According to the U.S. Department of State, human trafficking involves recruiting, supplying, transporting, and/or obtaining persons for involuntary labor or repayment of debt by the use of coercion, force, or fraud. Human trafficking can include a wide variety of forced labor, including commercial sex work (prostitution, exotic dancing, and pornography), personal service (domestic or sexual servitude), forced labor in sweatshops, manual labor at agricultural or construction sites, forced employment in nail salons, and various jobs within the hotel and food service industries.

Sex Trafficking of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Individuals

LGBT sex trafficking is commonly overlooked and rarely reported by local and national governments. The underreporting of sex trafficking among this population makes it difficult to understand the specific nature of the crimes and the total number of people affected. Taking this into consideration, this article summarizes some of the limited data available regarding the challenges and issues affecting LGBT victims of sex trafficking.

While a majority of victims of human trafficking are domestically trafficked, i.e., forced into labor for another's profit within their own countries by persons of the same nationality, those who are trafficked beyond borders go through a migration process. Examples of documented migration cases include Caribbean and Latin American LGBTs ending up in Western Europe, African victims being found in Europe (particularly Scotland), and African LGBT victims of Arab Gulf-based trafficking rings who end up as sex slaves for the wealthy in United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

LGBT individuals are effectively prevented from accessing the outside world. Due to the hidden nature of same-sex prostitution and the stigma associated with being LGBT, LGBT sex trafficking is even less likely than trafficking in heterosexuals to be reported to local authorities. In addition, immigration status and the anti-immigration rhetoric in the local jurisdiction add to public health and legal concerns of victims. As a result, LGBT individuals fall into political and social traps that require focused attention from legal and health professionals.

Many companies may be unwittingly enabling human trafficking and related forms of exploitation.

The trafficking of gay men is a serious issue with its own particular set of difficulties. Because sexual violence against males is considered taboo in most societies, many male victims are constrained by societal barriers from reporting their ordeals. Environmental factors contribute to the lack of reporting, including the absence of services available for men.

LGBT victims face unique and distinct health challenges. These challenges include physical trauma from torture and daily mental abuse, which results in profound depression and anxiety; substance abuse problems; physical and domestic violence; and exposure to tuberculosis and communicable diseases, including HIV. In fact, sex trafficking has been linked to the spread of HIV/AIDS. This link has important consequences for individuals and overall public health policies. Forced into commercial sex work, LGBT individuals who are trafficked are at high risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, which increases the risk for contracting HIV. Sex trafficking victims are also often subject to violent or dangerous sex practices that allow the virus to more easily enter the body. Sex trafficking has additionally been associated with contributing to new strains of the virus that are resistant to treatment. More research, health promotion, and awareness are needed to address the wide range of health disparities affecting LGBT victims of sex trafficking.

LGBT Youth and Sex Trafficking

At first glance, adolescents who work in the commercial sex industry may be identified as prostitutes. As prostitution is illegal in most countries, adolescents may initially be labeled as criminals. However, since sex trafficking and prostitution involve the sale of sex and sexual acts, adolescents are actually, according to the legal criteria, the victims of criminal activity, i.e., of sex trafficking. Specifically, adolescents who are forced into commercial sex acts through the use of coercion, fraud, or threats are considered victims of sex trafficking regardless of their age, and any person younger than age 18 involved in any form of commercial sexual exploitation (e.g., prostitution, pornography, sex tourism, and stripping) is considered the victim of the crime of sex trafficking of a minor. The legal criteria or definitions, which provide additional legal protection to victims, are provided under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which was adopted by the U.S. Congress in 2000 and reauthorized and revised in 2003, 2005, and 2008.

Crimes committed against child trafficking victims (e.g., threats, extortion, theft of documents or property, false imprisonment, aggravated or sexual assault, pimping, rape, and murder) result in an immeasurable amount of short- and long-term physical, mental, and emotional harm. Minors are targeted more frequently because they are easy to manipulate and unable to protect themselves. LGBT minors who are homeless are at the highest risk for sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. According to the U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless (www.nationalhomeless.org), homeless LGBT youth are much more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking than other homeless youths. For instance, only 20 percent of homeless youth are LGBT in the United States, and 58.7 percent of them are exploited

through sexual prostitution. This is a much higher rate than the 33.4 percent of heterosexual homeless youth that are at risk of sexual exploitation on the street.

Lack of reporting limits the ability to protect LGBT youth. If local publications and news channels do not report on the prevalence of human trafficking and on the disproportionate number of our homeless and runaway youth that are LGBT, it creates a perception that LGBT human trafficking and youth homelessness are issues outside the community or are issues only affecting the “Western world.” Increasing awareness of the worldwide prevalence of such issues will lead to a productive debate in society that could potentially tap into the core issues affecting LGBT homeless and LGBT youth at risk of sex trafficking.

A Call for Action

A call for action is needed in the legal and public health fields in order to effect change. In particular, there is a need to address the issues described above in all communities that are vulnerable and targeted for sex trafficking—including LGBT communities.

Legal professionals and public health providers need to educate victims and the broader public about the resources and referrals available for LGBT victims of sex trafficking. Some of these include the United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN GIFT) and the Global Forum on MSM and HIV (MSMGF). These resources and referrals can serve as empowerment mechanisms for victims of sex trafficking. In particular, in the United States, there are several potential immigration protections and remedies available for victims of crimes and trafficking, including T and U visas and asylum claims. The T visa is for persons who have suffered severe forms of human trafficking, who have assisted in the investigation or prosecution of traffickers, and who would suffer extreme hardship upon being forced to leave the United States. The U visa protects material witnesses to a wide range of local, federal, or state crimes, including trafficking and other sexual crimes. Asylum claims based on LGBT status may be successful if they are based on a well-founded fear of persecution in the country of origin. The significance of the U visa among those who are victims of domestic violence and crime in the United States merits particular attention.

LGBT sex trafficking is commonly overlooked and rarely reported by local and national governments.

Nation states should abide by and promote the current global legal protections for victims of sex trafficking: the 2000 United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime; the 2000 Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children; the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the 2000 Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography. In addition, local law enforcement agencies should implement a variety of policies to encourage the reporting of sex trafficking of LGBT individuals, emphasize the criminal nature of these offenses, and address the code of silence and stigma associated with the crimes.

Public health policy and legal strategies must be implemented in order to reach those nations that still criminalize homosexuality or same-sex behaviors. Examples of such nations

include Jamaica and many African countries, where there might be less reporting and less criminalization of LGBT sex trafficking. The criminalization of homosexuality coupled with the state-sanctioned stigma and the harassment of vulnerable elements of the population, has not been effective in addressing critical issues. For instance, Jamaica has the second highest rate of HIV infection in the Caribbean, with a high HIV prevalence rate among men who have sex with men; the infection rate now stands at 38 percent. Rates of infection in Jamaica are also high among sex workers and transgender people, although little is known about the latter population.

In general, an inclusive agenda to promote awareness, criminalization of traffickers, and service provision for sex trafficking victims will channel resources toward hidden networks of sexual exploitation. Global legal and health agencies could lead initiatives to increase the awareness and promotion of health services and targeted resources that address the growing health needs of LGBT victims of sex trafficking.

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Latino Action League Inc. provides bilingual HIV/AIDS and health education, prevention support, and other social services to the Latino community through collaboration with local and state governmental agencies and public and private sector organizations, including research institutions such as the Center for Sexual Health Promotion at Indiana University.

Table 1
List of Referrals and Resources Available for LGBT Individuals Who Are Victims of Sex Trafficking

International trafficking	U.S. Department of HHS, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), (202) 205-4582, childtrafficking@acf.hhs.gov
	Polaris Project, www.polarisproject.org
	United Nations Department on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html?ref=menuaside
	UNICEF, www.unicef.org/protection/index_3717.html
	UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, www.childtrafficking.org
	International Labour Organization, www.ilo.org/global/lang-en/index.htm
	International Organization for Migration, www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home.html
	The United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN GIFT), www.ungift.org
	Free the Slaves, www.freetheslaves.net/SSLPage.aspx
	Vital Voices, www.vitalvoices.org
	Shared Hope International, http://sharedhope.org
	Child Rescue Association of North America, www.facebook.com/ChildRescue
Other resources	Division of Gender, Sexuality and Health at Columbia University, http://gendersexualityhealth.org/hivcenter/hivcenteroverview.html
	Social Intervention Group at Columbia University School of Social Work, www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/sig
	Shared Hope International, (866) HER-LIFE, www.sharedhope.org
	Freedom Network USA, www.freedomnetworkusa.org
	Family Violence Prevention Fund, http://endabuse.org
	Global Forum on MSM and HIV (MSMGF), www.msmgf.org

Note: Links to organizations are provided for informational purposes and do not imply endorsement by the authors. Also, none of these organizations are restricted to the needs and advocacy of LGBT individuals. Rather, they address the needs of all victims of sex trafficking.

Table 2

Action Items

Policy	1. Local and national governments should create a criminal system to track cases of LGBT sex trafficking and push for accountability among perpetrators.
	2. The United Nations and global organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation should increase accountability to nation states to build strategies to better access the needs of LGBT sex trafficking victims and increase criminalization of those involved in sex trafficking.
	3. Promote collaboration among nations on issues pertinent to LGBT sex trafficking. In particular, partnership and collaborations should be established among sending and receiving nations.
	4. Increase capacity building by training health providers, legal professionals, and stakeholders about the issues and resources pertinent to LGBT sex trafficking.
	5. Promote the “three Ps” of combating human trafficking: “prosecution, prevention, and protection of victims,” regardless of sexual orientation.
	6. Conduct grassroots outreach and advocacy on LGBT sex trafficking issues.
	7. Develop and provide LGBT sex trafficking awareness trainings for law enforcement, first responders, and the public.
	8. Promote and create “safe places” in communities where victims of sex trafficking can come, go, and share their stories and be provided instant care. The city of Gainesville, Florida, for example, has launched a successful campaign to address the issue of sex trafficking by transforming its Regional Transit System into a “Safe Place.” Bus drivers are now sporting yellow and black diamond-shaped “Safe Place” stickers to show that they can be resources for homeless children and teens and children in crisis.
Public Health	9. More research is needed related to the determinants of health, as well as factors and barriers to care among LGBT asylum seekers.
	10. Increase targeted screening at health facilities for LGBT individuals with a focus on LGBT youth. Some questions that could be asked by the physicians include the following: Are you required to ask permission for physical necessities (e.g., food, water, sleep, medications)? Is anyone forcing you to do anything that you don't want to do? Have you ever received threats against you or your family if you do not perform sex acts? This screening instrument was developed to screen for all trafficking victims, and an adapted version is necessary to respond to the unique needs and challenges faced by LGBT trafficking victims (i.e., a version that addresses the stigma for being LGBT, discrimination, fear of disclosure of same-sex behaviors, and other LGBT concerns).
	11. Increase provision of health and other services for LGBT homeless youth, who are at the highest risk of being targeted for sex-trafficking.