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## Sex Trafficking: A Systematic Review of Operational Definitions

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Sex trafficking: A systematic review of operational definitions

By

Firdavs Khaydarov

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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In

Clinical Psychology

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May 2020

May 2020

Sex trafficking: A systematic review of operational definitions

Firdavs Khaydarov

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation constitutes about 59% of detected victims of trafficking, which makes it the most prevalent form of human exploitation globally. In the existing literature, there is a lack of a precise and consistent conceptualization of this phenomenon, which poses a significant challenge in its study. The purpose of this inquiry is to fill in the gap in the existing literature by identifying and analyzing existing operational definitions of sex trafficking pertinent to psychological scholarly literature.

**Methods:** Meta-ethnographic approach to qualitative research was utilized in this study. To identify pertinent literature, a systematic review of the scholarly articles across multiple ProQuest databases took place. A specific emphasis was placed on scientific literature inquiring into sex trafficking in the adult (>18) population.

**Results:** The results of the study indicated that 33% of the publications utilized operational definition of sex trafficking provided by the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA), followed by 30% provided by Palermo Protocol. A significant portion of publication (30%) did not employ a definition.

**Conclusions:** The overall findings suggest that the most salient characteristics of sex trafficking employed in definitions were the presence of act of *recruitment, harboring* and *transportation* with the means of *coercion, force, fraud* and *deception* for the purpose of the *commercial sex act*.

*Keywords:* operational definition, sex trafficking, meta-ethnography

Dedicated to my beloved parents for their years of selfless commitment to our family.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In the turn of the 19th century, with the convergence of the monetary system, developments in shipping and communications technologies, global markets began to emerge (Obstfeld & Taylor, 2003). The advent of globalization brought about colossal changes in form of the unprecedented tide of capital, services, and labor flow among nearly every nation in the world (Jones, Engstrom, Hilliard, & Diaz, 2007). In the same period, global migration began to increase. A major long-distance migration flow in the Americas alone constituted 55-58 million between 1846-1940, with 65 percent of those migrants settling in the United States (McKeown, 2004). Indeed, the increasing trend of migration among the nations continues to be observed to this date. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in 2015 there were an estimated 244 million international migrants globally, which was a significant increase from an estimated 155 million people in 2000 (McAuliffe, & Ruhs, 2017). Massive migration has not been without far-reaching consequences. Not only are migrants frequently regarded as outsiders in their respective host countries, but they also lack legal protections and rights which makes them particularly vulnerable to exploitation (Jones et al., 2007). Nowhere is exploitation more apparent than in human trafficking, which has been regarded by some scholars as the “dark side of globalization” (Kempadoo, Sanghera, & Pattanaik, 2015, p 6).

Human trafficking is not a recent phenomenon; records of slave trade exist from the beginning of civilization itself. What sets modern-day slavery apart from its precedent historical form is that exploiting vulnerable human beings is far more profitable today than it was when the sale of human beings was conducted in open markets (Sigmon, 2008). When trading slaves was legal, slaveholders invested large sums of money to legally purchase and own people to work the land or for other forms of servitude. Today, without a substantial amount of investment,



exploiters can generate immense profits from trafficking other human beings into forced labor or servitude in a variety of settings (Sigmon, 2008). Furthermore, it is often the case that trafficked individuals undergo psychological and physical abuse. The research literature indicates that the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among this population are common, with a substantial increase in substance abuse and self-harming behavior (Borschmann, Oram, Kinner, Dutta, Zimmerman & Howard, 2017).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that human trafficking generates approximately \$150 billion in profit globally each year (ILO, 2014). Victims of trafficking are primarily trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labor. Other forms of exploitation also have been noted, for instance, reports indicate that some trafficked victims are being used as beggars, forced or sham marriages, organ removal, or child soldiers. Moreover, different patterns of trafficking with different forms of exploitation have been observed among different regions. Trafficking children for illegal adoption, for example, is primarily reported in Central and South American countries, while forced marriage is commonly reported in parts of South-East Asia (UNODC, 2018).

It has been noted that different countries play different roles in trafficking, some functioning as sending, transit, and receiving countries. For instance, the U.S. has been regarded as a predominantly receiving country, while countries such as Ukraine as primarily a sending country. On the other hand, Thailand, it has been noted, functions as both sending and receiving, as well as a transit country (Jones et al., 2007). Given the complex nature of this phenomenon, it is difficult to precisely determine what factors contribute to an individual being trafficked. Nonetheless, available evidence suggests that poverty, social unrest, governmental corruption, population pressure and lack of opportunity are determinants of trafficking *from* a country, while

the availability of employment, economic well-being, opportunity, governmental corruption, and demographic profile are determinants of trafficking *to* a country (Bales, 2007).

In the last decade, sex trafficking has become a monumental global issue because of the adverse impact it has on vast number of individuals. Trafficking for sexual exploitation, which constitutes about 59% of detected victims of trafficking, is the most prevalent form of human exploitation globally. The highest revenue generated from sex trafficking is in Asia, with an estimate of \$32 billion annually, that is mainly attributed to a large number of victims present in the region. On the other hand, annual profit per victim is highest in developed economies, with an estimate of \$80,000 per victim (ILO, 2014). Due to the immense amount of profits generated from sex trafficking, by some estimates, it has become the third most profitable illicit activity following the trafficking of drugs and arms (UNICEF, 2005). Women constitute 68% of victims, while girls account for 26% of trafficked victims for sexual exploitation. Both men and boys, on the other hand, account for combined six percent of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2018).

Sex trafficking is detected in European sub-region, in North and Central America and the Caribbean, and East Asia and the Pacific (UNODC, 2018). In fact, the U.S. ranks as the world's second-largest destination country, following Germany, for women and children for the purpose of sexual exploitation (Schauer & Wheaton, 2006). The estimates regarding the numbers of individuals trafficked into the U.S. each year varies considerably. According to initial estimates presented in the of The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (2000) approximately 50,000 individuals were trafficked into the U.S. predominantly from Mexico and the Philippines. In 2003, the U.S. State Department reported the estimates were reduced significantly to 18,000 – 20,000, while subsequent reports 2005 and 2006 altered to an estimate

of 14,500 – 17,00 individuals trafficked into the U.S. (United States, 2009). In a report presented by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2007), 1264 foreign nationals were certified as victims of human trafficking. Among adults ( $n = 1153$ ) and minors ( $n = 111$ ), the victims were disproportionately female. Trafficking cases presented above predominantly focus on international trafficking victims into the U.S., yet according to some estimates, 199,000 incidents of sexual exploitation of minors occur within the U.S. Federal Human Trafficking Report (2018) indicated that over 51 percent of active human trafficking cases involved children in sex trafficking cases (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009). To address the issue of sex trafficking, U.S. government enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA) which has been reauthorized in 2003, 2005, 2008 and 2013 (Doonan, 2016).

Over the last two decades, there have been coordinated effort among governments to combat sex trafficking. Yet the policies enacted to combat this phenomenon, at times, have resulted in adverse consequences. For instance, according to Bernstein (2010), sex trafficking is becoming increasingly conflated with adult sex work in public policy and media. He goes on to point out that trafficking as it is presented in the current legal framework and international protocols could encompass other forms of exploitative labor, yet most emphasis, as it stands, is diverted to combat far fewer instances of sex trafficking. To make this point, Bernstein (2010) quotes Brian McLaren, a progressive evangelical author and activist, who stated in an interview “It’s disturbing that nonprofits can raise money to fight sex trafficking in Cambodia but it’s much harder to raise awareness about bad trade policies in the U.S. that keep Cambodia poor so that it needs sex trafficking” (p.49). Furthermore, Bernstein (2010) points out a parallel between the moral panic surrounding sex trafficking and the white slavery scare in the early twentieth century.

The moral panic surrounding sex trafficking is apparent in such a phenomenon as “Super Bowl sex trafficking.” The Super Bowl is the annual championship game of the National Football league which occurs in the U.S. According to Martin and Hill (2019), between 2010 and 2016 a vast number of print media, 76 percent, reported stories that established a connection between the Super Bowl with commercial sex and sex trafficking. Media outlets presented “Super Bowl sex trafficking” as a pressing issue for the hosting cities, which usually resulted in increased policing of sex workers. Yet, the empirical evidence does not bear the myth created surrounding sex trafficking and this particular sporting event (Martin & Hill, 2019). There is also empirical evidence which suggests that media’s sensationalistic portrayals of the issue have resulted in conceptual confusion between trafficking, smuggling and illegal immigration (Houston-Kolnik, Todd, & Wilson, 2016).

Disentangling sex work from trafficking is notoriously difficult because estimating the extent to which the use of force and coercion in trafficking has been largely guesswork (Zhang, 2009). The conflation of sex trafficking with sex work has, in turn, had a significant impact on those working in the sex industry by choice or circumstance and those working by force or fraud (Vanwesenbeeck, 2017). As Vanwesenbeeck (2017) pointed out, sex work policies have been largely reduced to policies against trafficking. These policies have been characterized as “waterbed politics” in that the sex workers have been pushed and shoved around with undue restrictions and regulations. According to the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE) criminalization of sex work increases the risk of violence, arrests, blackmail, deportation, and other human rights violations. Indeed, Vanwesenbeeck (2017) in her thorough review of literature, highlighted the harms done to sex workers due to criminalization

in form of escalating risks of STIs/HIV, increase in violence, disruption to working routines and relations, and reducing access to healthcare, etc.

### ***Current Study***

Having a clear and consistent operational definition of sex trafficking is important when studying this phenomenon. The operational definition will play a fundamental role in data collecting and in particular it will significantly affect the subsequent depiction of the studied phenomenon. To the author's knowledge, there is no existing literature that explicitly examines operational definitions of sex trafficking utilized in the psychological research literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to fill in the gap in the existing literature by identifying and analyzing existing operational definitions of sex trafficking pertinent to scientific literature in psychological sciences. Moreover, a meta-ethnographic approach was employed for the current investigation. Meta-ethnography is a form of qualitative research that is used to synthesizing understanding from ethnographic accounts. It is characterized as analogous to meta-analysis (Noblit & Hare, 1988). Meta-ethnography was originally developed for the field of education and its scope of use has been extended to other areas of science (Cosco, Prina, Perales, Stephan, & Brayne, 2014). It is the author's contention to determine the extent of the utility of meta-ethnography as a psychological research methodology.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review is organized into four parts. In the first part, historical precedence for the coinage of the term sex trafficking is presented. In the second part, conceptual difficulties associated with defining sex trafficking and other closely intertwined issues are examined. Then a brief discussion of important stockholders who drive the narratives surrounding this issue is highlighted. Lastly, some methodological challenges associated with the prevalence data of this phenomenon would be presented.

### *Past and Present*

Historical records pertinent to sexual exploitation dates back to ancient times which was prevalent among most nations (Thompson, & Haley, 2018). It was common after a conquest to enslave the defeated population, as evident from Biblical records when Moses ordered Israelites to exploit 32000 girls after defeating the Midianites, which is reported in passages such as this: "...all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him keep alive for yourselves..." (Numbers 31:18). The same attitude is observed among ancient Greece, as passages from Homer's Iliad attest: "Let there be no scramble to get home, then, till every man of you has slept with a Trojan wife and been paid for the toil and groans that Helen caused him" (Vikman, 2005 p.24). Occurrences presented above were observed among many other ancient nations. A significant distinction between sex trafficking and sexual slavery rests on the fact that slavery was a legitimate enterprise recognized by the states, while the former is not.

The earliest mention of the notion of sex trafficking began to emerge in the latter part of the 19th century. Josephine Butler was an important figure who helped to propel the movement against the procurement of women for "immoral purposes" across borders. Her vigorous campaign against the British Contagious Disease Acts led to the founding of the International

Abolitionist Federation (IAF) in 1875. For abolitionists, prostitution was regarded as an outrage against all womanhood. In her writings, Josephine Butler described the exploitation of women prevalent at the period as: “a system of slavery, of buying and selling of human beings, of oppression, of imprisonment, and of slow murder, which was not for the rich man`s cotton fields but for the secure gratification of man`s lust” (De Vries, 2005 p.44).

With the coming years, a significant shift occurred from prostitution to what has been commonly termed the “white slave trade”. While prostitution was regarded as a sinful aspect of the prevailing society, the white slave trade was regarded as the product of modern industrial society. This view had an important implication, whereby prostitutes were essentially regarded as immoral women, while the white slaves were viewed as exploited innocent girls. The issue of trafficking generated attention from the international community, at the time, due to concerns over the exportation of European women to brothels. The international abolitionist movement lobbied nations to change laws to place a ban on the white slave trade. A significant victory for IAF came in 1904 when the International Agreement for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic was signed by 16 states, which was specifically designed to end trafficking with respect to “whites only.” (De Vries, 2005).

A few years later, in 1910, the International Convention for the Suppression of the White Slave Traffic was adopted. The treaty bound its signatories to “severely punish any person who hired, abducted or enticed for immoral purposes any women under the age of twenty-one” and those who use “violence, threats, fraud or any compulsion on a woman over twenty-one to accomplish the same purpose, even if he or she committed the acts constituting the offense in different countries” (Tiefenbrun, 2002 p.146). Unlike the treaty of 1904 which addressed only fraudulent or abusive recruitment of women in another country, the new treaty expanded the

scope of crime to include recruitment for prostitution within national boundaries (Doezema, 2002).

The next significant stage in the development of the notion of sex trafficking came in 1949, with the signing of the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. Article 1 of the treaty states that:

The Parties to the present Convention agree to punish any person who, to gratify the passions of another:

- (1) Procures, entices or leads away, for purposes of prostitution, another person, even with the consent of that person;
  - (2) Exploits the prostitution of another person, even with the consent of that person
- (UNGA, 1949 p.1).

One important aspect of this historic treaty lies in the fact that the distinction between “free” and “forced” prostitution was not made.

In 2000, U.S Congress passed the federal statute of The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA). The purpose of TVPA was to combat trafficking in person to ensure just and effective punishment of traffickers, and to protect their victims. In TVPA, sex trafficking was conceptualized as the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act. Similar to the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others conceptualization of sex trafficking in TVPA had no distinction between “free” and “forced” prostitution. A victim of sex trafficking includes anyone who has received assistance with migration for the purposes of prostitution. But unlike its predecessor, category of Severe Forms of Trafficking in Persons was added:



The term “severe forms of trafficking in persons” means:

- (A) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or
- (B) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery (U.S. Congress, 2000 – sec 103, 8).

Inclusion of the severe form of trafficking provision had an important implication for those trafficked victims who qualified for the provision. Substantial protection was offered in the form of safeguard against inappropriate incarceration, fines, or other penalties for being in the country illegally. Other benefits in the form of visas and work permits, welfare support, and even possibility of permanent residency for those who qualify were provided (U.S. Congress, 2000 - sec 102, 19).

Another important contemporary conceptualization of sex trafficking was introduced in 2000 by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol). According to the Palermo Protocol, “trafficking in persons” is defined as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced

labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs (U.N., 2000 Article 3 p.2).

The protocol further qualifies the conceptualization with Article 3 (b), which states that consent is irrelevant when the victim is a child or when any *means* noted in Article 3 (a) is utilized (U.N., 2000a).

### ***Conceptual Issues***

Sex trafficking is closely associated with other issues such as migration and sex work. In this part of the literature review, a brief overview of the trafficking and its relation to different forms of migration would be discussed. A specific emphasis would be placed on disentangling the issue of trafficking from smuggling. Furthermore, a distinction between sex trafficking and sex work would be made, primarily revolving around the notion of *consent*.

### **Migration**

The overlap between issues of migration and trafficking has posed a significant challenge for both academics and policymakers. For instance, if an individual, with assistance from a third party, migrates to a foreign country to work in the sex industry willingly - would they be considered an economic migrant or a trafficked individual? This individual might fail to meet the criteria for sex trafficking victims under the guidelines of *trafficking in person* laid out in the Palermo Protocol, on the other hand, they would qualify under *sex trafficking* victim in TVPA. For policymakers, it is crucial to be able to distinguish between victims of trafficking, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants.

First of all, it is important to highlight that seeking asylum is not a criminal act. An asylum seeker is a person who meets the UN criteria for consideration of refugee status. A *refugee* is defined as a person who:

owing to a well- founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country... (Iselin & Adams, 2003 p. 2)

On the other hand, the lack of conceptual clarity between *smuggling* and *trafficking* allows room for confusion and conflation between the terms. According to the Palermo Protocol *smuggling* refers to “the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly a financial or other material benefits, of the illegal entry of a person into a state party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident” (U.N., 2000b). An important distinction that can be made between *smuggling* and *trafficking* is the transnational nature of smuggling, whereas trafficking occurring both within and across states. Palermo Protocol further notes that the notion of legal or illegal entry to a state does not apply to *trafficking*, whereas *smuggling* can only refer to illegal entry. Finally, smuggling and trafficking substantially differ in the levels of agency ascribed to the individual. In the case of smuggling some level of agency attributed to the individual, while with the later agency is almost nonexistent (Campana & Varese, 2015). From these conceptual frameworks, a trafficked individual is most often viewed as a victim of crime, whereas the smuggled individual is regarded complicit in crime committed against the state. Consequently, whether an individual is considered *trafficked* or *smuggled* in large part determines the rights that they may receive in the country of destination.

The core elements of the Palermo Protocol’s conceptualization of trafficking, such as “deception” and “coercion” can serve as a valuable indicator in distinguishing this phenomenon from migration, smuggling and other forms of labor. Nonetheless, ample criticism has been leveled against Palermo Protocol conceptualization of both trafficking and smuggling. Notably,

Hathaway (2008) argued that trafficking is defined too narrowly, while Salt (2000) argued for the combination of both trafficking and smuggling. Researchers also have pointed out that adaptation of policies towards trafficking and smuggling were largely driven in part due to growing intolerance of all forms of irregular migration (Gallagher, 2002). While the distinction between smuggling and trafficking is important for the states to regulate migrant entry into the respective nations, it is important to highlight that they are not necessarily helpful for victims of sexual exploitation.

### **Sex Work**

Because of the lack of specificity prevailing in contemporary definitions of sex trafficking, contentions have risen on the precise interpretation of what constitutes sex trafficking. One such central issue is of *consent*, to be precise, the role of consent role in providing demarcation between sex trafficking and sex work. The notion of sex work is in itself a complex construct, present in a variety of different forms (Harcourt, 2005). For the purpose of this review, the definition of sex work provided by Vanwesenbeeck (2001) will be utilized: *sex work* defined as the explicit and direct exchange of sexual services for any monetary gain. Throughout the discussion, the word prostitution will be interchangeably used with sex work. Historically, it has been noted that efforts to combat trafficking have ended up serving justification for taking measures that are oppressive against sex workers. Activist groups have emerged to address the adverse consequences experienced by those who, in their own volition, chose sex work as their occupation (Doezema, 2002).

Within the discourse of sex work, two major frameworks have emerged. One is compatible with the traditional abolitionism view, which originated in radical feminist thought, that postulates prostitution as the epitome of women's oppression (Outshoorn, 2005). While

another framework, developed out of liberal and socialist feminist thought, regarded prostitution as a form of labor which ought to be protected as an occupation (Outshoorn, 2005). Inability to resolve deep division about what sex work is and its relationship to trafficking culminated in full display in the process of drafting Palermo Protocol. During the two years in which the Palermo negotiation took place, the Global Alliance Against Trafficking Women (GAATW), inspired by the global sex worker rights movement, advocated recognition of sex work as a legitimate form of occupation. On the other hand, led by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) argue that prostitution is a form of sexual violence that can never be consented to or chosen as a profession. These differences were most ferociously fought out around the pivotal term: *consent* (Doezema, 2005).

### ***Stakeholders***

Various stakeholders play an important role in driving the discussion surrounding sex trafficking. When discussing sex trafficking it is important to explore the influence of these stakeholders over the policy and research with regards to this issue. In the present review, the emphasis will be placed on two such stakeholders: Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) and Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International (CATW).

#### ***Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW)***

In 1994, activists who were concerned about the contemporary discourse surrounding trafficking in women established the Global Alliance Against Trafficking in Women (GAATW) in Thailand (<https://gaatw.org/about-us>). Over the next two decades, GAATW morphed into a network of over 100 organizational members and a wide community of partners and allies. The alliance came into existence from a collective consensus to identify factors contributing to trafficking, while utilizing the human right framework, and centering around voices of trafficked

persons for policy decisions. GAATW highlights the importance of active alteration of the political, economic, social, and legal systems and structures that contributes to the perpetuation and maintenance of trafficking in persons and other violations of human rights.

GAATW has taken pro-rights or sex workers approach, which views sex work as a possible option to generate income, which should be respected (Outshoorn, 2005). Their views entail that individuals have the right to sexual self-determination, even it means individuals choosing to engage in sex work. Adherents to this framework view the dismissal of consent as infantilizing and disempowering the choices that adults make (Meshkovska, Siegel, Stutterheim, & Bos, 2015). Individuals can be, and some are, victims of sex trafficking, but that does not entail that all those who cross borders to engage in sex work are victims of forced prostitution. In fact, many do migrate in order to work in the sex industry to make a living (Agustín, 2006).

Furthermore, adherents to the sex work position argue that criminalizing prostitution has only driven sex industries underground, leaving sex workers at a potentially greater risk for harm and exploitation (Limoncelli, 2009). Because under the given framework prostitution is regarded as a form of labor, advocacy groups focus on policy solutions that enable them to fight forced prostitution and improve working conditions for those who engage in sex work (Outshoorn, 2005). It would mean efforts to improve working conditions, right to employment benefits such as healthcare and social security, and more generally to enable sex workers to enjoy the same labor rights available to other forms of labor. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight a particular weakness inherent to this framework, that is, the difficulty in drawing a line between forced prostitution and sex work as a choice.

### ***Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International (CATW)***

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) is a worldwide network of a non-

governmental organization dedicated to eliminating human trafficking, prostitution, and other forms of commercial sex ([www.catwinternational.org](http://www.catwinternational.org)). A central question to the abolitionist approach to prostitution is why men have the right to “demand that women’s bodies are sold as commodities in the capitalist market” (Miriam, 2005 p.2). This discourse, which has been called “the sexual domination discourse,” views prostitution as the epitome of women’s oppression (Outshoorn, 2005). Specifically, prostitution is regarded as sexual slavery, which is an extreme manifestation of sexual violence against women. According to this discourse, trafficking is closely tied to prostitution, as the legitimization of prostitution would pave the way to more trafficking. Policy wise, abolitionists advocate to abolish prostitution and penalize all those profiting from sexual exploitation, except the prostitutes (Outshoorn, 2005). Abolitionists view consent in the context of human trafficking only make a distinction between “deserving and undeserving” victims (Meshkovska et al., 2015 p.383).

What is needed is an inclusive, unambiguous definition that protects and provide support to all victims, and offers no loopholes for traffickers (Raymond, 2002). Abolitionists acknowledge the fact that many sell sexual services as a way to secure needs for themselves and their family, however, what they oppose to is whether selling sex ought to be a legitimate economic choice for women (Miriam, 2005). Furthermore, they argue that sex work neither can or should be regarded as empowering for women, when the whole practice is driven by male demand (Miriam, 2005). Abolitionists argue that when pro-rights advocates destigmatize and dignify prostitution, not only do they inadvertently dignify the sex industry, but also legitimize buyers as customers and pimps as “third party business agents or brokers” (Raymond, 2002 p.496). A common criticism levied against abolitionists is their tendency to rob individuals’ agency, typified in their common representation of victims as a naïve woman deprived of the

ability to choose and lacking agency (Zhang, 2009). It is notable that the past abolitionist framework played as a pivotal instrument in restricting young women from traveling altogether, in order to stop sex trafficking from occurring (Doezema, 2002).

The disagreement between the two divergent views on sex trafficking has not been resolved to this date. For instance, according to CATW interpretation of the Palermo Protocol, any migration pertinent to prostitution falls under trafficking (Raymond, 2002), while GAATW maintains that the inclusion of “force” or “coercion” in the protocol clearly indicates demarcation between sex work and trafficking (Doezema, 2005). Because the definition of sex trafficking laid out in the Palermo Protocol does not explicitly favor either camp, responsibility has shifted to individual governments in whether to treat sex work as labor or to criminalize it, thereby prosecuting those who engage in sex work in the name of trafficking.

### *Methodological Issues*

Over the past two-decade, global public awareness concerning trafficking in person has increased dramatically. The same period also witnessed a substantial increase in the number of studies and publications on the same topic. Yet, from existing studies, not all use a precise definition, and neither is there a consistent definition of trafficking across a multitude of publications (Nawyn, Birdal, & Glogower, 2013). The absence of a precise and consistent definition of trafficking poses a significant challenge in thoroughly studying this phenomenon. According to Nawyn et al. (2013), existing empirical data suggests that the “modern-day slavery” described by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and government agencies bears little resemblance to Trans-Atlantic African Slave Trade which it has been widely equated.

Moreover, researchers have pointed out that the reports provided by governmental and nongovernmental agencies tended to overestimate the number of trafficking victims (Musto,



2009). Likewise, there is a multitude of research that points out the discordance among various statistical data about the prevalence of this phenomenon. For instance, according to a 2009 report compiled by International Labor Organization (ILO), an estimate of 12.3 million people find themselves in forced labor or commercial sexual servitude, while Bales (2005) estimated 27 million people living in slavery-like conditions (Silver, Karakurt, & Boysen, 2015). Given these divergent estimates about the prevalence of trafficking, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime acknowledges that “statistical goal [accurate prevalence] may prove to be unachievable” (Jones et al., 2007 p.108).

Most of the challenge in studying human trafficking stems from the fact that the population under inquiry are a *hidden population*. According to Tyldum and Brunovskis (2005) “A hidden population is a group of individuals for whom the size and boundaries are unknown, and for whom no sampling frame exists” (p.18). There are other factors, such as, the stakeholders holding access to relevant information and having political agendas that determine how the information is utilized. In his seminal work, Ronald Weitzer (2005) accused a moral crusade as driving the current discussions on human trafficking in Western countries. As he points out:

in no area of the social sciences has ideology contaminated knowledge more pervasively than in writings on the sex industry. Too often in this area, the canons of scientific inquiry are suspended and research deliberately skewed to serve a particular political agenda. Much of this work has been done by writers who regard the sex industry as a despicable institution and who are active in campaigns to abolish it (p.934).

There is some evidence which points out the lack of empirical data, and a strong reliance on anecdotal evidence in the human trafficking literature. In their review of human trafficking literature, Gozdzia and Bump (2008) determined that more than half of journal articles that they

reviewed (82%) contained nonempirical data. Furthermore, the estimates of trafficking have varied greatly, in part due to more forms of exploitation being identified (Nawyn et al., 2013). For instance, legal low-wage and dangerous jobs were included in the “Trafficking in Person Report” provided by the U.S. Department of State only in 2012.

Given these challenges and discrepancies, Feingold stated that “the trafficking field is best characterized as one of numerical certainty and statistical doubt. Trafficking numbers provide the false precision of quantification, while lacking any of the supports of statistical rigor” (Feingold, 2017 p.1). It is therefore imperative to formulate adequate methodologies for data collection which could enable policymakers and researchers alike to have an accurate representation of this phenomenon. After all, there is always a possibility that policies and interventions developed based on inaccurate findings might be ineffective. For instance, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) allocates about \$120 million annually to combat “modern day slavery” yet little is known about the effectiveness of their programs (Dottridge et al., 2014).

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The present inquiry was primarily conducted using qualitative research methodology. Although qualitative research has not yet reached the same degree of acceptance as the quantitative methodology, nonetheless this approach to research has been continually refined over the years. Continual development in qualitative methodology has given rise to various methodologies and greater acceptance among the research community (Britten et al., 2002). Refinements to qualitative research methodology is especially important for social behavioral sciences, such as psychology, where it has been utilized significantly. The current literature

review will be organized and analyzed using the meta-ethnographic approach to qualitative research.

### **Meta-ethnography**

Meta-ethnography is a research method used to produce interpretive translations, ground narratives or theories by integrating and comparing the findings or metaphors of different qualitative studies (Siau & Long, 2005). Unlike meta-analysis, which reduces quantitative studies into averages, meta-ethnography expands qualitative findings into a comprehensive whole (Clemmens, 2003). A meta-ethnography is intended to enable:

1. More interpretive literature reviews
2. Critical examination of multiple accounts of an event, situation, and so forth
3. Systematic comparison of case studies to draw cross-case conclusions
4. A way of talking about our work and comparing it to the works of others
5. Synthesis of ethnographic studies (Noblit & Hare, 1988)

Meta-ethnography was developed by Noblit and Hare (1988), which was primarily used in the field of education. Nonetheless, its scope of utility has widened to include other fields, such as health sciences (Cosco et al., 2014). Noblit and Hare outlined a seven-step process for conducting a meta-ethnography:

#### **Step 1: Getting started**

Similar to other forms of inquiry, meta-ethnography begins with an interest in some setting, topic, or issue. In this step, the question of how can an investigator inform their intellectual interest by examining pertinent literature is answered.

#### **Step 2: Determine what is relevant to the initial interest**

In the second step, in order to determine what studies or accounts are relevant, knowing who the audience for the synthesis is, and what is credible and interesting to them becomes important. After deciding what studies or accounts are relevant, identifying available accounts to address investigation comes next.

#### Step 3: Reading the studies

The third step involves careful analysis of the included studies. It is suggested that the texts should be reread, so that important metaphors can be identified.

#### Step 4: Determining how the studies are related

While performing synthesis, the various studies must be “put together.” Therefore, it is imperative to identify the relationships between accounts that are being synthesized. In this stage, a list of key metaphors, phrases, ideas, and/or concepts can be created in order to juxtapose them later on.

#### Step 5: Translating the studies into one another

Translating involves treating the accounts as analogies, where one account “is similar to another except...” (Noblit & Hare, 1988 p. 28). An adequate translation should contain essential metaphors/or concepts of each account in their relation to other key metaphors or concepts in that account. This makes translations unique because it affords investigators to have more of a holistic account of the phenomenon studied at hand.

#### Step 6: Synthesizing translations

In the meta-ethnographic approach, synthesis refers to the act of making a whole into something more than the parts in themselves imply. When the number of studies is large, it inevitably leads to large numbers of translations. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify some

metaphors and/or concepts that can encompass many other accounts, thereby allowing a second level of synthesis.

#### Step 7: Expressing the synthesis

For the expression of translations to achieve a synthesis, they must be presented in some comprehensive form. The aim of the expressed form is to enable the audience to perceive juxtapositions of different accounts and their relation/differences to one another.

### **Present Study**

In the present study, I was interested in identifying existing operational definitions of sex trafficking pertinent to scholarly psychology literature and synthesize conceptual accounts into a comprehensive whole. Operational definitions derived from different publications served as data points for this inquiry.

#### **Study inclusion**

For this study, only articles relevant to sex trafficking, either primary or secondary subject matter, were included. There would be no geographical restriction regarding the articles' origin, but only articles written in English would be taken into account. A further restriction would be placed in the form of trafficked individuals' age, with specific emphasis on adult (>18) sex trafficking survivors. Lastly, only scholarly articles relevant to psychological research literature published between the years 2000 and present would be taken into consideration.

#### **Search strategy**

A funnel approach was used to conduct a systematic review of the literature across multiple ProQuest databases. ProQuest is a search engine that provides access to 35 databases that contain a wide range of literature across many disciplines and sources. In particular, within ProQuest, the following databases were utilized: PsychARTICLES, PsycINFO, PsycTESTS, and

PTSDpubs. The funnel approach consisted of three distinct phases: broad, median and narrow. During the broad phase, the term “sex trafficking” along with other related terms: “human trafficking,” “modern day slavery,” and “sexual exploitation” were searched in databases (see Table 1). The searched terms were specifically inquired in the abstracts of the literature. While using ProQuest specific phrase operators: “”, and OR were utilized. The quotation mark (“”) served to restrict phrases (verbatim search) while performing the search. The phrase operator *OR*, on the other hand, was used to broaden the search scope of a term by including synonyms or other related variant terms.

In the median phase of the search, the results were further restricted to a specific time frame. The year 2000 was selected as a baseline based on the passage of various important legislations, such as TVPA, that year. Other restrictions were placed in the form of inclusion of peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles and exclusion of other resources, such as periodicals. Only scholarly articles in English were taken into consideration while excluding other languages. Emphasis on English stems from the lack of resources available in translating articles from other languages. Lastly, the age of trafficked individuals would be taken into consideration as inclusion/exclusion criteria, with specific emphasis placed on the adult population (>18). The emphasis on a specific age range was selected based on the researcher's interest in studying this phenomenon in the adult population. After the search completion, the abstracts of the identified articles were reviewed for the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

In the narrow phase, a content analysis of included articles was performed. Since the present study primarily focuses on psychological research literature, six related terms: *psychology*, *psychotherapy*, *mental health*, *mental disorders*, *mental illness*, *intervention*, *sexual abuse*, and *trauma* will play a pivotal role in identifying pertinent literature. The final refinement

came in the form of inclusion of studies whose primary or secondary focus was on adult sex trafficked survivors, while excluding articles that primarily investigated other trafficking-related phenomena, such as commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), etc.

### **Data extraction**

Initially, an abstract review of included articles was conducted to identify relevant literature for full-text extraction. After analyzing abstracts, the process of content analysis and extraction of operational definitions of sex trafficking ensued. Extracted operational definitions were dissolved into essential conceptual components for comparative purposes. Articles which met required qualifications without containing an operation definition were considered for final analysis.

### **Synthesis**

In order to synthesize operational definitions, conceptual components from included studies were categorized into three broad categories: act, means, and purpose. These categories are based on the Action-Means-Purpose Model that is used to describe important components in the conceptualization of human trafficking (Toney-Butler, & Mittel, 2019). For each included article, the operational definition of sex trafficking was analyzed using A-M-P Model to determine the most common elements in comprising the conceptualization of sex trafficking.

### **Expressing the synthesis**

Once the analysis of all articles was completed, the results were presented in a table containing each individual article and their respective number of components based on A-M-P Model. Furthermore, the Wordle software was utilized to give prominence to the most frequently employed words across all operational definitions in order to generate a graphical representation. Lastly, a comprehensive operational definition containing the most commonly used elements (in

accordance to A-M-P Model) in constructing operational definition of sex trafficking would be generated.

#### Chapter 4: Results

The search was conducted using ProQuest across four databases on March 13, 2020. The initial search results yielded 1662 articles. After utilizing the search filters (Table 2), the search results eliminated 1451 articles. Further 161 articles were eliminated through the abstract screening. After the content analysis, 23 articles out of 50 did not meet the inclusion criteria due to the articles not being either relevant to the field of psychology or no emphasis was placed on the issue of sex trafficking. In the final screening, only 27 (1.6%) of the articles out of 1662 results met the inclusion criteria (Figure 1). The articles that met inclusion criteria were published between 2012 and 2019, with average publication in 2016. A significant portion of studies were originated in the U.S. ( $n = 19$ ), followed by collaborative publication between two or more nations ( $n = 3$ ). The remaining studies originated from India ( $n = 1$ ), Canada ( $n = 1$ ), Australia ( $n = 1$ ), Israel ( $n = 1$ ), and UK ( $n = 1$ ). The country of origin for publications were classified based on the authors' institutional affiliation and their respective countries. All of the articles that met the inclusion criteria were retrieved from the PsycINFO database. Different research methodologies were utilized across the publications, with qualitative research constituting 22% of the articles ( $n = 6$ ), quantitative research 44% ( $n = 12$ ), mixed methodologies 7% ( $n = 2$ ), literature review 11% ( $n = 3$ ) and case study 15% ( $n = 4$ ). The research methodologies were classified according to the publication's categorization in the PsycINFO and content analysis.

The analysis of the extracted operational definition of sex trafficking from the included articles revealed that 33% ( $n = 9$ ) of publications employed the definition provided by TVPA,



followed by 30% ( $n = 8$ ) of publications relying on the definition provided by the U.N. (Palermo Protocol), 4% ( $n = 1$ ) employing mixed definitions (U.N. and TVPA), and 4% ( $n = 1$ ) employing another (referencing to another article) definition. The remaining 30% ( $n = 8$ ) of articles did not employ any explicit definition of sex trafficking. Articles that relied on the conceptualization of sex trafficking formulated by TVPA ( $n = 9$ ), primarily employed the definition of the severe form of trafficking (89%), with a single article not making the differentiation.

Furthermore, I was interested to assess different sources of the operational definition used depending on the country of origin. To achieve this purpose, the included articles were separated into two distinct categories and their respective operational definitions were ranked. The first category was coded as the U.S. and the second category Non-U.S., which contained other nations and collaborative work. A significant portion of the articles originating from the U.S ( $n = 19$ ) relied on the operational definition provided by the TVPA (32%,  $n = 6$ ), followed by the U.N (26%,  $n = 5$ ). On the other hand, in the subsequent category ( $n = 8$ ), 38% ( $n = 3$ ) of the articles utilized the TVPA definition, 38% ( $n = 3$ ) the U.N. definition. Furthermore, 30% ( $n = 6$ ) of the articles originated in the U.S did not employ any definition, while 25% ( $n = 2$ ) of the other category did not employ any definitions.

The component analysis of articles that contained operational definitions ( $n = 19$ ) based on the A-M-P Model indicated that 63% ( $n = 12$ ) of the publications utilized all components (*Act*, *Means*, and *Purpose*) in conceptualizing sex trafficking. On the other hand, 37% ( $n = 7$ ) of publications utilized less than three components of the A-M-P Model, most often forgoing the *Act* component. Across the operational definitions, different components of the A-M-P Model contained a distinct number of elements (Table 2). With *Act* containing the greatest number of distinct elements ( $n = 12$ ), followed by *Means* ( $n = 11$ ) and *Purpose* ( $n = 11$ ) which contained an

equivalent number of elements. On average, the *Act* component of operational definitions was constructed using three elements, with *recruitment*, *harboring*, and *transportation* used the most frequently. The *Means* component was on average constructed utilizing four elements, with *coercion*, *force*, *fraud* and *deception* used most frequently. Lastly, the *Purpose* component on average was constructed using one element, with the *commercial sex act* used most frequently. For a more detailed presentation of the frequency distribution of elements across the Act, Means and Purpose components of the definitions please refer to Figures 2,3, and 4. The relative prominence of elements across all definitions was generated via *Wordle*, which is presented in Figure 5. In accordance with A-M-P Model, combining the most common elements across all operational definitions resulted in the following definition of sex trafficking:

the recruitment, harbor, and transportation of persons, by means of coercion, force, fraud or deception for the purpose of the commercial sex act.

### **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The trafficking of persons for the purpose of sexual exploitation has become a global issue that has left no nation unaffected. The wealth of information generated in the past two decades has clearly revealed the complexity associated with the study of this phenomenon. The accurate assessment of sex trafficking is especially important for social and behavioral scientists because they are at the forefront of dealing with the effects that emanate from this issue. The current study aimed at assessing the conceptualization of sex trafficking in psychological literature. The results of the inquiry indicate that the researchers, in the included studies, primarily utilize operational definitions provided by the TVPA and the U.N (Palermo Protocol). Moreover, the results revealed that a significant number of articles did not employ a definition of sex trafficking, despite discussing the phenomenon at lengths. The absence of definition is

problematic because depending on what framework of sex work is used, the study could be potentially misinterpreted. For instance, if a study discusses the mental health of sex-trafficked individuals, those individuals who take the abolitionist stance would extend the findings to those who work in sex industry, while pro-rights advocates would not.

When employing the operational definition of sex trafficking formulated in TVPA, the researchers primarily relied on the conceptualization of the severe form of trafficking. This is important because the severe form of trafficking outlined in TVPA provides a demarcation between “free” and “forced” commercial sex. The definition of the severe form of trafficking (TVPA) is fairly similar to that of the definition provided in the Palermo Protocol. Nonetheless, the content analysis across the operational definitions revealed that different authors employed a different number of elements from these definitions when conceptualizing sex trafficking. Specifically, a substantial number of articles did not contain the *Act* component of the A-M-P Model in their definitions, despite referring the original source of definition which employs it.

Furthermore, the analysis of the definitions revealed that the most salient characteristic of sex trafficking in the assessed literature was the presence of act of *recruitment, harboring, and transportation* with the means of *coercion, force, fraud and deception* for the purpose of the *commercial sex act*.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations associated with the present inquiry that constrains the inferences made from these results. Despite not having any geographical restriction placed on published literature, only those articles written in English were taken into account. Specific emphasis on English significantly reduced the scope of articles that could meet the inclusion criteria. For instance, in the median search 9 articles were excluded because they were written in

Portuguese ( $n = 5$ ), German ( $n = 2$ ), Czech ( $n = 1$ ), and Greek ( $n = 1$ ). Furthermore, emphasis on language could explain the vast number of included articles originating from the U.S., which confines inferences from the results to this country.

Another significant limitation was associated with the sole reliance on ProQuest databases. There are various other databases, such as Google Scholar, National Health Institute, or others that might contain additional psychological literature on sex trafficking that has not been taken into account in this research. The content analysis also revealed an important challenge in the screening for the inclusion of the articles. Some articles proved to be difficult to classify appropriately and certain reliance on the personal judgment was unavoidable. Having other investigators to validate for inclusion and exclusion would certainly be helpful in mitigating this challenge. Some other limitations were in the form of chosen time frame for the search (2000 - 2020) and sole focus on the adult population. During the abstract and content analysis screening, a significant number of articles were excluded due to their focus on commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC).

## **Recommendations**

Examining a complex issue such as sex trafficking is a challenging endeavor. Especially when this phenomenon is entangled with other complex phenomena such as migration and sex work. To reduce conceptual confusion when discussing sex trafficking, it is imperative for investigators to adopt a consistent operational definition. The vast number of the included publications in this review referenced two relatively similar operational definitions of sex trafficking (TVPA and U.N.), yet the presented definition in the articles themselves varied significantly from one another and the referenced sources. The adoption of a consistent and

clearly articulated operational definition among researchers can ensure that the investigators are examining the same phenomenon.

Furthermore, most of the publications in this review primarily relied on the operational definition of sex trafficking provided by the U.N., or the U.S. government. The heavy reliance on these sources to conceptualize what constitutes sex trafficking should be cautioned because their conceptualizations have altered in significant ways over the years and might do so in the future. Lastly, it is recommended for the authors to provide a conceptualization of what constitutes sex trafficking whenever the phenomenon is discussed at length, because a significant number of publications in this review forgo to define sex trafficking altogether.

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Table 1

*ProQuest Command Line Employed in Advanced Search*

Command Line	ab("sex trafficking") OR ab("human trafficking") OR ab("modern day slavery") OR ab("sexual exploitation" )
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Table 2

*Inclusion and Exclusion Filters Utilized in ProQuest*

Inclusion	Exclusion
Peer reviewed	Commentary, Review and Editorials
Scholarly Journals	Other languages
English language	<18
01/01/2000 – 03/13/2020	
>18	
Articles	

Table 3

*Study Characteristics*

Author	A-M-P Model Components			Methodology	Database	Country	Population
	Act	Means	Purpose				
da Silva and Sathiyaseelan (2019)	-	3	1	Qualitative	PsycINFO	India	Female
Iglesias et al. (2018)	-	-	-	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US/UK	Male/Female
Bouche et al. (2018)	5	3	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Thompson and Haley (2018)	2	1	1	Literature Review	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Jani (2018)	-	-	-	Qualitative	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Gerassi (2018)	-	-	-	Qualitative	PsycINFO	US	Female
Rajaram and Tidball (2018)	-	3	1	Qualitative	PsycINFO	US	Female
Mundsey et al. (2018)	-	-	-	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Female
Nguen et al. (2018)	-	6	1	Case Study	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Scannell et al. (2018)	5	8	1	Case Study	PsycINFO	US	Female
Williams et al. (2018)	-	3	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Robitz et al. (2018)	7	3	1	Case Study	PsycINFO	Canada/US	Transgender
Jani and Felke (2017)	-	-	-	Mixed Methodology	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Dhungel (2017)	-	-	-	Qualitative	PsycINFO	Canada	Female
Scott-Tilley and Crites (2016)	-	-	-	Case Study	PsycINFO	US	Female
Houston-Kolnik et al. (2016)	-	3	2	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Honeyman et al. (2016)	5	-	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	Australia	Male/Female
Rimal and Papadopoulous (2016)	5	3	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	UK	Female
Wills et al. (2016)	-	-	-	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Female
Silver et al. (2015)	5	8	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Beck et al. (2015)	-	3	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
de Chesnay (2013)	5	4	2	Literature Review	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Peled and Parker (2013)	5	7	1	Qualitative	PsycINFO	Israel	Female
Abas et al. (2013)	2	3	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	UK/Moldova	Female
Muftic and Finn (2013)	5	3	1	Quantitative	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female
Collins et al. (2012)	5	3	1	Mixed Methodology	PsycINFO	US	Female
Newby and McGuinness (2012)	5	8	6	Literature Review	PsycINFO	US	Male/Female

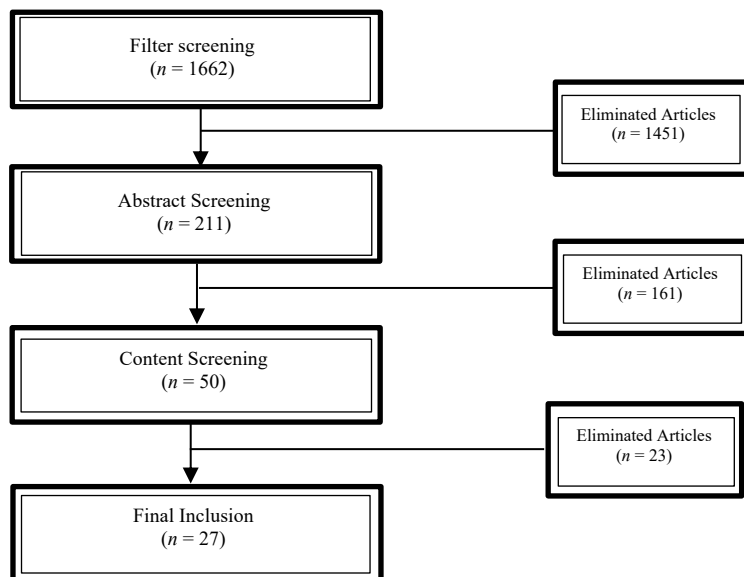


Figure 1. Funnel approach in screening pertinent literature.

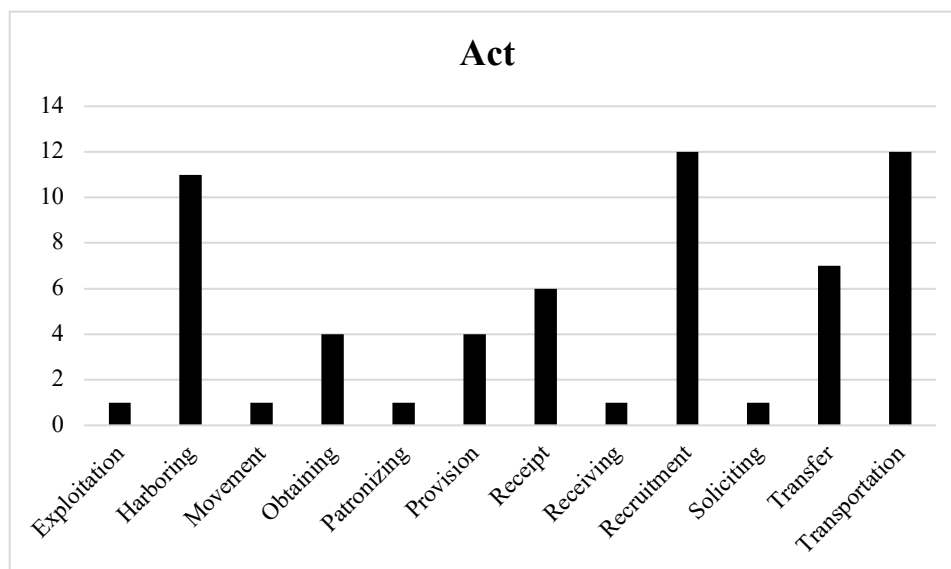


Figure 2. Frequency distribution of elements in the Act component from the A-M-P Model.

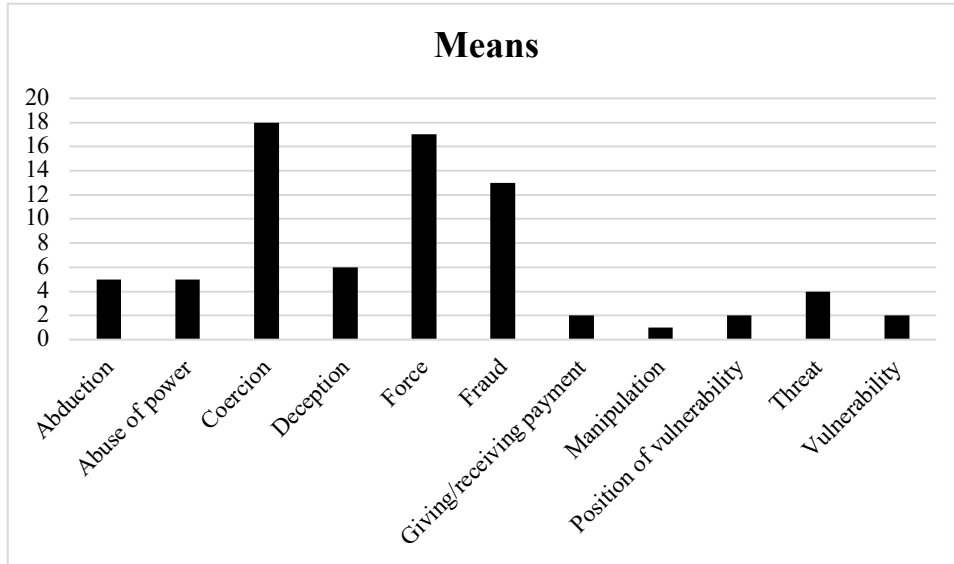


Figure 3. Frequency distribution of elements in the Means component from the A-M-P Model.

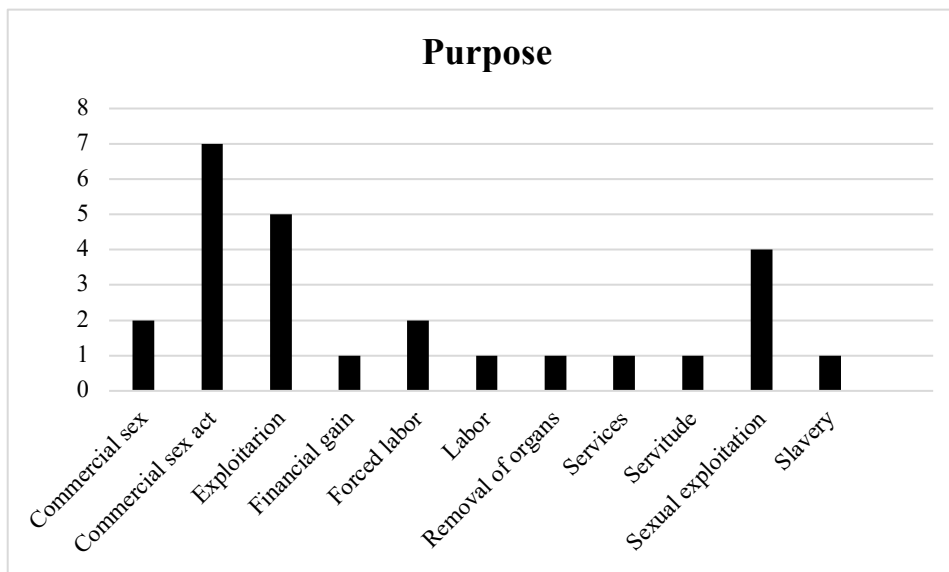


Figure 4. Frequency distribution of elements in the Purpose component from the A-M-P Model.



*Figure 5.* Graphical representation of the frequency distribution of elements across all operational definitions.