

# Social Work Education that Addresses Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation: An intersectional, anti-oppressive practice framework

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## Abstract

Practice, policy, and research focused on trafficking for sexual exploitation and commercial sex involvement occur in the United States within a white, heteronormative social environment that must be addressed pedagogically in the classroom. Social work education increasingly includes the topic of trafficking for sexual exploitation as a stand-alone course or as sessions embedded within other courses. Yet, very little scholarship critically examines how instruction in social work on this topic can apply intersectional, anti-oppressive frameworks across micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Furthermore, current literature suggests that some social workers use exclusionary practices when addressing trafficking and commercial sex involvement, further exemplifying the need for anti-oppressive curricula. The purpose of this paper is to critically analyse how key anti-oppressive theoretical and practice frameworks should influence education on trafficking for sexual exploitation and commercial sex involvement in social work. Written by two scholars and social work instructors, we describe how we apply these frameworks to pedagogical exercises in social work courses. Finally, we argue that intersectional, anti-oppressive social work education is critical to training social work students and, ultimately, addressing the needs of people experiencing or at risk of trafficking.

**Keywords:** trafficking for sexual exploitation education, anti-oppressive practice, intersectionality

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## Introduction

Although anyone can experience trafficking into sexual economies, people at risk and survivors in the United States (US) are more likely to experience identity-based oppression and identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+), low-income, or people living with a disability.<sup>1</sup> Social work education in the US that addresses trafficking for sexual exploitation occurs in a white, heteronormative social context. For example, an analysis of 20 social work courses in 14 states found that most courses did not include a direct focus on structural oppressions experienced by people of colour or LGBTQ+ people who trade sex.<sup>2</sup> Social work students, faculty, and practitioners in the field also predominantly consist of white, cisgender, heterosexual people.<sup>3</sup> As such, general social work education as well as courses that address trafficking for sexual exploitation must use an intersectional, anti-oppressive practice (AOP) framework that centres on the convergence of multiple axes of oppression in people's lived experiences of privilege, oppression, and discrimination.<sup>4</sup>

This paper provides a framework for designing instruction in social work programmes on trafficking for sexual exploitation, thereby preparing future social workers to address the needs of people involved in commercial sex across the micro (i.e., individuals, families, and small groups), mezzo (i.e., community-

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<sup>1</sup> L B Gerassi and A J Nichols, *Sex Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation: Prevention, advocacy, and trauma-informed practice*, Springer, New York, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826149756>; J A Reid, 'Sex Trafficking of Girls With Intellectual Disabilities: An exploratory mixed methods study', *Sexual Abuse*, vol. 30, issue 2, 2018, pp. 107–131, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063216630981>; M Dank *et al.*, *Surviving the Streets of New York: Experiences of LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW engaged in survival sex*, Urban Institute, Washington, D.C., February 2015, p. 94; L Werkmeister Rozas, J Ostrander and M Feely, 'Inequalities in US Child Protection: The case of sex trafficked youth', *Social Sciences*, vol. 7, issue 8, 2018, p. 135, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7080135>.

<sup>2</sup> M R Panichelli, 'The Intersections of Good Intentions, Criminality, and Anti-Carceral Feminist Logic: A qualitative study that explores sex trades content in social work education', Dissertation, Portland State University, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.6396>.

<sup>3</sup> E Salsberg *et al.*, 'Profile of the Social Work Workforce', A Report to Council on Social Work Education and National Workforce Initiative Steering Committee, The George Washington University Health Workforce Institute, October 2017; J Morton, D Jeyasingham and S Hicks, 'The Social Work of Sexuality: Rethinking approaches to social work education', *Health and Social Care Education*, vol. 2, issue 2, 2013, pp. 16–19.

<sup>4</sup> K Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color', *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, issue 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

coordinated responses and interagency collaboration), and macro (i.e., state and organisational level policy) social work levels. We are two professors who have taught undergraduate and graduate trafficking courses at our respective universities and guest-lectured for other social work instructors, professional organisations, and community groups across the US. We emphasise an intersectional, AOP framework in research and teaching and are cognizant of our own intersecting privileges that impact our lenses. The first author identifies as white, Hispanic, cisgender, and heterosexual, while the second author identifies as white, pansexual, and cisgender. We begin by analysing the social work context in which sex trafficking courses occur. We then discuss theoretical frameworks (e.g., intersectionality) and social work frameworks (e.g., AOP) before describing how to integrate such frameworks into coursework examples across different levels. Finally, we conclude with recommendations to use theoretically guided, practice-informed, and evidence-based curricula to strengthen instruction on prevention, identification, policy, and interventions in relation to trafficking for sexual exploitation.

We use the US federal definition of trafficking for sexual exploitation (more commonly referred to as sex trafficking in the US), which occurs when: 1) a minor<sup>5</sup> exchanges a sex act (e.g., prostitution, pornography, stripping, or selling illicit photos) for financial compensation or other benefits (e.g., food, clothing, housing, or drugs), or 2) an adult is induced through force, fraud, or coercion to perform a commercial sex act.<sup>6</sup> We use the term sex work to refer to adults who sell sex without force, fraud, or coercion. We recognise that adults involved in commercial sex may do so by choice or circumstance, and that systemic oppressions across multiple sociodemographic groups (e.g., race, class, or sexuality) heighten vulnerabilities to exploitation. Social work education should highlight person-centred services and promote collaborative environments that consider the continuum of experiences involved in trafficking for sexual exploitation and sex work, and analyse the impact of policies on sex workers as well as trafficking victims and survivors alike.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A person under the age of 18.

<sup>6</sup> J Bigelsen and S Vuotto, 'Homelessness, Survival Sex and Human Trafficking: As experienced by the youth of Covenant House New York', Covenant House, May 2013; Dank *et al.*; C L Miller *et al.*, 'Individual and Structural Vulnerability among Female Youth Who Exchange Sex for Survival', *The Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 49, issue 1, 2011, pp. 36–41, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.10.003>.

<sup>7</sup> Gerassi and Nichols.

## The Social Work Context

In response to social mobilisations against police brutality, anti-Black violence, and ongoing racialised violence against BIPOC people, many educators in social work are reckoning with the extent anti-oppressive theories and frameworks are integrated into the field's guiding ethics, educational competencies, and student learning outcomes. For example, the US Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is revising educational competencies to focus on engaging diversity and difference in practice and address intersectional factors, including race, gender, and sexual orientation, among others.<sup>8</sup> Another social work competency aims to advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice by eliminating oppressive structural barriers.<sup>9</sup> These competencies are important but omit the integration of anti-oppressive practices as well as adequate engagement with intersectionality. There is a growing recognition that social work institutions are built on a white supremacist culture that utilises the history, labour, and pain of people of colour to benefit white people.<sup>10</sup> Current competencies also insufficiently address heteronormativity by exclusively focusing on the negative experiences of 'sexual minorities', rather than confronting heterosexist policies and the structural oppressions that allow heteronormative assumptions to thrive.<sup>11</sup> To address these criticisms, CSWE will issue new competencies by 2022 to 1) integrate how diversity, equity, and inclusion characterise and shape the human experience, 2) expand on the dimensions of diversity to emphasise the intersectionality of factors, and 3) engage in anti-racist practice, cultural humility, and the dismantling of structural oppression.<sup>12</sup> As such, coursework that addresses trafficking for sexual exploitation can serve as an ideal case study to integrate theoretical and practice frameworks that address structural oppressions.

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<sup>8</sup> Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Commission on Educational Policy and the CSWE Commission on Accreditation, *2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for Baccalaureate and Master's Social Work Programs*, Council on Social Work Education, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> 'Social Work Coalition for Anti-Racist Educators (SWCAREs)', 2021, retrieved 22 February 2021, <https://www.swcares.org>.

<sup>11</sup> Morton, Jeyasingham, and Hicks; B Bennett and T G Gates, 'Teaching Cultural Humility for Social Workers Serving LGBTQI Aboriginal Communities in Australia', *Social Work Education*, vol. 38, issue 5, 2019, pp. 604–617, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2019.1588872>; T G Gates, 'Challenging Heterosexism: 6 suggestions for social work practice', *The New Social Worker*, 2006, [https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/ethics-articles/Challenging\\_Heterosexism%3A\\_Six\\_Suggestions\\_for\\_Social\\_Work\\_Practice](https://www.socialworker.com/feature-articles/ethics-articles/Challenging_Heterosexism%3A_Six_Suggestions_for_Social_Work_Practice).

<sup>12</sup> D M McPhee *et al.*, 'Leading Critical Conversations on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion: Educational policy and accreditation standards, 2022 Progress Update', Council on Social Work Education, 2020.

Education that addresses trafficking can and should prepare future social workers to support and work alongside diverse people involved in commercial sex as encompassing a range of relationships: choice, circumstance, or trafficking.<sup>13</sup> At the micro level, social workers may encounter trafficking survivors or individuals at risk and should be prepared to identify red flags, conduct assessments, and provide critically important behavioural health services. At the mezzo level, social workers may work within coordinated community responses to improve social services and should be prepared to encounter interagency challenges. At the macro level, social workers must be prepared to advocate for policies that help survivors and those at risk, ranging from trafficking-specific legislation—e.g., *Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)*, *Violence Against Women Act*, etc.—to policies that prevent and reduce risks—e.g., Medicaid expansion, living wage policies, etc. Doing so in ways that centre people involved in commercial sex or survivors of trafficking is essential, as several studies suggest that social workers have created harm in their service responses (e.g., use of saviour ideologies in practice or of sensationalistic and re-traumatising organisational materials).<sup>14</sup> Thus, utilising an intersectional framework to facilitate students’ nuanced understanding of trafficking for sexual exploitation and commercial sex involvement, and guide related responses across those levels are essential components of social work education and practice.

Overall, we contribute to critical anti-trafficking work by demonstrating how an intersectional framework can be applied in efforts towards anti-oppressive education. While we focus on social work, curricula in other areas of study (e.g., criminal justice, human rights, sociology, or gender studies), community-based education and awareness initiatives, and professional trainings can similarly benefit from the curriculum and principles we present here. Similarly, we focus on trafficking for sexual exploitation, as this is the focus of many US social work courses.<sup>15</sup> The lack of focus on trafficking for labour exploitation in this curriculum is reflective of a larger global trend of marginalisation in social work and criminal justice curricula, as well as in legal and justice systems, and social services more broadly. Ostensibly, the same principles detailed below apply to other forms of human trafficking as well, including trafficking for labour exploitation.

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<sup>13</sup> Gerassi and Nichols.

<sup>14</sup> G Soderlund, ‘Running from the Rescuers: New U.S. crusades against sex trafficking and the rhetoric of abolition’, *NWSA Journal*, vol. 17, issue 3, 2005, pp. 64–87, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4317158.pdf>; A I Fukushima *et al.*, ‘Multiplicity of Stigma: Cultural barriers in anti-trafficking response’, *International Journal of Human Rights in Healthcare*, vol. 13, issue 2, 2020, pp. 125–142, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJHRH-07-2019-0056>.

<sup>15</sup> Panichelli.

## Theoretical Frameworks: Prioritising intersectionality

Given the multiple axes of oppression experienced by people who are involved in commercial sex, related coursework should be guided by an intersectional framework. Intersectional theorists note that people's unique identities intersect to inform their experiences with oppression, specifically on the grounds of race, class, sex, gender identity, age, sexual orientation, citizenship and immigration status, and abilities.<sup>16</sup> Despite the growing awareness of intersectional feminism, US anti-trafficking discourses have largely been led by divergent radical and liberal feminist philosophies. Related debates within sex work discourses centre on agency, victimisation, and the role of the state in perpetuating or ameliorating gender inequality.<sup>17</sup> However, experiences with commercial sex are nuanced, and can be empowering for some, oppressive for others, or a mix of these.<sup>18</sup> Teaching social work students about the fluidity and variance in the experiences of people involved in commercial sex will lead to better understandings about diverse populations and their service needs, and will counter often homogenising depictions of commercial sex rooted in abolitionist (i.e., the movement to end commercial sex viewed as 'modern slavery') and radical feminist thinking (i.e., the essentialist view largely depicting commercial sex as male violence against women). Instructors should teach criticisms of radical and liberal feminism, as they largely focus on women and girls and ignore nuanced contexts of nationality, immigration, race and ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identities, and men and boys who experience trafficking.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> N J Sokoloff and I Dupont, 'Domestic Violence at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender: Challenges and contributions to understanding violence against marginalized women in diverse communities', *Violence against Women*, vol. 11, issue 1, 2005, pp. 38–64, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801204271476>; Crenshaw.

<sup>17</sup> K Kempadoo and J Doezema, *Global Sex Workers: Rights, resistance, and redefinition*, Routledge, New York, 1998; J Doezema, 'Forced to Choose: Beyond the voluntary v. forced prostitution dichotomy', in *Ibid.*, pp. 34–50, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315865768-3>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*; see also L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins*, Zed Books, London, 2005; S A Limoncelli, 'The Trouble with Trafficking: Conceptualizing women's sexual labor and economic human rights', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 32, issue 4, 2009, pp. 261–269, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2009.05.002>; C Valadier, 'Migration and Sex Work through a Gender Perspective', *Contexto Internacional*, vol. 40, issue 3, 2018, pp. 501–524, <https://doi.org/10.1590/s0102-8529.2018400300005>.

<sup>19</sup> Liberal feminists vary in the ways they view choice, and have been critiqued for excluding diverse viewpoints. (see J Doezema, 'Now You See Her, Now You Don't: Sex workers at the UN trafficking protocol negotiation', *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 14, issue 1, 2005, pp. 61–89, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663905049526>.) Radical feminists have been critiqued for their essentialist views, such as framing sex work as violence against women, thereby ignoring LGBTQ+ people involved in commercial sex. (See L Duggan and N D Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual dissent and political culture*, 10th Anniversary Edition, Routledge, New York, 2006.)

Intersectionality allows for an analysis of the problematic notions of the ‘ideal victim’ that impact identification and criminalisation of survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation, and reinforce racial, class, sexual, and other forms of inequality.<sup>20</sup> Intersectional feminists critique essentialist frameworks as primarily benefiting white, cis, heterosexual, middle- and upper-class women and girls. Scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Laura Agustín, Kamala Kempadoo, and Jo Doezema, among others, generally reject the invisibility of oppressed groups. Such scholarship centres oppression as a focal point of analysis, and catalyses change that benefits people across race, sex, gender, class, abilities, immigration status, and sexual orientation. Presently, social work trafficking curricula largely reflect the inaccurate homogenisation of survivors and ideal victimhood.<sup>21</sup> Monolithic depictions of commercial sex are often promulgated by Christian and abolitionist NGOs that impact academic and community curricula. Radical, abolitionist, and anti-sex work thinking has had a demonstrable impact on the US policy level as well, reflected in the ‘Anti-Prostitution Pledge’ of the 2005 TVPA reauthorisation, the popularity of ‘end demand’ frameworks illustrated in expanded safe harbour legislation, and the advent of SESTA-FOSTA.<sup>22</sup> Such abolitionist policies aim to eradicate or significantly curtail the commercial sex industry and are shown to have problematic impacts on trafficking survivors and sex workers alike.<sup>23</sup>

Intersectional curricula may also focus on consequences of anti-trafficking responses resulting in heightened criminalisation and barriers to services for marginalised people, as well as the role of carceral protectionism, surveillance, and criminalisation directed towards oppressed groups on community, practice,

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<sup>20</sup> A I Fukushima, *Migrant Crossings: Witnessing human trafficking in the U.S.*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Panichelli.

<sup>22</sup> Acronyms for the 2018 *Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act* (FOSTA) and 2018 *Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act* (SESTA); S Gies *et al.*, ‘Safe Harbor Laws: Changing the legal response to minors involved in commercial sex, Phase 1. The legal review’, U.S. Department of Justice, February 2018; Kempadoo and Doezema; R Weitzer, ‘The Movement to Criminalize Sex Work in the United States’, *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 37, issue 1, 2010, pp. 61–84, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6478.2010.00495.x>.

<sup>23</sup> Missouri Ho (MO Ho) Justice Coalition, ‘The State of the Hustle: Sex workers speak out in the show-me state’, retrieved 9 March 2021, <https://mojustice.com>; D Blunt and A Wolf, ‘Erased: The impact of FOSTA-SESTA and the removal of Backpage on sex workers’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 14, 2020, pp. 117–121, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220148>; E Tichenor, ‘“I’ve Never Been So Exploited”: The consequences of FOSTA-SESTA in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 14, 2020, pp. 99–115, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201220147>.



and policy levels.<sup>24</sup> Understanding historical and current state and police violence directed towards oppressed people through an intersectional perspective is imperative to understanding its impacts on identification, access to justice, and interaction with social services and state institutions more broadly. Police violence, such as randomly searching and arresting trans people for carrying condoms and charging them with prostitution (so-called ‘walking while trans’ laws), police brutality towards African Americans, jurisdictional policies that move power from tribal justice systems in indigenous communities towards US federal justice systems to address victimisation, and enhanced border control, deportation, and detainment of immigrants erodes trust in the justice system and facilitates fear.<sup>25</sup> Students should learn how to address problematic state and federal policies, as well as their consequences, from an intersectional framework. Students engaged in anti-trafficking work will assuredly encounter organisations reflecting ideologies that are exclusionary and carceral, which thereby facilitate harmful policies and practices. This can prepare students to counter the deeply racialised, gendered, heterosexist, and cis-centric rhetoric reflected in policy, interagency relationships, and direct practice, as discussed later in this article.

Theoretical and political perspectives shape responses to trafficking on micro, mezzo, and macro levels. An intersectional framework is necessary to understand both the nature of trafficking risks and barriers to service access and utilisation, and criminalisation. While we focus on the intersectional framework in this paper, we note that queer theory, critical race theory, transnational feminism, and post-colonialist feminism likewise have long histories of interrogating Western and essentialist frameworks of commercial sex and human trafficking, and key readings from such scholars should be included in social work curricula.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> E Bernstein, ‘Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary antitrafficking campaigns’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45–71; A Hill, ‘The Rhetoric of Modern-Day Slavery: Analogical links and historical kinks in the United Kingdom’s anti-trafficking plan’, *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Transcontinental Feminism*, vol. 7, issue 2, 2017, pp. 241–260, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phi.2017.0023>; E Shih, ‘Not in My “Backyard Abolitionism”’: Vigilante rescue against American sex trafficking’, *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 59, issue 1, 2016, pp. 66–90, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121416628551>; J Musto, *Control and Protect: Collaboration, carceral protection, and domestic sex trafficking in the United States*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2016.

<sup>25</sup> M Dank *et al.*, *Locked In: Interactions with the criminal justice and child welfare systems for LGBTQ youth, YMSM, and YWSW who engage in survival sex*, Urban Institute, Washington, D.C., September 2015; A Farrell *et al.*, ‘Failing Victims? Challenges of the police response to human trafficking’, *Criminology & Public Policy*, vol. 18, issue 3, 2019, pp. 649–673, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12456>.

<sup>26</sup> C N Butler, ‘A Critical Race Feminist Perspective on Prostitution & Sex Trafficking in America’, *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism*, vol. 27, issue 1, 2015, pp. 95–139.



## Social Work Practice Frameworks

### *The Limits of Cultural Competency and Humility*

US social work curricula are dominated by cultural competency and cultural humility. Cultural competency is intended to increase social workers' knowledge of the client's realities, systems, norms, and beliefs, so that they can better understand and empower their clients.<sup>27</sup> At the micro level, cultural competency has traditionally involved using knowledge of particular communities as well as strategies to engage clients who are different from the practitioner.<sup>28</sup> At the mezzo-level, social workers collaborating with multiple organisations can use culturally competent frameworks to emphasise interactions between clients, social workers and therapists, and actors in various systems (e.g., legal, child welfare, or healthcare).<sup>29</sup> One potential problem with emphasising a cultural competency framework only is the connotation that one can become fully culturally competent and therefore be done with one's learning,<sup>30</sup> which can lead to a rationalised form of stereotyping.<sup>31</sup> Such limitations should be explored by discussing practice examples of how culturally competent practice can positively and negatively impact clients. In contrast, cultural humility seeks to enhance understanding and appreciate differences in health or social behaviours by

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<sup>27</sup> J Chu *et al.*, 'A Model for the Theoretical Basis of Cultural Competency to Guide Psychotherapy', *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, vol. 47, issue 1, 2016, pp. 18–29, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pro0000055>.

<sup>28</sup> D W Sue, P Arredondo, and R J McDavis, 'Multicultural Counseling Competencies and Standards: A call to the profession', *Journal of Counseling & Development*, vol. 70, issue 4, 1992, pp. 477–486, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1992.tb01642.x>; A L Whaley, K E Davis, and L Arthur, 'Cultural Competence and Evidence-Based Practice in Mental Health Services', *American Psychologist*, vol. 62, issue 6, 1996, pp. 563–574, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.62.6.563>; S R Lopez, 'Cultural Competence in Psychotherapy: A guide for clinicians and their supervisors', in C R Watkins (ed.), *Handbook of Psychotherapy Supervision*, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, 1997, pp. 579–588; S Sue *et al.*, 'The Case for Cultural Competency in Psychotherapeutic Interventions', *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 60, issue 1, 2009, pp. 525–548, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163651>; J Y Wang *et al.*, 'A Conceptual Model of the Psychological Health System for U.S. Active Duty Service Members: An approach to inform leadership and policy decision making', *Military Medicine*, vol. 178, issue 6, 2013, pp. 596–606, <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-12-00429>.

<sup>29</sup> Lopez; Whaley, Davis, and Arthur.

<sup>30</sup> C Foronda *et al.*, 'Cultural Humility: A concept analysis', *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, vol. 27, issue 3, 2016, pp. 210–217, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043659615592677>.

<sup>31</sup> S T Stevens *et al.*, 'Cultural Competence: A form of stereotype rationality', in C L Frisby and W T O'Donohue (eds.), *Cultural Competence in Applied Psychology: An evaluation of current status and future directions*, Springer, Cham, 2018, pp. 651–664, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78997-2\\_26](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78997-2_26).

putting the responsibility on social workers to seek out information from clients about their worldviews.<sup>32</sup> Cultural humility can help social workers reflect on the limitations of their knowledge and perspectives, and emphasise that no amount of knowledge learnt in the classroom can make them experts of their clients' lives.<sup>33</sup> Social workers using a culturally humble framework are encouraged not to view a particular group as monolithic, but to allow for differences to be emphasised.<sup>34</sup> Students can be taught to support and believe persons who disclose experiences of discrimination, bias, and identity-based oppression.<sup>35</sup>

Like all practice frameworks, instructors must emphasise the importance of applying these frameworks across different social work levels. For example, social workers are advised to work with interpreters who are trained and adequately prepared to provide accurate interpretation of potentially traumatic and difficult situations within a cultural context.<sup>36</sup> Social workers should be prepared to work collaboratively with clients and interpreters or bring in other social workers to serve as 'cultural brokers' in order to link immigrant families to resources and mediate any differences between cultures.<sup>37</sup> Although these recommendations are situated at the micro level, they will not be successful in organisations with funding mechanisms that do not prioritise such practices or the need to arrange (and compensate) interpreters.

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<sup>32</sup> B L Beagan, 'A Critique of Cultural Competence: Assumptions, limitations, and alternatives', in *ibid.*, pp. 123–138, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78997-2\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78997-2_6); R Danso, 'Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility: A critical reflection on key cultural diversity concepts', *Journal of Social Work*, vol. 18, issue 4, 2018, pp. 410–430, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316654341>.

<sup>33</sup> T Bryant-Davis and P Tummala-Narra, 'Cultural Oppression and Human Trafficking: Exploring the role of racism and ethnic bias', *Women and Therapy*, vol. 40, issue 1–2, 2017, pp. 152–169, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2016.1210964>.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett and Gates.

<sup>35</sup> Bryant-Davis and Tummala-Narra; T Bryant-Davis, 'Cultural Considerations of Trauma: Physical, mental and social correlates of intimate partner violence exposure', *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, vol. 2, issue 4, 2010, pp. 263–265, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022040>.

<sup>36</sup> D L Sidun *et al.*, 'Report of the Task Force on Trafficking of Women and Girls', American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., 2014; R C Y Chung, 'Cultural Perspectives on Child Trafficking, Human Rights & Social Justice: A model for psychologists', *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 22, issue 1, 2009, pp. 85–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515070902761230>; J Cwikel and E Hoban, 'Contentious Issues in Research on Trafficked Women Working in the Sex Industry: Study design, ethics, and methodology', *Journal of Sex Research*, vol. 42, issue 4, 2005, pp. 306–316, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490509552286>.

<sup>37</sup> S Lindsay *et al.*, 'Social Workers as "Cultural Brokers" in Providing Culturally Sensitive Care to Immigrant Families Raising a Child with a Physical Disability', *Health & Social Work*, vol. 39, issue 2, 2014, pp. e10–e20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hsw/hlu009>.

The limitations of both cultural competency and humility should also be taught to students. First, ‘culture’ is often reduced to focusing solely on race, ethnicity, and immigration status, which may not allow for an intersectional framework or a focus on other important identities. ‘Culture’ can be expanded to include other identities, such as gender, which would include increasing knowledge of the use of heteronormative and non-gender affirming language.<sup>38</sup> Instructors can highlight the importance of avoiding assumptions that a romantic partner is of the opposite sex, intake forms that are outdated and list sex and gender identity as either female or male, or referring to the individual as she or he if they have not indicated which gender pronouns they use.<sup>39</sup> Second, the culturally humble and competent education suggest that clients may hold differing marginalised or oppressed identities than that of the social workers, particularly regarding race and ethnicity. While it is true that the majority of US social workers are white, non-Hispanic cis-women,<sup>40</sup> these discussions could ostracise students who identify as BIPOC or LGBTQ+ by using white, cisgender, heterosexual social workers as referents. In addition, cultural humility may lead to tokenisation, as clients who are asked to describe pieces of their identity or experiences may feel that they are being asked to represent their entire culture and teach their social worker about oppression.<sup>41</sup> Finally, these frameworks do not actively challenge white supremacy and other identity-based dominations, which is essential.

### *Anti-oppressive Practice*

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is the reflective and critical process of actively challenging domination at an interpersonal and structural level.<sup>42</sup> This framework acknowledges inequality, discrimination, and marginalisation particularly within

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<sup>38</sup> D E Smith and T M Moore, ‘Family Violence and Aggression and Their Associations With Psychosocial Functioning in Jamaican Adolescents’, *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 34, issue 6, 2013, pp. 745–767, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X12450841>; F Anthias, ‘The Intersections of Class, Gender, Sexuality and “Race”: The political economy of gendered violence’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 27, issue 2, 2014, pp. 153–171, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-013-9152-9>.

<sup>39</sup> M P Andrasik *et al.*, ‘Exploring Barriers and Facilitators to Participation of Male-to-Female Transgender Persons in Preventive HIV Vaccine Clinical Trials’, *Prevention Science*, vol. 15, 2014, pp. 268–276, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-013-0371-0>.

<sup>40</sup> Salsberg *et al.*

<sup>41</sup> A Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and speeches*, Crossing Press, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 110–114.

<sup>42</sup> M B Cohen and A Mullender, ‘The Personal in the Political: Exploring the group work continuum from individual to social change goals’, *Social Work with Groups*, vol. 28, issue 3-4, 2005, pp. 187-204, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v28n03\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1300/J009v28n03_13).

and enacted globally by Western societies that require critical reflection.<sup>43</sup> Like cultural humility, social workers use this framework to examine social identities and gain awareness in addressing biases among people.<sup>44</sup> However, a key principle of AOP is for social workers to work towards acknowledging their own roles in perpetuating oppression and homogenising experiences in client groups. AOP demands specific worker actions towards equalising the power and position, particularly of client groups who enter spaces with various degrees of power.<sup>45</sup> Social workers using this framework actively prepare to address sexism, racism, heterosexism and other -isms that manifest individually, in groups, and across all cultural, legislative, and political practices.<sup>46</sup>

Instructors who teach social work students about AOP must highlight the importance of using an intersectional framework in discussing anti-racism. AOP reflects the intersectionality of oppression across identities, rather than focusing on anti-racist social work by itself.<sup>47</sup> Anti-racist social work and AOP should be linked because focusing on racism is an essential starting point for the anti-oppressive, anti-racist pathway in social work and the critically conscious approaches to understanding social workers' own power, privilege, and positionality.<sup>48</sup> For example, a social worker facilitating a support group of mixed-race, cisgender, heterosexual women survivors of trafficking must acknowledge the trauma of racism that has impacted the women of colour in the room.<sup>49</sup> Group participants will have likely experienced sexism that is inherent in gender-based violence and state responses to it, but acknowledging the intersectional role of racism is critical. This example bridges research to practice and uses an anti-oppressive, intersectional framework to addressing participants' trauma. At the policy level, AOP may facilitate students' learning about how prostitution

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<sup>43</sup> T Mattsson, 'Intersectionality as a Useful Tool: Anti-oppressive social work and critical reflection', *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, vol. 29, issue 1, 2014, pp. 8–17, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109913510659>.

<sup>44</sup> L Dominelli, 'Anti-oppressive Practice in Context', in R Adams *et al.* (eds.), *Social Work*, Palgrave, London, 1998, pp. 3–22, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14400-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14400-6_1).

<sup>45</sup> Cohen and Mullender.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*; L Parrott, 'Constructive Marginality: Conflicts and dilemmas in cultural competence and anti-oppressive practice', *Social Work Education*, vol. 28, issue 6, 2009, pp. 617–630, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470903027322>.

<sup>47</sup> Mattsson.

<sup>48</sup> Dominelli.

<sup>49</sup> L B Gerassi, 'Experiences of Racism and Racial Tensions Among African American Women Impacted by Commercial Sexual Exploitation in Practice: A qualitative study', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 26, issue 5, 2020, pp. 438–457, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219835057>; L B Gerassi, 'How Adult Women Who Trade Sex Navigate Social Services: A grounded theory study', *Feminist Criminology*, vol. 15, issue 2, 2020, pp. 196–216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085119885444>.

policies impact people who experience intersectional oppressions across race, gender, sexual orientation, and class.

There are some documented debates in implementing AOP throughout curricula. Some scholars suggest that focusing on anti-racism alone is essential due to the whiteness of the social work landscape in the US,<sup>50</sup> while others note, and we agree, that AOP is inclusive of anti-racism.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, it is not uncommon for social workers and social work students to struggle to connect AOP theories to practical skills associated with cognitive and behavioural interventions at the micro-level.<sup>52</sup> Such lack of connections underscores the need to demonstrate practical examples in the classroom that connect AOP to the micro, mezzo, and macro level social work.

## Applied Theoretical and Practice Frameworks in Curricula

Intersectional and AOP theoretical and practice frameworks should be integrated throughout social work curricula on trafficking as a means to give instructors opportunities to analyse and translate evidence into practice and action. To increase the practical nature of our courses, we draw from research and teaching experiences to provide examples that reinforce theoretical and practice frameworks through assignments, case examples, activities, and discussions.

### *Micro Level Curricula*

Micro level curricula predominantly focus on individual level prevention, identification, and trauma-informed care to clients who have experienced or are at risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Above all, a focus on intersectional identities and AOPs should be maintained in lectures and small group experiences. For example, a class on prevention may integrate a lecture component critically

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<sup>50</sup> C Williams, 'Connecting Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Theory and Practice: Retrenchment or reappraisal?', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 29, issue 2, 1999, pp. 211–230, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.bjsw.a011443>.

<sup>51</sup> M Graham, 'Honouring Social Work Principles—Exploring the connections between anti-racist social work and African-centred worldviews', *Social Work Education*, vol. 19, issue 5, 2000, pp. 423–436, <https://doi.org/10.1080/026154700435959>.

<sup>52</sup> M L Raineri and V Calcaterra, 'Social Work Strategies against Crisis in Everyday Practice: An anti-oppressive case study', *International Social Work*, vol. 61, issue 1, 2018, pp. 130–142, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020872815606793>; R Bhuyan, R Bejan and D Jeyapal, 'Social Workers' Perspectives on Social Justice in Social Work Education: When mainstreaming social justice masks structural inequalities', *Social Work Education*, vol. 36, issue 4, 2017, pp. 373–390, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2017.1298741>.

analysing readily available prevention curricula. Assigned readings could demonstrate that many prevention campaigns are targeted towards female, cisgender girls and may not be inclusive of a range of diverse identities.<sup>53</sup> Instructor-led discussions could challenge students to apply their theoretical knowledge to the prevention campaigns: who is this campaign targeted towards? Who is left out? What are some of its potential consequences? In small groups, students can then be asked to create and plan a prevention campaign initiative while integrating an AOP framework. Discussions should explore to what extent identity-based oppression is acknowledged in terms of how victimisation risk and commercial sex involvement manifests.

Similarly, trafficking risk assessments and direct practice (e.g., case management or therapy) should emphasise a person-centred approach that addresses the individual's intersectional identities. For example, a lecture on assessment strategies can guide students on conducting non-judgmental assessments that ask clients' permission to discuss any sex trading and emphasise clients' needs and wants. Diverse case examples can facilitate student discussions about trafficking red flags that may be observed in clients and the questions that might be relevant and helpful for social workers to explore with their clients. While these case examples can be drawn from documentaries, research studies, or survivor memoirs, it is essential that they be diverse in presentation and critically examined (i.e., from whose perspective is the story being told? What are the conditions under which the survivor may have published it? Is it possible the telling of their story was coerced in some way through a non-profit organisation to reproduce a formulaic survivor narrative?). Efforts should be made to prioritise those who experience intersecting forms of oppression and evaluate how such identities are de-emphasised in anti-trafficking discourses. Students should be asked to discuss how identity-based issues are relevant to the case presentation in individual or group work. For example, support groups that address trauma and substance use among survivors should also address the trauma of racism for BIPOC people in the groups, and explore how experiences of racism may have impacted some people differently than others.<sup>54</sup> Identity-broaching, the process of considering

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<sup>53</sup> Gerassi and Nichols; A J Nichols, 'Prevention and Outreach to At-Risk Groups', in A J Nichols, T E Edmond and E C Heil (eds.), *Social Work Practice with Survivors of Sex Trafficking and Commercial Sexual Exploitation*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2018, pp. 358–379; L Goldblatt Grace *et al.*, 'Preventing the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: The my life my choice model', in *ibid.*, pp. 335–357; L S Peffley and A J Nichols, 'Challenges to Sensational Imagery Used in the Antitrafficking Movement and Implications for Practice', in *ibid.*, pp. 380–404.

<sup>54</sup> Gerassi, 'Experiences of Racism and Racial Tensions'; L J Guth *et al.*, 'Ten Strategies to Intentionally Use Group Work to Transform Hate, Facilitate Courageous Conversations, and Enhance Community Building', *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, vol. 44, issue 1, 2019, pp. 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2018.1561778>.

how sociopolitical factors such as race influence clients' concerns, could be discussed as a strategy to develop skills to increase clinical alliances and alleviate distress for clients and counsellors who hold differing racial, ethnic, cultural, gender, sexual orientation, or other identities.<sup>55</sup> These lessons should build on other foundational social work coursework that address microaggressions in practice.<sup>56</sup> Throughout the class activities, an intersectional, AOP framework can be emphasised by translating theoretical concepts into discussions and advocacy actions for individuals, families, and groups.

### *Mezzo Level Curricula*

On an organisational level, it is important that students understand that staff of diverse racial, ethnic, sexuality, and gendered backgrounds are part of organisations at all levels, so clients can see themselves reflected in the organisations.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, language and images on websites and organisational materials should also reflect diverse populations to avoid marginalisation and potential barriers to service access. Students should be prepared to advocate for organisations' inclusion in hiring practices and materials. In addition, mezzo level practice typically joins law enforcement, social service providers, healthcare providers, students, survivors, and researchers in the form of coordinated community responses (CCRs)<sup>58</sup> to share knowledge, potential resources, and coordinate services.<sup>59</sup> The importance of CCRs should be stressed to students, as some evidence suggests that CCR models can broadly reduce victimisation, increase well-being, and result in higher

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<sup>55</sup> N L Day-Vines *et al.*, 'The Multidimensional Model of Broaching Behavior', *Journal of Counseling and Development*, vol. 98, issue 1, 2020, pp. 107–118, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12304>; N L Day-Vines, J Bryan and D Griffin, 'The Broaching Attitudes and Behavior Survey (BABS): An exploratory assessment of its dimensionality', *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, vol. 41, issue 4, 2013, pp. 210–223, <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1912.2013.00037.x>.

<sup>56</sup> M S Spencer, 'Microaggressions and Social Work Practice, Education, and Research', *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, vol. 26, issue 1–2, 2017, pp. 1–5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15313204.2016.1268989>.

<sup>57</sup> L B Gerassi and S Skinkis, 'An Intersectional Content Analysis of Inclusive Language and Imagery Among Sex Trafficking-Related Services', *Violence and Victims*, vol. 35, issue 3, 2020, pp. 400–417, <https://doi.org/10.1891/VV-D-18-00204>.

<sup>58</sup> Also known as multidisciplinary teams.

<sup>59</sup> K Foot, *Collaborating Against Human Trafficking: Cross-sector challenges and practices*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2016.



satisfaction with services for survivors.<sup>60</sup> However, instructors should prepare students for the diverse theoretical frameworks and tensions that can occur among CCR members regarding differing perspectives of agency and victimisation in the sex trade as well as language choices made (e.g., modern slavery, sex trafficking, sex work).<sup>61</sup> CCRs may result in the unintentional or intentional exclusion of some individuals involved in commercial sex and survivors of trafficking, such as LGBTQ+ members. Thus, teaching students about the benefits and challenges of CCR involvement as well as using practice-based case examples can facilitate students' critical reflections and advocacy. For example, a class exercise may prompt students to discuss social service provision with a new coalition member, who indicates that their housing services require participants to attend faith-based, abstinence-only education groups. Their programme also 'saves lives, saves souls, and changes futures' and they are committed to 'rescuing women and girls' and 'helping the helpless locally and globally'. Discussing the organisation's strengths (i.e., a housing programme in a field that has a dearth of services) and problematic practices (i.e., the racist, heterosexist and cisgenderist nature of their services, as well as the intersection of this type of language with white saviourism) as well as strategies for meeting clients' needs is a fruitful exercise for students.

Furthermore, organisations that are commonly represented in CCRs may use problematic images that reflect overt or colour-evasive racism.<sup>62</sup> For example, a common image used by anti-trafficking groups in the US is that of a Black man's hands over a young girl's mouth. This image perpetuates racist myths of trafficking, and mischaracterises Black men as traffickers of white, female children. Alternatively, imagery used may not be diverse at all, and only represent young

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<sup>60</sup> M R Greeson and R Campbell, 'Sexual Assault Response Teams (SARTs): An empirical review of their effectiveness and challenges to successful implementation', *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*, vol. 14, issue 2, 2013, pp. 83–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838012470035>; N E Allen, D I Bybee and C M Sullivan, 'Battered Women's Multitude of Needs: Evidence Supporting the Need for Comprehensive Advocacy', *Violence Against Women*, vol. 10, issue 9, 2004, pp. 1015–1035, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801204267658>.

<sup>61</sup> A J Nichols, L B Gerassi and K Snider, 'What's in a Name? Benefits and challenges of anti-trafficking language in social service provider perspective', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 4, issue 1, 2018, pp. 73–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2018.1423448>; L B Gerassi, A Nichols and E Michelson, 'Lessons Learned: Benefits and challenges in interagency coalitions addressing sex trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 3, issue 4, 2017, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2016.1260345>.

<sup>62</sup> Peffley and Nichols.

white women as a manifestation of ‘the ideal victim’.<sup>63</sup> This form of colour-evasive racism denies the disproportionate rates of trafficking for sexual exploitation experienced by BIPOC.<sup>64</sup> Encouraging students to question such imagery and make suggestions for change to CCR partners is an important part of education. Furthermore, some anti-trafficking trainings and community presentations often exclude LGBTQ+ people. Educating students to advocate for inclusive training curricula rooted in evidence is necessary to address oppression through omission, and to centre the lives of LGBTQ+ and BIPOC survivors in training and education endeavours.

### *Macro Level Curricula*

An AOP framework is also vital for combating identity-based oppression on the macro level, typically centred on organisational or legislative policy work. Curricula drawn from evidence-based research should aim to 1) apply an intersectional framework to analyse existing policies, and 2) translate theory into action by teaching AOP and inclusive organisational, state, and federal policy development and advocacy. Providing students with scenarios and policies to analyse through the AOP theoretical framework can facilitate this type of learning. For example, the need for gender-affirming youth shelter policies supporting trans clients’ access to residential space that aligns with their gender identity should be enforced. It is important that social work students learn to advocate for this type of policy at their local organisations. Policy analysis assignments can require students to apply theory when analysing the impact of any given policy on race, class, gender, ability, or sexual orientation, thereby preparing future social workers to think in terms of anti-oppressive, long-term, and potentially differential outcomes. We recommend offering reading assignments that have an intersectional focus and asking students to think critically about FOSTA-SESTA, two laws that have resulted in the closure of sites commonly used by sex workers to solicit clients, and its differential impact on those of varied race, class, gender identity, and undocumented status backgrounds.<sup>65</sup> More broadly, anti-trafficking education for social workers is strengthened by macro perspectives; for example, teaching the next generation of social workers about the importance of state and federal

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<sup>63</sup> C Hoyle, M Bosworth and M Dempsey, ‘Labelling the Victims of Sex Trafficking: Exploring the borderland between rhetoric and reality’, *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 20, issue 3, 2011, pp. 313–329, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663911405394>.

<sup>64</sup> R Curtis *et al.*, *The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in New York City—Volume One: The CSEC population in New York City: Size, characteristics, and needs*, Center for Court Innovation, New York, December 2008; N G Chong, ‘Human Trafficking and Sex Industry: Does Ethnicity and Race Matter?’, *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 35, issue 2, 2014, pp. 196–213, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2014.885413>.

<sup>65</sup> K Albert *et al.*, ‘FOSTA in Legal Context’, *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, vol. 52, issue 3, 2021, pp. 1084–1157.

policies that do not specifically address sex work or trafficking, but that support people who experience identity-based oppression such as Medicaid expansion as well as healthcare for all and living wage policies, among others. Discussions or assignments should help students draw connections between these policies and people who engage in sex work or experience trafficking, which will help them understand that broader efforts addressing weak social institutions and social safety nets will benefit many, including those experiencing trafficking. Using an AOP approach to take these actions may prevent social workers' perpetuation of violence and oppression.<sup>66</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper underscores the importance of using intersectional theoretical and practice frameworks that address interlocking oppressions and provide practical examples for instructors to apply such frameworks to micro, mezzo, and macro social work levels. Social work courses should highlight the importance of understanding social work implications across all three social work levels using anti-oppressive practice and an intersectional framework. The course design itself and class discussions of final projects should explicitly draw connections between the different levels. Whether education about trafficking and commercial sex involvement is a standalone class or integrated into a larger course, the design must integrate an intersectional, AOP framework that is both practice-informed and evidence-based, thereby translating knowledge into anti-oppressive action.

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<sup>66</sup> Williams; Dominelli; SWCAREs.