Reviewer's report

Title: Risk factors for mental disorders in women survivors of human trafficking: a historical cohort study

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Reviewer: Heidi Stöckl

Reviewer's report:

Review of 'Risk factors for mental disorders in women survivors of human trafficking: a historical cohort study'

Thank you for giving me the chance to review this interesting article that provides a clear contribution to the scarce evidence in the area of human trafficking research. The study investigates the influence of pre- and post-trafficking factors on trafficked women's likelihood to sustain mental disorders 6 months after returning to Moldova.

Still, before the manuscript can be published, I want to ask the authors to address and clarify several queries and requests outlined in the following.

Abstract:
1. Background: Please provide more background on what is known about mental health disorders among trafficked women for unfamiliar readers.

2. Methods:
   a) The sentence "the foremost international organisation providing assistance to trafficked persons." seems not as relevant to the methods as e.g. the definition of mental disorders used in the study, the recruitment strategy, information on the interviewer training, and the pre- and post-trafficking factors the study controlled for.
   b) Also, mention that you look at long term mental health disorders (average 6 months after return)

3. Results:
   a) Countries of destination are only reported in the abstract, not in the results section. The information on 'elsewhere' countries are be too detailed for the abstract, especially since that is not the focus of the study. Rather discuss them in the results section, where this information is missing.
   b) Please clarify how many of the women who had PTSD also had anxiety disorders, or not – as it was done in the results section.

4. Conclusion: You might want to state the need to consider including pre-and post-trafficking factors into therapies offered to trafficking survivors in the first place before testing therapies that do this. If therapies like this exist already, it might be worth stating.
Manuscript:

Background:

1. Please add a sentence between the first two and the third sentence to make clear why this article only focuses on trafficked women, as trafficked men are also exposed to severe trauma etc.

2. Please give examples about what is known about mental health disorders among trafficked women, even if the evidence is limited. Please also include information of your previous study on mental health disorders among the same sample of trafficked women and explain the new evidence this study provides in respect to your previous publications.

3. “No previous research has described risk factors for diagnosed mental disorder in a sample of trafficked women.” I recommend putting this sentence at the end of the paragraph.

4. The background should include a theoretical framework on which the hypotheses are based to understand why childhood abuse and unmet social needs after the trafficking experience are predicted to influence women’s mental health approximately 6 months post trafficking.

5. You should also include a statement why no information is included on the trafficking experience itself and the difference it might have made to have this information available, especially since duration of trafficking is significantly associated with mental health. Actually, given that duration of trafficking is used as a proxy for trafficking experience, as stated in the results and explained in the discussion, you might not want to say that you solely focused on pre- and post-trafficking experiences. Also, you have looked at the association with country of destination as well.

Methods:

1. Were the interviews conducted throughout 2008 or just for a few months?

2. Clarify if the 80% of trafficked women who are referred to the programme are 80% of all trafficked women or 80% of those assisted by IOM.

3. Please give information on the training of the interviewer

4. Please discuss if the fact that an IOM social worker approached women about the participation pressured women to participate in the survey, given that they were receiving or had received services from IOM.

5. Were women reimbursed for their participation and travel?

6. Please provide information on how women were followed up for the research, what communication methods were used and how safety was ensured.

7. Please provide information on why women were not asked about their trafficking experience itself.

8. Please provide information on the sexual abuse items.

9. Please give an explanation why mental health disorders were not considered
separately but jointly.

10. What do you mean with ‘represented elsewhere in the dataset’?

11. Why did you not control for residence prior to trafficking when examining the association between mental disorder and childhood abuse and unmet needs and social support as this was also significant in the bivariate analysis (Table 1)?

12. Please clarify the difference in the analysis described in paragraph 2 and 3 of the analysis section, as both analyses calculated OR and AOR. Please specify what variables the last analysis controlled for and which variables had to be excluded due to collinearity.

Results:

1. For consistency, please state that the social worker was an IOM social worker

2. Please give information on the countries of destination in the same detail as in the abstract in addition to % or numbers.

3. Please change sentence 2 and 3 as women are not able to refuse to participate if they cannot be traced in the first place. Rather provide a percentage for women who refused to participate after being asked, as loss to follow up and declining to participate might have very different reasons. Also, please provide information on why the two women were excluded.

4. Please describe what is meant with ‘budgeting’ – did they have financial problems due to a lack of money or due to a problem of dealing with the money they have?

5. How do you know from the data that the reduction in unemployment is due to IOM assistance?

6. Predictors of mental disorder: why was residency not included?

7. It is unclear what factors the final multivariate logistic regression model controlled for, after the stepwise analysis was conducted. Please state that in the text and table.

Discussion:

1. Is it possible to compare levels of childhood abuse among trafficked women to the general population or other trafficked women as the prevalence rates seem comparatively high to what is generally revealed in survey research?

2. You do have some data on the trafficking experience, so please change lack of data to minimal data, especially since you are using the data you have.

3. Can you explain what the ethical reasons were that prevented you from collecting data on the trafficking experience – this might be of importance for future researchers. Please align with the information given in the methods.

4. Please add ‘Based on our analysis’ to ‘we have no reason to think’, as you have not found any differences to those who could not be followed up. Also, change the sentence from ‘those who did not’ to ‘those who could not be followed up or did not agree to participate’.
Implications:
1. Why do you only talk about the applicability of the cognitive model of PTSD when the study looked at more forms of mental disorder?

Conclusions:
1. The last sentence could be stronger, as it is not only important to test therapies that take pre- and post-trafficking factors into account (that is obviously important as well!) – rather it seems essential that these therapies address these issues as it sounds like they have not done this up to date.

Table 1:
1. The distribution of n in the table does not make sense. Are there really only 6 women with mental disorders?
2. The total does not always add up to 100 in all cells. Please check each individual cell
3. Please change ‘general obligatory’ to ‘primary education’ if applicable
4. The coding of the living situation variable does not make sense. Where are women who lived with their partner and their children? There must be overlaps between the categories.
5. Reword ‘confidante’ as it is not clear what is meant with it
6. Please state that the abuse variables only refer to childhood abuse by someone from the household, not any abuse before trafficking
7. As women trafficked to other countries make up nearly a third of all trafficked, information should be given how high the percentages are for these other countries (at least in the results section) and an additional category for a specific country might have be created.

Table 2: Add ‘human’ to the title for consistency.

Table 5:
1. Please provide information on what factors have been adjusted for
2. Please specific that the duration of exploitation was measured in months.
   Check if the language of exploitation and trafficking experience is consistent with the text.
3. Also give a range for the social support score and the number of unmet needs to assist the reader in interpretation of the AOR.

All Tables: Change ‘6 months post-return’ is changed to ‘on average six months post return’. Table 1 does not give any information on that.

Figure 1: Please format the figure like the original figure as the current figure is confusing due to a lack of spaces and lines.

Overall:
- Please make sure that you consistently refer to either trafficked women, female trafficking survivors or trafficking victims, both in the text as in the table.
- There is confusion whether you refer to ‘6 months post-trafficking’ or ‘a mean duration of 6 months post trafficking’. Please align within the text and tables.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

'I declare that I have no competing interests'