

# Stop Trafficking!

## Awareness Advocacy Action

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**FOCUS:** This issue highlights human trafficking that occurs within the family.

## Family members are involved with nearly half of all child trafficking. What is familial trafficking?



Familial trafficking is when a family member, the trafficker, exchanges another family member for goods, substances, rent, services, money, or status within the community. Many times, familial trafficking involves a parent selling their child or children. However, there have been cases of grandparents trafficking grandchildren, aunts and uncles trafficking their nieces and nephews, cousins selling other cousins, and brothers and sisters trafficking siblings. Familial trafficking often starts at a much younger age than other forms of trafficking, and boys are more likely to be recruited by a family member than girls.

Family members are involved with nearly half of all child trafficking. The extent

of family trafficking of children is almost four times greater than familial trafficking of adults, which is about nine percent of cases. According to the National Human Trafficking Hotline, a family member is the second leading way a person is recruited into sex trafficking. The fourth leading way a person is recruited into labor trafficking is by family.

Familial trafficking of children is not bound by social class, ethnicity, or demographics. In the United States, poverty, socio-environmental stressors, and the opioid epidemic, especially in rural areas, have created an environment of desperation in many families, leaving children vulnerable to trafficking by a parent or family member. An analysis of familial sex trafficking published in the Journal of Family Violence in 2018 shows that when trafficking occurred by family members, children were most often exchanged for illegal drugs. Supporting this, the Counter-Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC), operated by the Institute of Medicine, found that 64% of the traffickers in their study were mothers who a nonrelative trafficker assisted. Furthermore, in more than 80 percent of these cases, drugs were the currency used to profit from the exchange.

In addition, familial trafficking has significantly impacted children and families involved in the child welfare system.

Globally, the International Organization for Migration reports that family members are linked to nearly half of child trafficking cases. Moreover, family involvement in child trafficking is up to four times higher than in cases of adult trafficking.

In some cases, family members unknowingly involve their children in exploitive situations, enrolling them in education or training opportunities that are fronts for labor or sex trafficking operations.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

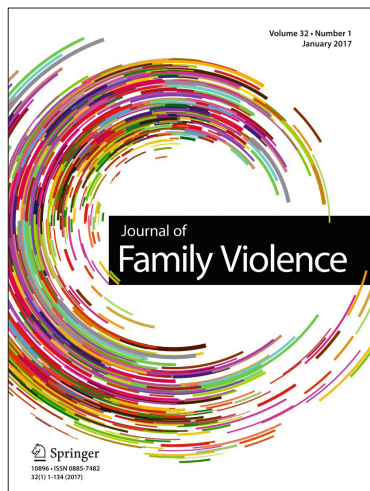


I am Not  
for SALE

STOP Human Trafficking!

*A.R. knows the horror that familial traffickers can visit on the children they exploit. Her stepfather exploited her. He would photograph her as a three-year-old, exploiting her for pornography. When she got older, he would hire her out to other men, often many times a night. If she was not compliant, he'd make sure she was too drugged to resist.*

## Who are the Traffickers?



In a [Journal of Family Violence](#) study, published in 2018 by Ginny Sprang and Jennifer Cole, all of the traffickers involved were family members. Nearly 65% of the traffickers were the victim's mother, and 32% were the victim's father. In addition, almost 60% of familial trafficking victims have ongoing contact with their trafficker, making it exceedingly difficult for children and youth to remove themselves from harmful situations and protect themselves—both physically and psychologically. Many of the children in this study were trafficked for illicit drugs.

Traffickers who victimize their family members or those close to them take advantage of existing power dynamics. They seek extensive control over their victims' lives. They know their victims well and understand precisely what makes them vulnerable. This position allows them to manipulate and groom their victims to do as they're told.

Perpetrators often don't look like criminals. Elijah Rising, an organization in Houston working to end human trafficking, explains that familial traffickers intentionally build relationships within their communities. They often hold positions of authority, are friendly and extroverted, strive to hold positions of power, and want to be well-loved.

Some ways that family members initiate child sex trafficking include:

- Caregivers engage with traffickers who fraudulently promise to obtain jobs or other opportunities for their children. Instead, they force the children into commercial sex, strip club involvement, child sexual abuse materials (formerly called 'child pornography'), etc.
- Caregivers were providing inadequate supervision leaving children/youth vulnerable to those who sexually exploit them.
- Family members not otherwise engaged in trafficking allow traffickers to exploit their children/youth in exchange for drugs, money, or something else of value.
- Family members exploit/traffic their children and potentially others. Methods used to control or sustain youth involvement in family sex trafficking include psychological, physical, or sexual abuse.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Impact of Familial Trafficking on the Victim

*"At a young age, I looked the devil in the eye many, many times. I knew—if I disobeyed my trafficker—exactly what would happen to me. I knew the abuse. I knew how awful it would be. The scariest thing to me as a child was to come out and talk to all of you...to talk to a teacher, to talk to law enforcement. Because what I didn't know was how the rest of the world would react." (K.D.)*

Many children who are victims of familial trafficking do not identify as victims of abuse or even have the language to describe their abuse. They may fear the police or feel guilt and shame about what they've experienced. They may also falsely believe what's happening to them is their fault. If a child sees their abuse as a form of punishment, they won't recognize it as exploitation or abuse. Victims often never know that money or something of value is being exchanged.

The child victims are often fed lies and manipulated to keep quiet. "If you tell the police, you'll be arrested and thrown in jail." "Abuse happens to everyone, especially girls; your friends just don't talk about it." "You're

worthless, and no one else cares about you." Moreover, traffickers often threaten the lives or safety of victims and their victim's loved ones to maintain control.

The onset of trauma can exacerbate the impacts of familial trafficking during key childhood developmental stages. Moreover, while the amount of continued abuse experienced by any sex trafficking victim leads to severe complex trauma, another level of trauma and mistrust is added when a family member traffics the victim. The adult that breaks the trust naturally found between child and caregiver creates lasting health, well-being, and relationship issues within that child. Thus, commercial

sexual exploitation by an adult family member violates a most sacred trust, significantly when it breaches the parent-child relationship.

Children who have been victims of familial trafficking may develop educational and social delays, physical health problems, and psychological disorders, such as complex post-traumatic stress disorder and attachment disorders.

Survivors may encounter many health indicators and somatic complaints due to having to endure trauma for an extended time at an early age. These include head, stomach, and body aches; throat and urinary tract infections; interrupted sleep due to nightmares and flashbacks; difficulty concentrating; asthma; and more.

Victims and survivors of familial trafficking have a range of responses to the traditional educational system: some are reported to have learning challenges, including illiteracy and processing challenges. Other children excel, whether because school is where they feel safe or because they have been conditioned to please adults in their lives or developed resiliency and survival skills early in life.

Furthermore, familial trafficking situations may have prevented survivors from developing critical healthy social skills, including making and maintaining friends, relating to other children and adults, asking for assistance, and recognizing their self-worth. Many have a negative self-concept and chronic interpersonal and relational problems. Studies show that boys tend to display more behavior symptoms while girls have higher rates of depression.

Having a family member as the main perpetrator and trafficker may also result in many victims feeling unable to speak about the experiences they endured due to the shame it may bring upon their families, communities, and themselves. Regardless of socioeconomic background,



child survivors of familial trafficking situations often have limited avenues for resources when seeking assistance.

In addition to the exploitation associated with involvement in prostitution, pornography, or employment, other forms of trauma exposure may have been experienced during the period of exploitation, such as witnessing the violence of another. In addition, some children experience a health-related crisis such as contracting a sexually transmitted disease.

What is most disturbing is the high number of survivors of familial trafficking who have considered suicide.

Finally, child victims of familial trafficking tend to have some involvement in the child welfare system. They may also have truancy issues, some involvement with law enforcement, juvenile justice, homeless shelters, or other social services. They may also have a history of emergency department visits with frequent injuries or sexually transmitted infections.

Click [here](#) to learn more.



## The High Cost of History

*As the founder of Where All Women Are Honored, an antitrafficking organization in Rapid City, South Dakota, Norma Rendon from the Lakota Ogalala Sioux explains how Native Americans may be particularly vulnerable to familial trafficking.*

For historical reasons, Native Americans are particularly vulnerable to familial trafficking. Prior to being confined to a reservation, native peoples did not have the family-related problems they face today. Men would hunt and the women would then cook the food. The men in the tribe would serve the women and children first. When the women and children had enough, the men would then eat.

Once confined to a reservation everything changed. The tribe lost their weapons. The men were unable to hunt and even worse, they could not protect women and children from rape. Men no longer had the protector role. Adding to their humiliation, they saw family members dying from cold or hunger and felt powerless.



# Advocacy

To survive, the family sometimes had no choice but to trade a daughter for food or blankets. It was a total breakdown of the societal system and society was never the same again.

Moreover, another factor comes into play regarding trafficking among the indigenous population. Tribal lands have their own legal system which does not apply to people who are not tribal members. Therefore, if a non-indigenous person commits a crime like human trafficking against a member of the tribal community, they will not be prosecuted.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Navigating the Unique Complexities in Familial Trafficking

In *Navigating the Unique Complexities in Familial Trafficking*, published by the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons in the July 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report, the International Office for Migration asserts that governments and anti-trafficking stakeholders often overlook familial trafficking.

While the anti-trafficking field has identified the recruitment, grooming, and exploitation practices traffickers use in various scenarios of both sex and labor trafficking, familial trafficking remains challenging to identify. Many of its victims do not realize they are victims and the child's inherent loyalty to and reliance on the family structure make familial trafficking challenging to prosecute. Moreover, misperceptions about where and how familial trafficking happens, such as the belief that familial trafficking only occurs within neighborhoods, communities, or countries of low socioeconomic status, contribute to challenges to prosecution, prevention, and protection efforts.

In familial trafficking, the trafficker may begin grooming the victim at an early age, using their proximity to take advantage of the child's developmental stage and inability to express concerns or safety issues verbally. Because children are dependent on their families for their basic needs, such as food, shelter, and clothing, they often have basic needs unmet or physical violence if they don't comply with the trafficker. The traumatic impacts are severe because children have little psychological recourse for protecting themselves from the trafficker, who may also wield significant power by nature of the familial relationship alone.

## Dispelling the Myths

Often, familial trafficking is normalized within the family culture, sometimes spanning generations. This may be considered the "family business," such as in some cases of forced child labor in agriculture, or there may be a belief that this is a cultural passage into womanhood. Because the child sees trafficking and forced labor as a normal family state, it becomes even more difficult for them to identify the problem and escape it.

Misconceptions about familial trafficking may also serve to imply that trafficking only occurs in impoverished communities where parents must sell their children to purchase basic necessities.



Because a child in this situation is often trained not to report what is happening, interactions with adults who might otherwise notice a problem or identify the child as vulnerable, such as teachers, neighbors, doctors, and other adults in the community, instead see the child as shy or failing to thrive. Moreover, if another family member notices the exploitation of the child, there is a strong incentive to look the other way to protect the family, both physically and in reputation, from outside interventions.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## Red Flags

Children who are victims of familial trafficking come from many backgrounds, and there is no common socioeconomic situation, race, gender, creed, or religious indicator to predict who will be trafficked over another child in a family situation. However, while familial trafficking can and does happen in families that appear entirely “functional” or “normal” to an outsider, there may be signs of child abuse or neglect, which may include trafficking.

### Red Flags Used to Help Identify Victims of Familial Trafficking include:

- ◆ Never alone (might be with other family members all the time)
- ◆ Might appear to be in a controlling environment
- ◆ Isolated from other people, peers, and “normal” situations; lack of opportunities that most children have the ability to participate in
- ◆ Signs of domestic violence and intimate partner violence within the family
- ◆ Debt bondage (child talks about having to make money to pay for things within the family system)
- ◆ Abnormal loyalty to the “family” system
- ◆ Poor working/living conditions
- ◆ Lack of formal education and isolation; some survivors of familial trafficking do very well in school though simply because it is the one safe place that they are not being abused
- ◆ Mind control and programming
- ◆ Inability to “grow up.”
- ◆ Fear of medical providers and other helpers
- ◆ Might appear to be the “keeper” of the family secrets
- ◆ Secrecy around the house (e.g., areas that are off-limits to outsiders)
- ◆ Lack of understanding about one’s changing body and developmentally/age appropriate things

*A mother sent her little daughter to the landlord’s house and the landlord was taking advantage of the child. Upon investigation it came out that the mother was receiving money off her rent.*

- ◆ Substance dependency within the familial system without an obvious means to pay for it
- ◆ Attachment disorders (including struggles to get close to other people)
- ◆ Tries to please adults or get inappropriate attention from them
- ◆ Tries to act older than peers or mental age
- ◆ Inconsistent behavior, frequent mood swings
- ◆ Behaviors that appear to be sexually promiscuous
- ◆ May have vague answers; have been taught to hide secrets
- ◆ May have non-evident injuries that affect physical activity
- ◆ Lack of understanding and education about bodily functions, rape, incest, sexual abuse
- ◆ May have poor hygiene, be unaware of body odor

### Those involved in familial sex trafficking may have:

- ◆ involvement in the child welfare system, often with referrals/substantiations of neglect
- ◆ history of presenting at health and emergency departments with sexually transmitted diseases and injuries
- ◆ excessive absences from school
- ◆ law enforcement or juvenile justice involvement related to status or drug-related offenses
- ◆ contact with homeless shelters or other social service organizations as runaways

Click [here](#) to learn more.

## How Does Familial Trafficking Differ From Child Sexual Abuse?

Familial trafficking is not only hard to detect, but it is often misidentified as child abuse or rape. However, there is a clear difference between familial sexual abuse and familial sex trafficking. Child sex trafficking is always child abuse, but not all child sexual abuse is trafficking.

Familial trafficking has a commercial element to it. A child trapped in a trafficking situation could experience repeated, frequent, and ongoing abuse—from which the trafficker will profit. This commonly includes a transaction of money, drugs, rent, or even transportation. Involvement in sex trafficking inflicts harms over and above those imposed by sexual abuse alone. A child trafficking charge carries a more severe sentence for perpetrators, so it must be appropriately identified.



# Action

## What can be done

If you suspect a child you know is being trafficked by a family member or anyone else, file a report with local law enforcement or contact the Human Trafficking Hotline. In addition, report sexually abused or exploited minors to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. Never confront the situation on your own.

Investigate where your children are going and with whom they are involved. In some cases, family members unintentionally place their children in harmful situations like distant education and training opportunities that are fronts for sex trafficking operations.

Raise your voice and advocate for these children trafficked by family members by educating others around you about not only the dangers of

sex trafficking but the realities of familial trafficking as well.

Donate to organizations that are actively working to protect children from this form of exploitation. Education is crucial in the fight to end familial human trafficking. Children must be taught that if someone is using their body for profit, it is a grave, horrific offense, even if their parents are committing the crime.

Frequently, service providers use the same approaches and resources for familial trafficking that are used for all types of human trafficking, which can be inappropriate and even harmful. Addressing familial trafficking requires an interdisciplinary approach to ensure recovery of mental and physical health, trauma-informed investigation and prosecutorial efforts, survivor-led and centered



practices and interventions, and more extensive societal education and awareness.

On the global front, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) calls for governments and other development and humanitarian partners to step-up counter-trafficking interventions aimed at children. This includes helping household heads to make long-term plans for themselves and their families; assisting children to identify potentially dangerous or exploitative situations and know how to get support; and ensuring that protection and systems are accessible to all children, regardless of their migration status.

Click [here](#) to learn more.

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*"It is an absolute betrayal that a relative is so evil to sell you for profit. Most relatives are selling girls for their drug habit. Some sell them because of poverty. And others sell them because they think it is cool to have someone like you to pass around to their friends for cash."*



## What Happened to Me?: Healing for Sex Trafficking Survivors

by Toni McKinley

This book helps educate others about a pimp, familial, and gang trafficking. It is filled with survivor stories as well as the author's own story of familial trafficking. Each story has a purpose and that is to help others, especially trafficked girls, understand what happened to them when they were trafficked. This book will help break that trauma bond as well as facilitate the healing process.

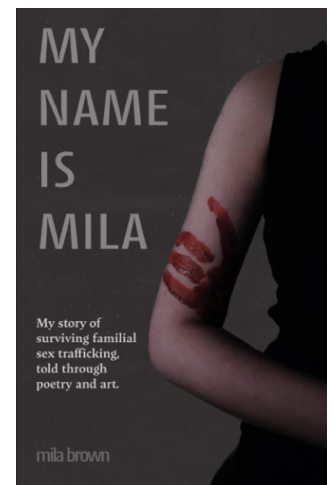
This book is for sex trafficking survivors, advocates, counselors, and anyone else who wants to learn more about trafficking and what the healing process looks like for complex trauma. I believe that if each girl understood how they were forced, coerced, or manipulated into

## My Name Is Mila: My Story Of Surviving Familial Sex Trafficking

by Mila Brown

'My Name Is Mila' is the heartbreaking true story of a child's life in the hands of sex traffickers published in March 2021. Told through haunting photography, poetry, and prose, this book takes you deep into the dark world of surviving familial sex trafficking, a world that exists and thrives in darkness and secrecy.

Written to expose the dark and disturbing world of child trafficking, this book is heart-wrenching but an awareness piece much needed. Human Trafficking is a billion-dollar industry happening in every country globally. An estimated 40 million people worldwide are being trafficked, with 10 million of those being children. Together we must work to put an end to these crimes and bring all traffickers to justice.



**Trafficked by my own family.** Click [here](#) to view this brief you tube.

"A family member was trading a child for rent." Click [here](#) to view a short YouTube on familial sex trafficking in South Carolina.

Click [here](#) to view a short YouTube on familial sex trafficking in West Virginia caused and effected by the opioid crisis.



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