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Insights into the Social and Psychological Factors Affecting the Reintegration of Sexually Exploited Children in Zimbabwe

Trudy Nyakambangwe^{1*}, Dr Christopher Zishiri², Dr I Mahiya³^{1,3}Faculty of Social and Gender Transformative Science, Women's University in Africa²Faculty of Education, Social Sciences and Humanities, Department of Education, Catholic University of Zimbabwe, Harare, Zimbabwe.**Article History**

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Abstract: Sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe encounter numerous challenges that impede their recovery and reintegration into society. This qualitative study focused on the social and psychological challenges affecting the reintegration of these children. The study collected data from 60 participants comprising sexually exploited children, caregivers and managers working in rehabilitation institutions, among other stakeholders involved in the reintegration process. Data were analysed using thematic procedures and results show that pervasive stigma and discrimination, enduring trauma and psychological distress, lack of education, and economic hardships were hindering the reintegration efforts in Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the study found that cultural norms and beliefs that condone sexual exploitation exacerbate the problem, particularly affecting girls and young women. The enduring trauma and psychological distress experienced by these children result in emotional scars, including post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and feelings of shame and guilt. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach involving education, awareness-raising, advocacy, and trauma-informed care. Access to mental health services and comprehensive psychosocial support is crucial for healing and recovery. Therefore, a holistic approach encompassing physical, social, and emotional well-being, along with support networks, is essential for successful reintegration.

Keywords: Reintegration, sexually exploitation, recovery, social and psychological factors.

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual exploitation of children is a global problem that affects millions of children every year, with devastating consequences for their physical, psychological, and social well-being. In Zimbabwe, as in many other countries, sexually exploited children face numerous challenges when trying to reintegrate into society after experiencing exploitation, including stigma, trauma, and lack of support. Effective reintegration practices are therefore crucial to help these children overcome these challenges and rebuild their lives. This article presents insights into the social and psychological factors that affect the reintegration of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe, based on a case study of reintegration practices in the country. Drawing on interviews with key stakeholders, including social workers, counselors, and community members, this study examines the challenges and opportunities for successful reintegration of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study explores how social and psychological factors such as stigma, trauma, social support, and community attitudes influence the reintegration process. The findings of this study have important implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working to address the issue of sexual exploitation of children in Zimbabwe and beyond. By highlighting the key social and psychological factors that affect the reintegration of sexually exploited children, this study aims to contribute to the development of more effective and evidence-based

interventions to support these vulnerable children in their journey towards recovery and reintegration.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Sexual exploitation of children is a global problem that affects millions of children every year, with devastating consequences for their physical, psychological, and social well-being (Njau & Kinyanda, 2021; Tshabalala & Sithole, 2021; Mushore & Chirongoma, 2020). In Zimbabwe, as in many other countries, sexually exploited children face numerous challenges when trying to reintegrate into society after experiencing exploitation, including stigma, trauma, and lack of support. Effective reintegration practices are therefore crucial to help these children overcome these challenges and rebuild their lives.

The reintegration of sexually exploited children is a complex process that is influenced by a range of social and psychological factors. These factors can include the attitudes and perceptions of community members towards sexually exploited children, the availability of social support networks, the level of trauma and psychological distress experienced by the children, and the quality of services provided by reintegration programs (Wakoli, 2020). However, despite the importance of these factors, there is limited research on the social and psychological factors that affect the reintegration of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe. This is despite the fact that sexual

exploitation of children is a serious problem in Zimbabwe. Many children are at risk of being exploited for commercial sex work, pornography, and other forms of sexual exploitation. These children often face significant challenges when trying to reintegrate into society after experiencing exploitation, including stigma, trauma, and lack of support. Effective reintegration practices are therefore crucial to help these children overcome these challenges and rebuild their lives.

This study filled this gap by providing insights into the social and psychological factors that influence the reintegration of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe. Specifically, the study examined the challenges and opportunities for successful reintegration of sexually exploited children, exploring how social and psychological factors such as stigma, trauma, social support, and community attitudes influence the reintegration process. By focusing on the social and psychological factors that affect the reintegration of sexually exploited children, the study contributes to the development of more effective and evidence-based interventions to support these vulnerable children. The study findings have important implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers working to address the issue of sexual exploitation of children in Zimbabwe and beyond. The study employed a qualitative multiple-case study research design, which involved in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including social workers, counselors, and community members, to reveal the interplay among the social and psychological factors in shaping the reintegration experiences of sexually exploited children.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the key social and psychological factors that influence the reintegration of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe, and how do these factors interact with each other?

Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by a social-ecological framework, which recognises the complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, and societal factors in shaping the reintegration experiences of sexually exploited children (Greenson *et al.* 2018; Banyard *et al.* 2013). By using this framework, the study provided a holistic understanding of the factors that affected reintegration process, identifying ways in which different stakeholders, including policymakers, practitioners, and communities, can work together to support sexually exploited children. According to Hui and Wong (2018), the social-ecological framework emphasises the complex interplay between individual, interpersonal, and societal factors in shaping the experiences of vulnerable children. This framework acknowledges that the reintegration of sexually exploited children involves multiple levels of influence,

from the individual child to the broader social and cultural contexts in which they live (Decker *et al.* 2015).

At the individual level, the social-ecological framework recognises that the experiences and needs of each sexually exploited child are unique and that the reintegration process must be tailored to meet the individual needs of each child (Hossain, 2018; Hui & Wong, 2018). This may include providing specialised counseling and support to help children cope with trauma and emotional distress. At the interpersonal level, the framework acknowledges the importance of relationships and social support networks in the reintegration process. This may include involving family members, peers, and community members in the reintegration process, and providing opportunities for children to develop new relationships and support networks. At the societal level, the framework recognises the broader cultural and social contexts in which sexually exploited children live, and how these contexts can either facilitate or hinder their reintegration. This may include addressing social stigma and discrimination, promoting community awareness and education, and advocating for policy and legal changes to better protect the rights of sexually exploited children.

Using this theory, this study provided a comprehensive understanding of the complex factors that influenced the reintegration process of sexually exploited children. The ideas of the adopted social-ecological theoretical framework enabled this study to identify effective interventions and strategies that take into account the unique needs and experiences of each child, and that address the multiple levels of influence that shape their reintegration experiences. Such evidence-based interventions can be used to help to ensure that sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe and beyond, receive the support and care they needed to rebuild their lives and thrive.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The reintegration of sexually exploited children is a complex process influenced by various social and psychological factors. This study reviewed studies that were conducted in different regions, including America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, to gain insights into the factors affecting the successful reintegration of sexually exploited children. A study by Smith *et al.* (2018) conducted in multiple states in America examined the social and psychological factors influencing the reintegration of sexually exploited children. The findings highlighted the importance of social support from family, peers, and communities in facilitating successful reintegration. Access to education, vocational training, and employment opportunities were identified as crucial factors that contributed to the long-term well-being and social

integration of the victims. Another study by Wessells (2019), examined the factors associated with reintegration outcomes among former child soldiers. The study highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the social and cultural factors that contribute to child soldiering, as well as the need for support services that address the social and emotional needs of survivors.

A study conducted in Europe by Johnson and Williams (2019) explored the social and psychological factors affecting the reintegration of sexually exploited children. The findings revealed that stigma and discrimination were major challenges faced by these children during the reintegration process. Community-based interventions that aimed to reduce stigma, increase community acceptance, and provide comprehensive support services were found to enhance the reintegration outcomes significantly. Johnson and Lee (2020) conducted a study in South Asia to examine the social and psychological factors influencing the reintegration of sexually exploited children. The findings highlighted the importance of addressing stigma and discrimination as significant barriers to successful reintegration. The study emphasised the need for community-based interventions that promote acceptance, provide educational and vocational opportunities, and offer comprehensive support services to enhance the social reintegration of these children.

In Africa, a study conducted in Zimbabwe by Chiriseri *et al.* (2020) explored the social and psychological factors affecting the reintegration of sexually exploited children. The findings revealed that stigma and discrimination were significant challenges faced by these children during the reintegration process. The study emphasised the importance of community involvement, awareness programs, and interventions that promote acceptance and provide educational and vocational opportunities to enhance the social reintegration of these children. Another study conducted in Zimbabwe by Sithole and Kiguwa (2019), explored the narratives of resilience among young women, including those who had experienced sexual exploitation. The study found that resilience is a complex and multifaceted concept that is shaped by social and cultural factors, as well as individual experiences and coping strategies. The study highlighted the importance of understanding the social and psychological factors that affect the reintegration of victims of sexual exploitation. Community-based interventions, support services, and policy and legal reforms, were found to be vital in the promotion of the well-being of vulnerable populations.

The empirical evidence from the reviewed studies highlights common themes regarding the social and psychological factors affecting the reintegration of sexually exploited children. Stigma and discrimination emerge as significant barriers to successful reintegration

in all regions. The studies emphasise the importance of social support, community involvement, stigma reduction, access to education and vocational opportunities, trauma-informed care, and mental health interventions in facilitating the successful reintegration of these vulnerable children. These findings provided valuable insights that laid a strong foundation for the present study to which provides context specific findings which offer comprehensive evidence related to the psychosocial challenges affecting the reintegration process. These findings can be used to shape the formulation of strategies which can be used to inform the interventions that can effectively support the reintegration process of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe and beyond.

While the reviewed studies provided important insights into the challenges and best practices related to the reintegration of sexually exploited children and other vulnerable populations, it was apparent that the reintegration of process of sexually exploited children remains problematic. Social and psychological factors continue to hinder the process of reintegrating the affected children (Landberg *et al.* 2022). Therefore, the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the psychosocial factors, remained pertinent. This study therefore, was conducted to bridge this persisting gap in knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and a qualitative case study research design. This methodology is well-suited to exploring complex phenomena in real-life situations, such as the reintegration experiences of sexually exploited children (Carcary, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Qualitative case study research involves in-depth exploration of one or more cases through the collection of detailed data from multiple sources, such as interviews, observations, and documents (Flick, 2022; Maxwell, 2021). This methodology is particularly useful for understanding the experiences and perspectives of different stakeholders involved in the reintegration process, including sexually exploited children themselves, social workers, counselors, and community members.

By using a qualitative case study research design, the study collected rich and detailed data on the social and psychological factors that affect the reintegration of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe (Choy, 2014; Gray, 2014). The study used a purposive sampling technique to come up with a sample of 60 participants. The participants comprised sexually exploited children, caregivers and managers working in rehabilitation institutions, among other stakeholders involved in the reintegration process. According to Fusch *et al.* (2018), triangulation involves collecting data from multiple sources and using multiple data collection methods to ensure the consistency and accuracy of the data. This study employed multiple data

collection methods that included interviews with key stakeholders, focus groups with affected children, observations of reintegration programs, and review of relevant documents, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the reintegration process. Furthermore, the use of multiple data collection methods in this study, ensured the reliability data (Muratovski, 2021; Patton, 2015).

The study used thematic data analysis procedures to provide a rigorous data analysis process which ensured the accuracy and reliability of findings (Johnson & Thompson, 2021). The analysis process involved using coding schemes, data triangulation, and member checking to ensure that the findings are accurate (Harding, 2019). To enhance the credibility of results as elaborated by Harley and Cornelissen (2022), this study adhered to ethical guidelines and principles including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and avoiding harm to participants.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe face a multitude of challenges that hinder their reintegration into society after experiencing exploitation. One of the primary obstacles is the pervasive stigma and discrimination surrounding their experiences. Prior studies (Mbakogu & Odiyi, 2021; Mushore & Chirongoma, 2020; Wessells, 2019; Jordans *et al.*, 2012) have also identified stigma and discrimination as barriers that thwart reintegration efforts. Due to the sensitive and taboo nature of the issue, these children often encounter social stigma and discrimination, leading to their further isolation and marginalisation within their families and communities. This negative social perception makes it exceedingly difficult for them to reintegrate successfully. Commenting on the issues of stigma and discrimination encountered by victims of sexual exploitation, a participant emphasised that;

Addressing stigma and discrimination facing sexually exploited children requires a multi-faceted approach that involves education, awareness-raising, and advocacy. We need to work together to create a society that prioritises the well-being of children and protect them from further exploitation.

However, the multi-faceted approaches that target to address the issue of sexual exploitation is hampered by certain cultural norms and beliefs that still persist in some societies in Zimbabwe. In some communities, cultural beliefs still condone or even promote sexual exploitation of children. These cultural beliefs constitute gender inequality and it is girls and young women who are particularly at risk, as they may face discrimination and violence due to their gender. Such cultural beliefs sustain the problem of sexual exploitation and victims in such situations live with

stigma and other psychological challenges throughout their lives.

Another significant factor that profoundly affects the reintegration process of sexually exploited children is the enduring trauma and psychological distress resulting from their exploitation. This finding confirms Tshabalala and Sithole's (2021), who found that the experiences endured by sexually exploited children leave deep emotional scars, causing profound turmoil within their minds and spirits. The psychological impact of sexual exploitation manifest in various ways, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, depression, and feelings of shame and guilt. A participant highlighted that;

The importance of addressing the psychological trauma experienced by sexually exploited children cannot be overemphasised. It is crucial to provide them with access to mental health services to help them heal and recover. In fact, there is need to work towards preventing the exploitation of children in the first place by addressing the root causes of this issue.

These immense challenges can be overcome by availing specialised and comprehensive psychosocial support services to help affected children to navigate their traumatic experiences and rebuild their lives. In this regard, trauma-informed care becomes essential, as it focuses on the unique needs and vulnerabilities of each sexually exploited children, providing a safe and supportive environment for them to heal. The need for skilled therapists and counselors trained in trauma-focused approaches cannot be emphasised. These experts can help sexually exploited children to process their experiences, cope with their emotions, and develop healthy coping mechanisms.

Lack of education is another major factor which slows the process of reintegration. Children who lack access to education remain vulnerable to sexual re-exploitation, as they may not have the knowledge or skills to protect themselves from further abuse. Lack of education stands as a formidable barrier that not only hampers the reintegration process but also perpetuates the vulnerability of sexually exploited children. Deprivation of access to education, leaves victims ill-equipped to protect themselves from further instances of sexual exploitation. Without the knowledge and skills to recognise signs of abuse, assert their rights, and make informed decisions, they remain at heightened risk of falling prey to re-exploitation. In this regard, education serves as a powerful tool, to empower children with the necessary information and critical thinking abilities to navigate the complexities of their surroundings. It equips them with awareness about their rights, boundaries, and personal safety, bolstering their resilience against potential perpetrators. By fostering a greater understanding of healthy relationships, consent, and personal autonomy, education acts as a protective

shield, instilling the confidence and knowledge required to resist potential exploitation. Furthermore, access to education opens doors to a myriad of opportunities for these children, enhancing their prospects for a brighter future. Education not only imparts academic knowledge but also cultivates essential life skills, such as communication, problem-solving, and decision-making capabilities. Equipped with these skills, sexually exploited children can envision alternative paths and pursue avenues that lead to personal growth, economic self-sufficiency, and social integration.

Efforts to address the lack of education among sexually exploited children require a multi-faceted approach. It entails ensuring access to quality education, removing financial barriers, providing catch-up programs for those who have missed out on formal schooling, and tailoring educational approaches to accommodate their unique needs informed by their experiences. Collaborative initiatives involving government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and educational institutions can work together to create safe and inclusive learning environments that cater to the specific needs and sensitivities of sexually exploited children. Many families in Zimbabwe are living in poverty, leading children exposed to sexual exploitation in exchange for money or other basic needs. Therefore, education must be taken as an integral component of the reintegration process, given that it holds potential to empower sexually exploited children to break free from the cycle of exploitation, equip them with the necessary skills to protect themselves, and open doors to a brighter and more promising future.

Moreover, the journey towards recovery and reintegration necessitates a holistic approach that addresses not only the psychological aspects but also the physical, social, and emotional well-being of affected children. Support services can include individual and group therapy, art therapy, play therapy, and other evidence-based interventions tailored to the specific needs of sexually exploited children. Such interventions hold the potential to rebuild the children's self-esteem, restore a sense of safety and trust, and equip them with the necessary tools to navigate the challenges they may encounter during the reintegration process. Additionally, support networks comprising trusted adults, mentors, and peers play a vital role in the healing and reintegration journey. By providing a network of caring individuals, these children can find the emotional support, guidance, and encouragement they need to rebuild their lives. Building connections with positive role models and peers who have experienced similar challenges can foster a sense of belonging and reduce feelings of isolation.

In summary, the trauma and psychological distress experienced by sexually exploited children have profound and lasting effects on their mental health and overall well-being. Specialised counseling and

comprehensive support services, incorporating trauma-informed care and a holistic approach, are essential in helping these children cope with their traumatic experiences, heal, and rebuild their lives. These children need to be empowered to before they embark on their journey towards successful reintegration and a brighter future. However, lack of education and skills poses additional hurdles for them. Many of them have missed out on educational opportunities and skills development, impairing their ability to reintegrate into society and find meaningful employment. This lack of education and skills further exacerbates the economic challenges they face. In Zimbabwe, where economic conditions are already strained, sexually exploited children may struggle to access basic necessities such as food, shelter, and medical care.

It was apparent from the discussion of key finding that addressing the challenges faced by sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe required a comprehensive and coordinated approach. Policymakers, practitioners, families and communities must collaborate to develop effective strategies that combat social stigma, provide trauma-informed care, enhance educational opportunities and skills development, address economic disparities, and ensure legal protection and support for sexually exploited children. By addressing these multifaceted challenges, society can work towards enabling the successful reintegration of sexually exploited children and promoting their recovery and overall well-being.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The implications of this research study are in both theory and practice as discussed below;

Implications for Theory

First, this study reinforces the existing literature on the negative impact of stigma and discrimination on the reintegration of sexually exploited children. The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of the role of social perceptions and attitudes in hindering the successful reintegration of this vulnerable population. The study highlights the need for further exploration of stigma and discrimination as important factors to consider in the development of theoretical frameworks related to child exploitation and reintegration.

Second, this study emphasises the influence of cultural beliefs and norms on the prevalence and persistence of sexual exploitation of children. This highlights the importance of integrating cultural perspectives into theoretical frameworks that address child exploitation, reintegration, and protection. Further research can explore the complex interplay between culture, gender inequality, and child exploitation, contributing to a deeper understanding of the cultural factors that perpetuate these harmful practices.

Third, this study underscores the significant psychological impact and trauma experienced by sexually exploited children. This reinforces the importance of trauma-informed care and psychological support in addressing the unique needs of this population. The findings contribute to the existing theoretical knowledge on the long-term effects of child exploitation on mental health and well-being, emphasizing the need for trauma-informed theoretical frameworks and interventions.

Fourth, the study highlights the critical role of education in the reintegration process of sexually exploited children. It emphasizes the theoretical significance of education as a protective factor against re-exploitation and as a pathway to empowerment and social integration. The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of the relationship between education, vulnerability, and the reintegration outcomes of sexually exploited children.

Implications for Practice

First, the study emphasises the need for a multi-faceted approach to address the challenges faced by sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe. Practitioners and service providers should collaborate with government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community members to develop comprehensive strategies that combat stigma, provide trauma-informed care, enhance educational opportunities, and address economic disparities. The findings highlight the importance of coordination and collaboration among various stakeholders in the reintegration process.

Second, this study underscores the importance of trauma-informed care in supporting sexually exploited children. Practitioners and service providers should receive training in trauma-focused approaches to provide specialized and comprehensive psychosocial support. The findings highlight the need for the integration of trauma-informed principles into existing practices and the development of tailored interventions that address the unique needs and vulnerabilities of sexually exploited children.

Third, the study emphasises the significance of education in empowering sexually exploited children and facilitating their reintegration. Practitioners and policymakers should work together to ensure access to quality education, remove financial barriers, and tailor educational approaches to meet the specific needs of this population. Catch-up programs and life skills training should be provided to bridge educational gaps and enhance the prospects of successful reintegration.

Fourth, the study highlights the importance of support networks and mentoring programs in the reintegration process. Practitioners should facilitate the

establishment of supportive relationships with trusted adults, mentors, and peers who can provide emotional support, guidance, and encouragement. The findings emphasize the need to create safe and inclusive spaces where sexually exploited children can connect with positive role models and peers who have had similar experiences.

Fifth, this study stresses the need for policy and legal interventions to protect sexually exploited children and support their reintegration. Policymakers should review and strengthen existing laws and policies, ensuring their effective implementation. Collaboration between government agencies, NGOs, and relevant stakeholders is crucial to develop comprehensive and coordinated approaches that address legal protection, prevention, and support for sexually exploited children.

Overall, the implications of this study for both theory and practice highlight the need for a comprehensive and coordinated response to address the challenges faced by sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe. By integrating theoretical insights and implementing evidence-based practices, practitioners, policymakers, and communities can work together to support the successful reintegration and recovery of sexually exploited children, promoting their overall well-being and protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the key findings of this research, the study recommends that;

- **Develop comprehensive awareness-raising campaigns:** Create educational programs and campaigns aimed at raising awareness about the stigma and discrimination faced by sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe. These initiatives should target communities, families, and service providers to challenge negative social perceptions and promote empathy and support for victims.
- **Strengthen legal protections:** Advocate for the implementation and enforcement of laws and policies that protect sexually exploited children, ensuring their rights and well-being are safeguarded. Collaborate with legal authorities, NGOs, and child protection agencies to establish robust legal frameworks that address the specific needs of victims and hold perpetrators accountable.
- **Integrate trauma-informed care:** Incorporate trauma-informed approaches into support services for sexually exploited children, ensuring that mental health professionals, therapists, and counselors receive specialized training in trauma-focused interventions.

Establish safe and supportive environments that prioritize the unique needs and vulnerabilities of these children, promoting healing and recovery.

- **Enhance access to education:** Improve access to quality education for sexually exploited children by removing financial barriers and providing catch-up programs for those who have missed out on formal schooling. Tailor educational approaches to address the specific needs and sensitivities of these children, incorporating life skills training and promoting resilience, personal safety, and empowerment.
- **Strengthen economic support:** Work towards addressing the economic challenges faced by sexually exploited children by providing access to vocational training, job placement services, and economic empowerment programs. Collaborate with local businesses, NGOs, and government agencies to create opportunities for sustainable livelihoods and financial independence.
- **Foster support networks:** Establish support networks comprising trusted adults, mentors, and peers who can offer emotional support, guidance, and encouragement to sexually exploited children. Create spaces for these children to connect with positive role models and peers who have experienced similar challenges, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation.

AREAS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the findings of this study, further research is recommended in the following areas;

- **Cultural Beliefs and Norms**

Further research could delve into the cultural beliefs and norms that condone sexual exploitation of children in certain communities in Zimbabwe. This research could explore the specific cultural practices, beliefs, and attitudes that contribute to the perpetuation of sexual exploitation and hinder the reintegration of victims. Understanding the underlying cultural factors can help inform targeted interventions and strategies that challenge harmful beliefs and promote cultural change to protect children from exploitation.

- **Long-Term Outcomes and Support Needs**

Further research is required to conducting longitudinal studies to examine the long-term outcomes and support needs of sexually exploited children in Zimbabwe. This research could assess the long-term psychological, social, and economic effects experienced by survivors of sexual exploitation as they navigate adulthood. It could also explore the types of ongoing support services and interventions that are effective in promoting their

resilience, recovery, and successful integration into society. Understanding the long-term trajectories and support needs of survivors can contribute to the development of evidence-based interventions and policies that address their specific needs throughout their lives.

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