

## Article

# Best Practices in Rendering Services to Women Survivors of Human Trafficking: A South African Perspective

Sipho Sibanda <sup>1,2,\*</sup>  and Juliet Sambo <sup>3</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Social Work and Social Policy, The University of Western Australia, Perth, WA 6009, Australia<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, ZA 0028, South Africa<sup>3</sup> Department of Social Work and Criminology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, ZA 0028, South Africa; juliet.sambo@up.ac.za

\* Correspondence: sipho.sibanda@uwa.edu.au

## Abstract

South Africa is facing serious challenges in addressing the needs of women survivors of human trafficking. Trafficked women often experience health issues, physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and social abuse. Women trafficking is a multidisciplinary problem that needs the involvement of a wide range of actors to intervene and render holistic services. Based on a qualitative study conducted at five residential facilities for women in South Africa, this article highlights best practices in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking. Data was collected from social service providers using one-on-one interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the best practices for rendering effective services to women survivors of human trafficking include rendering services that have an emphasis on emotional containment, prevalence of basic counselling, active referral for medical and other services, and ensuring accurate assessment of the needs and concerns of women survivors of human trafficking. Furthermore, the best practices include establishing a one-stop, all-inclusive service centre; engaging women in skills development and empowerment activities; and ensuring collaboration between all stakeholders involved in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking. The conclusion is that best practices in rendering effective services to women survivors of human trafficking require an interplay of systems and the presence of sufficient institutional and infrastructural arrangements.

**Keywords:** best practices; ecological systems theory; human trafficking; rights-based approach; social workers; women survivors



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## 1. Introduction

Trafficking in women is an issue of global concern. The Palermo Protocol adopted by the UN in 2000 defines human trafficking as “the recruitment, transport, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud or deception for the purpose of exploitation” [1]. On any given day in 2021, more than six million people globally were estimated to be in situations of forced commercial sexual exploitation [2]. Human trafficking for forced labour or sexual exploitation is the third largest crime industry in the world [3]. It is a contemporary form of slavery that often results in forced migration and is a gross violation of basic human rights. Women survivors of trafficking experience severe adverse consequences, including sexual, social, physical, and psychological health [4,5]. Trafficked women suffer physically,

emotionally, socially, and financially at multiple points of trafficking [6,7]. Addressing their needs often requires well-targeted and purposefully formulated interventions and programmes [6,8]. Unfortunately, South Africa is struggling to effectively address the needs of women survivors of human trafficking [9]. The absence of a holistic programme to address the needs of women survivors of human trafficking contributes to professionals being ill-equipped to render adequate service to these survivors [10].

Human trafficking is on the increase in South Africa and has increased since the global COVID-19 pandemic [11]. Children are trafficked within the country from poor rural areas to urban centres, such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, and Bloemfontein; girls are subjected to sex trafficking and domestic servitude; boys are forced to work in street vending, food services, begging, criminal activities, and agriculture [12]. South Africa is a source, transit, and destination country for men, women, and children subjected to forced labour and sex trafficking [12]. Despite the prominence of trafficking in South Africa and its manifold impact on the people involved, there is a dearth of studies in this area. The current literature provides an overview of the situation [8,13] and explores the legislation and its ineffectiveness [14], but there is limited literature exploring the experiences of women survivors of human trafficking in the South African context [7], the services they require, and the services they are provided with. This paper endeavours to fill some of this gap in the literature by exploring the best practices in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking in light of the rights-based approach and the ecological systems theory.

The trafficked women face numerous changes, which include health issues, physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and social abuse [6,7]. Best practices and effective support services will empower women to shift from being victims to being survivors of human trafficking [3]. The process of empowerment and healing is unique for each survivor. As such, social workers are being called upon to move at the pace of each survivor; they should not generalise the experiences and needs of these women. Each woman must be empowered to take steps based on her strengths, agency, and self-determination [8].

It is against this background that the best practices in rendering effective services to women survivors of human trafficking (WSHT) were explored. These best practices are intended to guide social workers and other social service providers in women's protection services in rendering effective, efficient, and holistic services. This article sought to answer the following research question: What are the best practices for rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking in South Africa? It begins by providing a background of the study, followed by an exploration of the rights-based approach and the ecological systems theory as theoretical frameworks that guided the study. Thereafter, a research methodology is employed, followed by the presentation and discussion of the research findings. Finally, the study's conclusion is presented, and recommendations are provided.

### *1.1. Background*

Human trafficking is one of the fastest-growing criminal industries in the world [15]. Around the globe, an estimated 27 million people are exploited for labour, services, and commercial sex [3]. According to [7], most people trafficked across national borders annually are women and girls. Many women are trafficked annually for several reasons, ranging from sexual exploitation to forced labour [3]. Many victims are taken from underdeveloped areas and sold in more developed regions [7]. The trafficked women find themselves in forced labour, prostitution, and other forms of sexual exploitation, debt bondage, coercion, threats of violence, physical and mental abuse, and related violations of fundamental human rights [8].

A critical aspect of understanding the response to human trafficking in South Africa lies in examining the legislative and policy frameworks that underpin it. Central to this is

the Prevention and Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act (PACOTIP) No. 7 of 2013 [16], which provides the primary domestic legislative foundation for combating trafficking, in alignment with international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol [1]. These frameworks delineate the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, including the South African Police Service (SAPS), government departments, and non-governmental organisations. However, their implementation has been fraught with challenges. Recent research by Frankel describes the national response system as an “abject failure”, citing chronic underfunding, fragmented coordination, and inconsistent engagement by state actors, particularly SAPS [11]. These structural and systemic weaknesses highlight the disconnect between legislative intent and operational reality, a pattern that resonates across many countries in the global South. This backdrop illuminates the institutional architecture of anti-trafficking efforts in South Africa and highlights the critical service gaps and accountability issues that persist within it.

Trafficked women are vulnerable and require a wide range of social work services. However, in South Africa, the capacity of social workers to intervene and curb this challenge is undermined by the absence of a holistic social work programme for women survivors of human trafficking [10]. Most organisations and residential facilities end up duplicating services for women survivors of domestic violence and extending them to women survivors of human trafficking. It is concerning because the needs of these two groups of women are different, despite both being vulnerable [8]. This intervention, which does not take the specific needs of the service users into consideration, hence generalises and weakens the quality of services to women survivors of human trafficking, and often leads to fragmentation of services. The practice of combining domestic violence and human trafficking survivors poses a significant challenge to holistically addressing the needs of women survivors of human trafficking [10]. As such, a wide range of comprehensive and fit-for-purpose interventions and services need to be rendered to this vulnerable group of women [7].

The provision of support to victims of human trafficking in South Africa operates through a hybrid system involving both governmental and non-governmental actors. The Department of Social Development (DSD) is the principal government agency responsible for victim protection and rehabilitation, mainly through the Victim Empowerment Programme (VEP), which provides temporary accommodation, counselling, legal assistance, and skills development [17]. Other departments—such as Justice and Constitutional Development, Home Affairs, Labour, and Health contribute to identification, referral, medical treatment, and legal redress for victims [10]. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and faith-based organisations play a central role in direct service delivery, operating most shelters and safe houses across the country. These organisations deliver comprehensive psychosocial care, legal support, and reintegration services, often in partnership with DSD.

Funding for victim support derives from a mix of state and donor sources. While the government allocates funds through the VEP, many NGOs rely on supplementary donor or private funding, leading to significant disparities in resource availability. The U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report notes that despite ongoing government efforts, funding inconsistencies and limited capacity persist, especially at the provincial level [3]. Shelters are required to adhere to minimum service standards, including the provision of basic needs, psychosocial and medical care, and legal assistance. Overall, South Africa’s victim support system represents a state–NGO partnership model, where government agencies coordinate and regulate while NGOs deliver most front-line services.

## 1.2. Theoretical Frameworks That Guided the Study

### 1.2.1. Ecological Systems Theory

The ecological systems theory provided a solid theoretical foundation for the study since it drew on theories from different disciplines in analysing the complex nature of human interactions within a social environment [8]. A familiar demarcation of eco-systems in social work involves categorising particular social systems as micro, meso, or macro levels depending on system sizes and complexity [18]. Micro-systems refer to smaller-sized social systems, such as individuals and couples; meso-systems focus on intermediate-sized systems, including groups, support networks, and extended families; and macro-systems focus on large systems, such as communities and organisations [19]. As such, social work should focus on three separate areas. Firstly, on the person, seeking to develop the person's problem-solving, coping, and developmental capacities [20]. Secondly, the focus should be on the relationship between a person and the systems interacting with the person, resulting in linking this person with needed resources, services, and opportunities [8]. Thirdly, the focus should be on the systems and reforming them to meet the needs of the individual more effectively. The eco-systems theory has value in that it deals with the idea of wholeness, which indicates that the human being is continually interacting with many other systems [20].

### 1.2.2. The Rights-Based Approach

The United Nations (UN) indicates that human rights should be at the core of any effort to combat or eliminate trafficking in persons [21]. Trafficking is a grave violation of human rights, particularly the right to liberty, human dignity, and the right not to be held in slavery or involuntary servitude [10]. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa states that every person has the right to privacy, freedom of movement, information, freedom of expression, and freedom of association, as well as the right to be heard, and the right not to be held in slavery [22]. This is in a bid to promote social justice, human rights and human dignity. Social justice is an ideal condition in which all members of society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits [23]. Lombard and Twikirize have the opinion that social justice implies a commitment to fairness, adding that in society, social justice should foster equal human rights, distributive justice, and a structure of opportunity [24]. The marginalised and disadvantaged populations include women survivors of human trafficking. Therefore, social service providers, as professionals who work with complex and interlocking systems, are compelled to advocate for the principles of respect for people and social justice [8,25].

From a rights-based approach, women survivors of human trafficking should have access to information, credit, financial resources, associations, business networks, and employers [10]. Such opportunities would empower women and allow them to make informed decisions. In promoting social justice to achieve human rights and the well-being of women survivors of human trafficking, the women's most fundamental physical needs, such as food, healthcare, and shelter, the moral needs of security, affection, and actuation should be taken into consideration [6], since individuals are deemed vulnerable when they are exposed to conditions that do not allow them to enjoy fundamental rights for development in harmony, and do not allow them to satisfy personal needs, owing to physical conditions, personal history, or the prevailing cultural or societal environment [8]. It is the responsibility of the government to create safety nets for those within the community who are vulnerable.

The preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 1 reminds social service providers that, "The recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice,

and peace in the world” [26]. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to a standard of living for his/her health and well-being, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care, necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of certain circumstances [26]. The recognition of the inherent dignity and the equality and rights of people is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world [27].

However, WSHT frequently shares experiences of dehumanisation, compromised dignity, and inequality. Such a situation underscores the importance of a rights-based approach in working with WSHT and ensuring their human rights are upheld. While the means to achieve human rights guarantees should be locally appropriate and contextually determined, the universality of their applicability to all persons, including everyone who has been trafficked, is indisputable [27]. The Trafficking Principles and Guidelines explicitly advocate for a human rights-based approach to trafficking [21]. The importance of this approach to trafficking has been confirmed by the international community and by International Human Rights bodies [10].

As a conceptual framework for dealing with trafficking in women, a human rights-based approach is normatively based on international human rights standards and is operationally directed to promote and protect their rights [27]. Such an approach requires an analysis of how human rights violations arise throughout the trafficking cycle, as well as of different countries’ obligations under international human rights law [10]. In the African context, an application of the rights-based approach seeks to identify and redress the discriminatory practices and unjust distributions of power that underlie trafficking, that maintain impunity for traffickers, and that deny justice to women survivors of trafficking [21]. In the African milieu, an application of a rights-based approach emphasises the collective responsibility of the community to protect the women survivors of human trafficking, essentially meaning “I am because we are,” highlighting the importance of interconnectedness and shared care within a community to safeguard women’s wellbeing; this philosophy promotes a strong focus on social support networks, human dignity, respect for cultural norms, communal oversight to ensure women’s safety, and addressing structural inequalities [28].

From an African feminist approach, it is imperative to recognise the gender-based violations of human rights, especially against women and girls, as the root cause of trafficking [10]. As such, the United Nations states that anti-trafficking measures taken in the name of protecting survivors and preventing trafficking should not operate in a discriminatory manner that results in further violations of the rights of women and girls, for example, the restriction of movement, but should strive to promote the dignity and worth of women [21]. To be relevant, acceptable, accessible, appropriate, and responsive, a gender-sensitive approach to trafficking that is firmly grounded in African values and human rights should be considered when dealing with women survivors of human trafficking [27]. The Trafficking Principles and Guidelines should be adhered to, identifying differences in the needs of the women survivors of human trafficking and moulding appropriate responses.

The human rights of trafficked women should be at the centre of all efforts to prevent and combat trafficking and to protect, assist, and provide redress to victims [10]. Countries have a responsibility under international law to act with due diligence to prevent trafficking, to investigate and prosecute traffickers, and to assist and protect trafficked persons [29]. Anti-trafficking measures should not adversely affect the human rights and dignity of women, in particular the rights of those who have been trafficked. Trafficked women should not be detained, charged, or prosecuted for the illegality of their entry into, or residence in countries of transit and destination, or for their involvement in unlawful activities to the extent that such involvement is a direct consequence of their situation

as trafficked persons [21]. Women survivors of trafficking should be provided with appropriate assistance and protection, and a full account should be taken of their special vulnerabilities, rights, and needs.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Participants and Sampling

The population of the study was social service providers (social workers, social auxiliary workers, housemothers, and outreach workers) working in five organisations that are rendering services to women survivors of trafficking in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. Although the broadened definition of social service professions include social auxiliary workers, “social workers, child and youth care workers (CYCWs), and community development workers (CDWs)” [30], it should be noted that the organisations that participated in the study referred to housemothers and outreach workers as social service providers, although they are not recognised as such by the South African Council for Social Service Professions Act 110 of 1978. Housemother is a title unique to South Africa, and it refers to a professional caregiver employed in a shelter who is responsible for the physical daily running of the shelter. Letters asking for permission to conduct the study were sent to the organisations, and the requests were granted accordingly. It was not feasible to include the entire population in the study. As such, upon receipt of permission to conduct the study, the researchers used non-probability sampling techniques, specifically, purposive sampling, to select participants for the study. The researchers then approached the participants who met the inclusion criteria and explained the purpose of the study and invited them to complete the letter of informed consent if they were interested in participating. This sampling criterion relied on the researchers’ judgement of which participants possessed information relevant to the study [31].

The selected participants possessed the following characteristics: (1) Working for an organisation rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking in Gauteng, South Africa; (2) Belonging to the following group of social service providers: social workers, social auxiliary workers, housemothers, and outreach workers; (3) Being conversant in English; (4) Being in the employment of the selected organisation for at least 12 months; (5) Being willing and available to participate in the study. In line with the exclusion criteria set out in [32], participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria, including those not willing to provide written consent, those not available during the time of data collection, and social service providers that did not work directly with women survivors of human trafficking, were excluded from participating in the study. No other exclusion criterion was identified by the researchers that was likely to negatively impact the study findings, including affecting external validity.

### 2.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews, using an interview schedule, were used as a data collection method. The data was collected on a date and time chosen by the voluntary participants of the study, such that it did not interfere with the operations of the facilities. No rewards and financial incentives, including a token of appreciation, were provided to participants for participating in the study for reasons including unavailability of research funding, to facilitate the participants to share their experiences openly, while ensuring confidentiality of their identities. The semi-structured interview schedule was divided into two sections; the first section sought the demographic information of the participants, and the second section explored the best practices in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking. Interviews were held until data saturation; data reached saturation after 14 interviews. Furthermore, opportunities for debriefing after the interviews and access

to mental health service providers to deal with potential secondary traumatisation and compassion fatigue were put in place if/when the participants needed.

### 2.3. Design and Procedure

The study was conducted from a qualitative approach. By using a qualitative research approach, the principal investigator (PI) attempted to gain first-hand knowledge and a holistic understanding of women trafficking by means of a flexible strategy [33]. Since a qualitative research design is primarily interested in the meaning participants give to their life experiences, the PI immersed herself in the activities of social service providers to obtain patterns in their lives, words, and actions [34]. The PI explored the best practices in rendering effective services to women survivors of human trafficking by identifying qualitative themes through detailed and in-depth data collection methods by employing semi-structured, one-on-one interviews using an interview guide. The study's qualitative approach aligns with ecological systems theory by emphasising the multi-layered environmental influences on women survivors of human trafficking. The study addressed microsystems like the survivors' direct interactions with social workers; mesosystems, a collaboration between NGOs and other service providers; and macrosystems, focusing on broader societal norms and policies in Gauteng.

### 2.4. Data Analysis

Data was analysed using Creswell's spiral model of qualitative data analysis [35], which entailed the following steps. (1) Planning for recording—In this step, the researchers did a systematic transcribing and recording of the data collected during one-on-one interviews with participants. The PI utilised both audio recorders and hand-written notes. (2) Data collection and preliminary analysis—the researchers did ongoing data analysis by scanning the transcribed data, typing up the field notes, sorting the data, and arranging it into different categories and themes. Data collection and analysis were conducted hand-in-hand, which helped to build a coherent interpretation of the data. (3) Managing or organising the data—in this step, the data was managed and organised into a narrative format. Thereafter, the researchers converted the files into appropriate text units, like words and sentences, for analysis. (4) Reading and writing memos—the researchers read each transcript in its entirety several times and immersed themselves in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview, and then broke it into different parts. (5) Generating categories, themes, and patterns—the PI identified salient themes and recurring ideas that linked the participants together. Data was reduced into smaller and manageable sets of themes that were written into a final narrative. (6) Coding the data—The PI developed themes and provided an interpretation considering the perspectives from the literature study. (7) Testing the emergent understandings—The PI determined how useful the data was in illuminating the issues being explored and how central the data was to the stories that were unfolding about the best practices in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking. (8) Searching for alternative explanations—during this step, the researchers analysed the discovered categories and themes in the collected data. During the analysis process, the PI focused on identifying, describing, and demonstrating why the explanation offered was the most feasible of all.

The researchers enhanced the trustworthiness, confirmability, transferability, and credibility of data. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers focused on clarifying the bias of the PI [35]. The PI ensured the confirmability of data by doing member checking, which entailed soliciting information from participants about their perceptions of how the PI analysed and interpreted data and whether it was in line with what they had shared during the interviews. The PI understood the importance of a secondary

confirmation of the findings of the research study. Therefore, as a way of doing a peer review, the researchers interacted with postgraduate colleagues who were familiar with the research field and area. These interactions with postgraduate colleagues involved discussion on the study findings and not the raw data, ensuring that confidentiality of the data was upheld.

To ensure the transferability of the findings to other settings and contexts, the researchers provided comprehensive descriptions of the research context. The PI enhanced the data credibility of the study through repeated interviews until data saturation occurred [35].

### 2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the institutional review board of a university in South Africa. The researchers created an opportunity for potential individuals to make informed decisions to participate voluntarily in the study. Participants were informed several times that they could choose to discontinue their engagement in the study at any point and could always ask questions, including before the commencement of the study, as well as during the investigation. Furthermore, written consent was obtained from the participants.

The researchers maintained the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants by not disclosing the names and identities of participants throughout the research process and in the research report [31]. To prevent any harm to the participants, the researchers ensured that the environment where the interviews were conducted was safe, conducive, and relaxed. To minimise such harm, the participants were informed in advance about the potential impact of the investigation, that it might cause fatigue, arouse emotions, and consume time from their jobs. The participants were informed that they had a right to withdraw from the investigation at any stage if they so wished.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Profile of Participants

A brief description of the social service providers (SSPs) that participated in the study will be provided in Table 1 below, with reference to their positions and years of service in the field of working with women survivors of human trafficking.

**Table 1.** Details of social service providers.

| SSP Number | Position                | Years of Service    |
|------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| SSP 1      | Social Worker           | 1 year and 4 months |
| SSP 2      | Social Worker           | 4 years             |
| SSP 3      | Social Auxiliary Worker | 9 years             |
| SSP 4      | Housemother             | 2 years             |
| SSP 5      | Social Auxiliary Worker | 1 year and 6 months |
| SSP 6      | Social Worker           | 3 years             |
| SSP 7      | Social Worker           | 5 years             |
| SSP 8      | Social Worker           | 1 year              |
| SSP 9      | Social Worker           | 1 year and 6 months |
| SSP 10     | Social Worker           | 15 years            |
| SSP 11     | Social Worker           | 2 years             |
| SSP 12     | Housemother             | 2 years             |
| SSP 13     | Social Worker           | 11 years            |
| SSP 14     | Outreach worker         | 7 years             |

### 3.2. Best Practices in Rendering Services to Women Survivors of Human Trafficking

The social service providers gave their views regarding best practices in rendering effective services to women survivors of human trafficking. The findings indicate that the best practices for rendering effective services to women survivors of human trafficking include the provision of services that facilitate emotional containment and basic counselling, actively engaging in referral for medical and other services; establishing a one-stop, all-inclusive service centre; engaging women in skills development and empowerment activities; and ensuring collaboration between all stakeholders involved in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking. These key findings are presented below as themes.

#### 3.2.1. Emphasis on Emotional Containment

Most participants of the study expressed the importance of emotional containment once the survivor arrives at the shelter. They unanimously mentioned the need to create a safe environment to contain the feelings of the women survivors of human trafficking. Their views were articulated as follows:

We normally make the survivors feel at home and let them adjust. We normally take care of their emotional needs; we make them feel at home. (SSP 3)

I check how traumatised the survivor is. I will let her rest; I will check if she needs anything [ . . . ] I will interview her when she is ready. Most of the trafficked cases come at night. (SSP 4)

The first intervention is to contain the survivors' emotions and understand their frames of reference. Then we allow the survivors time to rest, to calm down their nerves. They are given space to calm down first and to digest what happened to them. (SSP 12)

As a best practice, the information shared by the study participants underscores the importance of 'meeting the client where they are' [36], with an understanding of where they are at emotionally and facilitating building positive self-concept. Self-concept refers to what the woman survivor of human trafficking thinks and believes about herself in various situations. It is, therefore, imperative for the woman survivor of human trafficking to have a positive self-concept to promote healing and social well-being [37]. Emotional containment occurs when the social service provider receives and understands the emotional communication of the survivor without being overwhelmed by it. The social service provider processes the survivor's emotional behaviour and then communicates understanding and recognition back to the survivor [38]. This process restores the survivor's capacity to think and plan logically [7]. Emotional containment involves social service providers absorbing the experiences of women survivors of human trafficking when they seek care [39].

#### 3.2.2. Prevalence of Basic Counselling

Several participants indicated that basic counselling is provided to the women survivors when they arrive at the shelter. Their statements on the matter were recorded as follows:

They are attended by the social worker straight away, and usually they get basic counselling. Counselling is done, though not in depth. (SSP 7)

The first thing is basic counselling, the women survivors are encouraged to join support groups. Icebreakers are used in the group work process to promote bonding and relax the group members. (SSP 5)

Empirical findings from the study illuminate that the services provided to women survivors of trafficking in South Africa are congruent with what the literature documents, namely that services to survivors of human trafficking may involve victims requiring a variety of services, including counselling [8].

### 3.2.3. Active Referral for Medical and Other Services

The participants mentioned that another key service that they provide to women survivors of human trafficking is providing referrals for medical and other services. They stated that the women usually require medical assessments, check-ups, and treatment. Their views on this matter were recorded as follows.

We link them with the Department of Health for medical check-ups, and to trace whether there are any drugs in their system. (SSP 6)

We take them to the hospital for a medical check-up. The doctors do a thorough medical check-up and give them treatment when necessary. (SSP 5)

As the social worker, I will do a psycho-social assessment to assess how they are mentally and psychologically, and whether they are affected by trauma and depression. Still, I will refer them for further assessment by medical professionals. The survivors also go for a medical check-up if they need one. (SSP 9)

When they come to our shelter, we assess the mental status of the survivor. In fact, the physical status first as all the victims of human trafficking needs to be taken for medical assessments. (SSP 10)

Referral to services was highlighted by participants as a best practice. Referral improves the relatedness of the women. Relatedness refers to the capacity to form attachments with social networks [40]. In assessing environmental resources, the social service provider should evaluate the availability and responsiveness of the woman survivor's formal service networks. These networks could be public and/or private agencies or different kinds of institutions.

### 3.2.4. Ensuring Accurate Assessment of the Needs and Concerns of WSHT

Most participants stated that their work with women survivors of human trafficking included undertaking a variety of assessments with the women. They stated that an accurate assessment is of vital importance and directs the nature and type of services needed by the women. Faulty assessments may result in rendering inappropriate and ineffective services to the survivors. Assessment is a process to identify and define the nature of the problem and develop a specific intervention programme to address the problem [38], and therefore, the assessment process places high value on the needs and concerns of the women survivors. The views of participants regarding assessments as a best practice in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking are captured below.

As a social worker, I assess the victim's adjustment in the house; I also assess the willingness to be part of the programmes conducted in the house. (SSP 1)

Even though the Hawks [special crimes Police] give us the story, we still have to hear the story from the women [---]. From my assessment, I found that most of them were unemployed, and they were promised jobs at restaurants and hotels. (SSP 2)

We assess their physical needs, emotional needs, and social needs [---]. We do not worry about legal issues; the lawyers do their legal assessments, and we focus on our social and emotional assessments. (SSP 3)

What I observed is that during the assessment, they are not free; they are jumpy, scared, isolated and shrink. I avoid causing secondary trauma. When clients are extremely traumatised, I do not push the issues of assessments; I wait until they are ready. Some assessments do not yield any results because they are not conducted at the right time. (SSP 4)

Sambo and Sibanda recommend that professionals assess the survivors holistically by focusing on their physical, cognitive, and emotional skills and the skills they need [8]. Screening and assessment are critical in identifying bio-psycho-social issues of women survivors of human trafficking who are negatively affected and assist in developing an intervention plan. Assessment should focus on psychosocial health experiences such as self-esteem, social stress, social support, psychological support, coping methods, as well as relationships with social service providers.

### 3.2.5. Establishing a One-Stop, All-Inclusive, and Multi-Sectoral Service Centre for WSH

Several participants stated that a one-stop, all-inclusive, and multi-sectoral social services centre should be established to render effective services to women survivors of human trafficking. Below are some of the statements made by the participants to this effect.

In my view, I think there should be a centre that specialises in human trafficking, that has everything all in one place. The centre should have a clinic, a doctor, a nurse, and a psychologist. A one-stop centre should have everything that the victims need... In our shelters, we try to provide everything, but if the victim needs to go to a clinic, it's up and down; you must take them, and this is not good. If only we could have a centre that specialises in human trafficking, victims can get assistance or help. ... You cannot put them in a common group with victims of domestic violence since their experiences are not the same; they are completely different. (SSP 9)

Mixing victims of trafficking and victims of domestic violence poses a problem. ... In an actual sense, we tend to treat the victims of human trafficking differently from other victims. This practice ends up offending the other clients, who do not understand the difference. My wish is that we should have a place for the survivors of human trafficking. ... (SSP 10)

One-stop centres are common in the South African context, and often literally mean houses that provide all services under one roof. In other parts of the world, one-stop shops may also be conceptual rather than physical, and thus, the South African one-stop shops are in many ways unique.

### 3.2.6. Working in Collaboration with Other Stakeholders

Participants stated that another best practice in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking is working in collaboration with other stakeholders who render services to women survivors of human trafficking. Participants stated that they could not work in isolation since the needs of women survivors of trafficking are complex and often require a multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral approach.

Networking is very important; one cannot work alone. As a service provider, know your limits. There is a need to refer the women for specialised services depending on the need. We work in collaboration with SAPS [South African Police Services], but they need to be educated on trafficking in women issues, as they often send the survivors back to the trafficker. There is a need to collaborate with Training Colleges to bridge the gaps by training the ladies and absorbing them in the employment sector. (SSP 3)

We work with the Department of Education, the Department of Health, and we also work with the Department of Justice, as it deals with courts. We also work with --- they take care of the women and girls; they teach them drama, dance, and poems. We also work with the police, doctors, and other organisations in Pretoria. (SSP 7)

We do have forums and a rapid response team... We meet quarterly, in these forums, we discuss plans on joint awareness campaigns, we discuss the challenges that we experience, the cases that each organisation has accommodated or rendered services to. (SSP 10)

### 3.2.7. Engaging Women in Skills Development and Empowerment Activities

The participants articulated that skills development and empowerment can be therapeutic to women survivors of human trafficking. Women survivors who are empowered with diverse skills demonstrate satisfaction and self-confidence. They are motivated to carry on with life without much support. The views of participants regarding this best practice are recorded below.

The other best practice that we have adopted in this shelter is craft therapy. Skills development through craft therapy and fabric painting encourages the survivor to create something that gives a picture of how they are feeling at that moment. We watch the colours they use, black, yellow, green, and we can see the developmental stages of the survivors with regard to emotions and healing. (SSP 2)

In our organisation, we offer training on different skills. Some survivors were trained by the best designers in South Africa who offer their services for free as their social responsibility. The women survivors were taught how to design, cut, and sew. At the end of that training, each woman was given a sewing machine. The aim was that they should mobilise others and start their own business. We also teach the women life skills like cooking, baking, and catering services. The survivors that are accommodated in this shelter are given duties; they are encouraged to cook breakfast, lunch, and supper for themselves, and they are allowed to start a food business to raise funds. (SSP 8)

It is a best practice to empower women with skills, as most of them, if not all, need jobs. There is a need to support them with projects that can earn them some income. Depending on the level of education of the survivor, one should focus on their strengths and then look for sponsors or start cooperatives so that they can help each other. (SSP 11)

## 4. Discussion

Findings indicate best practices in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking, and the realities of rendering social services in South Africa. Moreover, they underscore the applicability and relevancy of a rights-based approach and the ecological systems theory in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking. The key findings of the study relate to emotional containment, basic counselling services, referral services, including medical services, and assessments of the needs and desires of the women survivors of trafficking. In line with accessibility as a principle of a rights-based approach [23], a one-stop, all-inclusive service centre should be established for the women survivors. The idea of access to a 'one-stop shop' is supported by the UNODC as a strategy to ensure that specialised and fit-for-purpose services are rendered [41].

However, participants made it lucidly clear that survivors of human trafficking should be housed separately from other victims of domestic violence to meticulously respond to

the abuse they would have sustained. Similar views are shared by the Immigrant Council for Ireland, which highlights a concern that when the centre is not a specialised facility for victims of trafficking, it is not an appropriate environment for the survivors for several reasons [42]. These concerns are documented by [42] as follows: Firstly, mixing men and women can expose vulnerable women to further grooming and exploitation. Secondly, there is a lack of privacy when survivors share bedrooms with victims of domestic violence. Thirdly, it can pose a challenge to apply a personalised approach, as social service providers may not be aware of the needs of the survivors of trafficking. Separating the survivors of human trafficking from survivors of domestic violence will be aligned with the rights-based approach principles of acceptability and appropriateness, which advocates for ensuring that appropriate and acceptable services are rendered to service users [27].

The finding that WSHT should be engaged in skills development and empowerment activities is confirmed in the literature by The Protection Project, which attests that the multifaceted and complex phenomenon of trafficking in women must be addressed at various levels to empower and equip women survivors with sustainable skills [43]. This recommendation aligns with the principles of a rights-based approach, namely, empowerment and sustainability, which state that interventions should be geared towards empowering service users so that they can achieve self-sustenance [23]. Empowerment can happen through the sharing of information [27]. As such, services provided by organisations that work with WSHT should include sharing information about sexual health, commercial sex myths, targeting and recruitment tactics, as well as safety planning, and identifying resources [44].

A key feature of a rights-based approach is harmonising social development with economic development through employment and skills development [23]. Service providers should assist survivors to set up realistic employment goals corresponding to their abilities, skills, educational level, and the available employment opportunities in the area [45]. Moreover, to be aligned to a rights-based approach, skills development training should aim to impart the necessary skills to find employment and should be offered on a case-by-case basis, taking into consideration the survivor's needs [45].

The finding that collaboration and coordination of different stakeholders is critical in meeting the diversified needs of WSHT is confirmed by [46], who states that to ensure effective assistance to women survivors of human trafficking, government, NGOs, law enforcement, community, and social services providers must work interdependently to provide survivors with recovery resources. Collaboration between different stakeholders ensures that they provide comprehensive, integrated, and efficient services [8]. The idea of collaborations is further supported by The Protection Project, which states that the best way to assist women survivors of human trafficking is through the committed involvement of government departments, NGOs, the private sector, academia, and faith-based organisations [43]. This is aligned to the rights-based approach principles of collaborative partnership and welfare pluralism, which stipulate that the provision of social services is not only the responsibility of a government but of multiple stakeholders [27].

Research in the field reveals that emotional containment of the woman survivor of human trafficking is important during the intervention process to enhance the healing process [47]. Therefore, it can be said that the services provided to women survivors of trafficking in South Africa are aligned with the micro-level needs of these service users, as discussed in extant literature. During the healing process, the social service providers should further contain parts of women survivors' experiences, helping them to identify and address uncontainable feelings. Above all, the service provider should show an understanding and respect for the personal space of the survivor by believing that she has sufficient capacity to deal constructively with all those aspects of her life that she becomes aware of [47]. The service provider should accept the survivor as she is and communicate

empathetically with her to encourage personal growth, allowing her to exercise her freedom without fear of rejection [38]. The woman survivor should be respected as an expert of her own world and be allowed to experience a form of self-determination to make her own decisions regarding the healing process [38]. Emotional containment is an important service to women survivors of human trafficking because it enables women to be aware of the situation they find themselves in.

Counselling forms the ubiquitous service provided to women survivors of trafficking. Proper in-depth counselling should be provided when the women survivors are emotionally stable [47]. Counselling empowers the women survivors to build self-esteem, which denotes the extent to which a woman survivor of human trafficking feels significant and worthy [10]. Although counselling involves engaging with the person at the centre, its impact can be far-reaching to the meso and the chrono system. A woman survivor of human trafficking is more likely to be easily frustrated, may hesitate to try new things, may speak negatively about herself, and see temporary problems as permanent conditions [47]. Counselling is therefore imperative to empower the woman survivor to have an optimistic view of the world and her life, despite traumatic experiences. It unlocks her ability to handle conflicts, resist negative pressures, network with others, and bounce back. When a woman survivor of human trafficking has been through counselling, she taps into her self-esteem perceptions, and asks herself questions such as: “How do I feel?”, “Am I happy?”, and “Do people like me?” Answers to these questions reveal whether an individual possesses high or low self-esteem [37].

As a micro-level intervention, counselling also increases self-efficacy, which denotes a person’s confidence in his or her ability to cope [40]. Self-efficacy is defined as the belief that one can succeed in specific situations. It is a context-specific judgment of the capability to perform a task or engage in an activity [37]. Furthermore, it is a judgment of one’s own confidence, which depends mostly on the task at hand and is independent of any socially or culturally assigned values [37]. Survivors who exhibit a strong sense of self-efficacy tend to consider setbacks and difficult obstacles as challenges and therefore generally perform at higher levels than survivors who question their self-efficacy [47]. On the contrary, a woman survivor of human trafficking who exhibits weak or low self-efficacy often views challenges and setbacks as threats, resulting in low aspirations and weak commitment to goals [47]. Survivors with strong or high self-efficacy tend to set higher goals and remain motivated in the face of failure and disappointment. Self-efficacy, therefore, is a critical determinant of whether a woman survivor of human trafficking will expend effort on participating in the designed programme and persist under difficult conditions.

Counselling builds competence. Without overlooking weaknesses, social workers need to identify, mobilise, and build people’s inner and external strengths through the encouragement of their positive assets [48]. During counselling, social service providers should play an enabling role and demonstrate skills that would mobilise and strengthen the motivation of the women survivors of human trafficking to deal with difficult life stressors and the associated stress that they may experience. Enabling skills include: identifying strengths, conveying hope, offering realistic reassurance, and legitimising and universalising thoughts, reactions, and feelings [48].

In the context of multiple needs of women survivors of human trafficking, the findings that they are actively referred to medical and other relevant services underscore an attempt to be responsive to the needs of this vulnerable group. Women survivors of human trafficking have numerous needs and require intervention by different professionals [39]. From an ecological systems theory, this finding emphasises the significant impact and therefore importance of meso, exo, and macro systems in an individual’s life. Besides medical assistance, women survivors of trafficking may need psychosocial assistance,

detoxification services, and more [7]. The role of the social service provider is to show the necessary empathy to survivors during the intervention process and to convey a message of understanding regarding their needs [40].

Referral services were shared as a best practice for rendering services to WSH. Potential resources that could be utilised for referral include the survivor's informal network of relatives, friends, neighbours, and work colleagues who may or may not provide emotional support, material resources, information, feedback, and advice [48]. Importantly, the principle of autonomy should be applied throughout the referral process. Autonomy refers to the woman survivor having a sense of control over her life and taking responsibility for her actions [40]. All people intrinsically desire to be autonomous, meaning they have an innate desire to act according to their genuine desires and preferences, to show courses of action that reflect their true selves.

The importance of assessment of the needs and concerns of service users has been well documented in the literature for social work practice in general [49,50] and social work with survivors of trafficking in particular. The Ecological systems theory can provide a robust frame for assessment; it can guide practitioners in exploring the various dimensions of the lives of women survivors of human trafficking, including their own self, their support systems, their interactions with the various systems around them, the larger socio-economic-political context in which they live, and the impact of the changes around them in their everyday lives. Screening and assessment should cover all aspects to establish a meaningful service rendering to women survivors of human trafficking [18]. When assessing personal coping resources, the social worker should evaluate the survivors' motivation, problem-solving skills, and relationship-building abilities [19]. The social worker should further assess the survivors' outlook on life, self-confidence, and the ability to search for and use information in their environment.

From an ecological systems perspective, the findings of this study suggest that the best practices of rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking in South Africa have a strong focus on the micro and macro systems, that is, the survivors themselves and the institutions that they interact with.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

The strength of this study is that it makes several notable contributions. First, it deepens insight into the multifaceted best practices in addressing the needs of women who have survived human trafficking, strengthening the evidence base for responsive support. Second, it puts forward a clearly defined framework to guide social work intervention, offering practitioners a practical and coherent model for service delivery. Third, the research outlines concrete directions for specialised training, policy enhancement, and future scholarly inquiry. Taken together, these elements provide a strategic foundation for improving care systems for women survivors of human trafficking. In addition, the findings of the study underscore the importance of designing services that are flexible and individually tailored, recognising the diversity and specificity of survivors' circumstances.

A limitation of the study is that the sample was too small to produce valid results that warrant generalisation to all service providers in South Africa. Such small samples do not represent a diverse and broad range of views, which could have been obtained if the samples had been larger. This calls for a replication of this study with a larger sample drawn from across the entire country. Future research could include a broader geographic scope, as well as a combination of research methods (mixed methods study). Another limitation worth mentioning is that this is a study of service providers' perspectives, which cannot be taken as a proxy for victim-survivors' experiences and perspectives. There is also a bias in saying 'best practice' from this group's point of view, when they are the

group providing the services—they may not have been ready or willing to be critical of themselves and the services provided, which is a limitation for establishing best practice. As such, a future study could directly involve the women survivors of human trafficking to determine what they consider best practices for rendering services to them as service users.

## 5. Conclusions and Future Research

In conclusion, social service providers are aware of the best practices in rendering services to women survivors of human trafficking. Meeting the multi-dimensional needs of women survivors of human trafficking requires that services be comprehensive, holistic, and be rendered from a rights-based approach, which emphasises participation, collaborations, and partnerships between different stakeholders and the harmonisation of social development with economic development. Moreover, for services rendered to women survivors of human trafficking to be effective and efficient, they should be aligned with the rights-based approach principles of accessibility, acceptability, appropriateness, sustainability, and empowerment.

The framework for providing services to women survivors of human trafficking already exists. This research advances the understanding of survivors' needs, offers a structured programme for social work practice, and provides a roadmap for specialised training, policy development, and future research in the field. Services should be adapted and tailor-made to meet the diverse, specific, and unique needs of women survivors of human trafficking. To be holistic, the services should be rendered from an ecological systems approach and packaged to target all aspects of women survivors' wellbeing. Linked to the ecological systems way of thinking, three clinical assessment tools are helpful to social workers in gathering information from the service users and their environment, namely, the genogram, the eco-map, and the social network map [10]. These tools enable a graphic representation of certain aspects of the client's ecological environment and provide valuable interactional data that can support the social worker during the assessment process. In essence, the research provides a significant, evidence-based framework for holistic social work with women survivors of human trafficking in South Africa, emphasising emotional containment, empowerment, integrated services, and survivor autonomy as the cornerstones of effective intervention.

It is recommended that social service providers should render services from a rights-based approach to provide comprehensive and efficient services that will fully empower and promote the rights and well-being of women survivors of human trafficking.

Further research could be conducted on exploring why differentiated services should be provided for survivors of domestic abuse and survivors of human trafficking, and to develop a rights-based model for working with women survivors of human trafficking. Moreover, future research could directly involve the women survivors of human trafficking and focus on exploring the use of an ecological systems theory to design interventions and programmes for holistically addressing their needs.

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