

Episode 223 – Amber McDonald: The Underground Sex World and Vulnerable Youth: A Professional Social Worker’s Perspective

[00:00:08] Welcome to inSocialWork. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.inSocialWork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of inSocialWork is to engage practitioners and researchers in lifelong learning and promote research to practice and practice to research. We educate. We connect. We care. We're inSocialWork.

[00:00:37] Hello my name is Louanne Bakk and welcome to inSocialWork. Human sex trafficking is the largest illegal trade in the world. And the issue has gained increased attention over the last several years. In this podcast our guest Amber McDonald talks about her research involving homeless and marginally housed minors in their involvement in trading and selling sex. She discusses reasons why they engage in sex trafficking and how the decision to sell or trade sex is often linked to other social problems and vulnerabilities. Additionally she describes the background and progression of federal sex trafficking legislation from both an international and national perspective as well as why the issue is multifaceted, poorly understood, and extremely complex. Ms. McDonald concludes with suggestions on how social workers can more effectively engage with youth currently or previously involved in sex trafficking. Amber McDonald is a licensed clinical social worker and doctoral candidate at the University of Denver. Her research is in the areas of youth involvement in trading and selling sex, vicarious trauma in childhood, and sexual abuse. She was interviewed in July 2017 by Caitlin Beck MSW/JD candidate here at the UB School of Social Work.

[00:02:18] Welcome to our podcast. My name is Caitlin Beck and I will be interviewing Amber McDonald who's a doctoral student at the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado. Amber thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:02:30] Thank you for having me.

[00:02:31] Yeah we were really excited to have you on. I guess maybe we could just start by asking Can you tell us a little about your research?

[00:02:40] Yes. So my dissertation is exclusively focused on young people who are homeless or marginally housed in their involvement in trading and selling sex. The broader issue is the phenomenon of human trafficking which has received some increased attention in the last few years.

[00:03:02] So what ended up leading you to getting into this research?

[00:03:06] So I've been a clinical forensic social worker for a number of years and prior to going back to school to get my doctorate. I worked at a child advocacy center and I was the clinical director there where I was responsible for forensically interviewing children who were victims or witnesses to crime among other administration hyped things like supervising etc. But we engaged with so many really young people from 2 to 18 who had experienced sexual abuse and other crimes. And there were some preliminary research coming out or preliminary information coming out tying experiencing sexual abuse as a child and involvement and trading and selling sex Bolleter and life that seemed like a natural transition.

[00:03:50] Your work is focusing on sex trafficking. It seems like there is a broader definition of sex trafficking that is not understood by the public. And so I wonder if you could talk a little bit to our audience about that and explain what we're missing. When we define it when we speak of sex trafficking.

[00:04:09] Sure blocks of time there's kind of a more benign term such as trading and selling sex as opposed to using language like commercial sexual exploitation of use domestic minor sex trafficking which are or other words used underneath the umbrella of the term called human trafficking rate where sex trafficking Labor certainly falls under human trafficking as well but my research is exclusively focused on young people and sex. And the reason I'm using language that is a little bit more neutral is because the predominant narrative that is out there and perpetuated through media and on some level not federal legislation paints a picture that pretty different than how those involved would describe their experience since the enactment of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act or that TVPA. There's been quite a bit of a push to look at victims of human trafficking. It started really looking at international youth who are being trafficked abroad and it's continued to develop and evolve. The policy has evolved over the last 15-17 years. So we've got the beginning of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act and with exclusive efforts focused and victim provisions focusing on those who are outside of the United States or those who are being blocked here from other countries to be trafficked and then we move along in the policy and we start looking at things like children who are child soldiers we add some provisions over time about not being able to do trades or business with countries who enslaved populations. We start kind of entertaining the topic of those being trafficked within the United States who are actually domestically born around 2000. And some organizations start building around that time as well. In the United States. And it isn't until 2015 that we really start putting some federal legislation in place looking at those who are born in the United States and are also being trafficked. So that's kind of the history of some of the federal legislation. Now the problem with how this has come about is that federal legislators have really aligns international trafficking with domestic trafficking. When the truth is the phenomenon is distinctly different. And my research is validating that there's some academic research that I've relied upon to build my research proposal an agenda that is talking about that and researchers like myself are really popping up against this kind of moral and philosophical agenda that is being somewhat pushed by the federal legislation and really well-intentioned people who are trying to address this issue but are kind of missing the boat on the experiences of those involved.

[00:07:16] So just to make sure I'm getting this right. We didn't really start understanding what sex trafficking was in the United States domestically You said until 2008 and looking into what that meant for individuals.

[00:07:29] The federal legislation doesn't even really start talking about those within the United States like who were born here not brought here until 2008 and then 2015. There's two provisions in there specifically looking at what they called domestic minor sex trafficking. Now I would argue when you say we I would say we as a nation still don't really understand or have a clear picture of what is happening and those of us that think we do are really missing the mark.

[00:08:03] Right because you're saying that we liken it too much international sex trafficking when what's happening in the United States is unique and different probably as it is in every country correct.

[00:08:15] Sure. And still language it's being associated especially with young people related to involvement and trading and selling sex are terms such as sex slavery and things like that. And the pictures you see in media about girls being chained and girls are not for sale et cetera. Well of course philosophically I agree. You know young people shouldn't be for sale but when we look at the actual literature and work that's being done and exploring the experience of these young people most of them are engaging as mechanisms to survive. Now I absolutely agree that it's not OK for grown adults to purchase sex from minors. Right. I've been an investigator of sexual abuse my entire career on children. So I'm certainly in agreement with that. But there's a lot of kind of rescuing imbedded in the language and in the effort to addressing the issue of young people

involved in trading and selling sex. Which one is not victim centered and not a framework in which we would apply to any other social phenomenon that we're trying to address. And it's hard to quote unquote help somebody who doesn't want to be helped. We really need to start addressing the root of some of these issues which unfortunately lead young people to being involved in trading selling sex in order to effectively get them out.

[00:09:44] Yeah I really do think it does. What has your experience researching led you to this conclusion. What are you seeing that a lot of us are not seeing.

[00:09:53] I dove into the human trafficking research specifically you know that commercial sexual exploitation of youth or domestic minor sex trafficking those terms can be used interchangeably because of the information I receive from the media and a lot of anecdotal very powerful people who are involved in the work just in general of child abuse and neglect were kind of making these statements about young children being pimped out and exploited and until I got into this work in my research my first year of my doctoral program really going and thinking that was what was happening. That was the closest kind of transition as I was saying it's the natural transition for me to get into that. My first research project is really talking to professionals. I was doing qualitative research with some professionals in identifying kind of what they're seeing. I conducted my qualitative interviews went through my entire kind of methodological research process. I attempted to submit a publication and got it back from my peers in the research community who were like No you're perpetuating something that's not there. And so it was my first time like running into a wall where my peers who are really embedded in this work were like No actually what you found out is how people are talking about this issue and how they're perceiving the issue not necessarily the real true experiences of those involved. It was my first kind of sat back in my doctorate program and conducting research and that accountability piece with the peer review was amazing. And so I realized OK so I need to really dig into it and what this really is because clearly this isn't it. So my research focused for people who may be confused on professionals who are engaging with this population and what their thoughts were on their perceptions of the people they engage with. So I didn't talk to survivors of direct and so my first attempt at research was extrapolating a bit on what I was doing and as I continued to dig deeper into really what this is I found that we don't have any good empirical research on young people who are involved. Much of it is sample is incredibly bias where we're recruiting adults who were picked up for prostitution charged and then sent to treatment. And that's how the samples were collected and they're reflecting back on their experiences. And what I know from my work in general is that you know trauma very much is in the eyes of the beholder and social influences can change the way you perceive your experience. So there were some limitations in that some recent work by now a mentor of mine Alexander Lutnik out of San Francisco really published the first book that has a compilation of all of the really good empirical literature on those involved in trading and selling sex and found that really the narrative of the chains and shackles and slavery etc. is really only 10 percent of the population involved in trading and selling sex across the United States. And there's one of the big distinct differences between us and other countries where you look at Thailand and you really do see little girls in windows. Right. I mean that's a very very different experience of quote unquote slavery of young people than than what we have going on here.

[00:13:20] Curiosity since you're specifically engaging you know the practitioners the clinicians who are working with those who are human trafficked in the United States. How did your research change so that you wouldn't perpetuate this myth.

[00:13:34] Really as a search. Digging Deeper. So when I first when I do my literature review for this first study and then so it justifies me going to talk to clinical professionals you know who are engaging with these people. I only dug into the quote unquote commercial sexual exploitation literature to a minor sex trafficking literature which mind you much of it was just commentary and

not real empirical work. So they were you know published articles but not necessarily research studies. You know I go through that process. I do my research study. Now keep in mind these clinical professionals are relying on the same research that I'm relying on to write my literature as you and kind of the predominant narrative that's kind of being perpetuated just socially. Right. And we we know that there is a distinct gap in what we know empirically and what our service professionals know right. That's why we're there's a big push for translational research so we can close that gap a little bit. I go through this period where I've got my feet marrying her. I get set back quite a bit my peers that are well respected are like no you don't know what you're talking about. And I had really good intentions so I obviously missed something. They didn't make it up right. I start diving into the literature a little bit more and find out there's a separation and difference. I can't explain in the literature that looks at young homeless or marginally housed youth and their involvement in what they call quote unquote survival effect. And young people who are commercially sexually exploited while technically under the PVTA. This is the same issue. But I have this aha moment when I realized the academic world and subsequently the rest of the world is looking at these young people differently even though they're engaging in the same thing. So there's this body of literature. If you look at survival sex for LGBTQ lesbian gay bisexual transgender questioning or queer when you're looking at engaging in survival sex trade and selling sex you'll get a body of literature there. Now if you delete that and then look at commercial sexual exploitation abuse or domestic minor sex trafficking you get something completely separate. They're not crossing over. And so when I realized I was missing a whole other body of literature and I go back and start to rethink about and conducting policy analysis on all of the TV and all of its authorization it becomes really really clear that is a whole body of work out there that is not integrated into this kind of phenomenon which leads one to believe that we've then created this kind of worthy victim versus not where the victim even though they're all use all involved. And of course I have some assumptions about how this relates to ism such as racism. And you know all of the things that we think about what the narrative of a quote unquote pimp that.

[00:16:34] This kind of means I as an MSW student go to read the paper on sex trafficking and next year I'm going to become a case worker somewhere and I write this long paper on human trafficking. You're saying I'm only going to get one side of the story. Well and so at this point I will most likely writing that paper go into the field a year later. Having known only one story that's the the error that comes from separating this research right.

[00:17:02] Yep that is definitely the take home of what I was just saying. It's starting to emerge. I have one article in my entire dissertation that actually uses a language kind of the crossover in language only want you know in a dissertation get a whole chapter on the literature of. There is that gap and of course that's what you're going to believe it is. That's all that's all that's out there. It's getting better. Like I mentioned with Dr. Lutnik's book out there are some scholars out of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice that criticize the kind of sex slavery piece so I suppose you probably come across those because they intentionally used language like commercial sexual exploitation acts that are cut up but they're trying to kind of be for some of the common narrative through some anthropological methodological techniques and observation and engaging people in big cities like Atlantic City New York City. And in talking about what this phenomenon actually looks like we might get some of those probably well because I certainly did in the beginning but they were surpassed by many of the others which talked about young girls being manipulated trapped et cetera et. Which I'm not saying isn't a thing and I'm not saying that they're not proponents of manipulation or difference in general ability to assess the situation due to age or brain development but it's not quite as dramatic. I think as being sold which I think is also tied to that thing right. So it's really interesting.

[00:18:35] The more I learn the more I find things are never as black and white as what I was always taught they were. This is just another thing. And you know coming into this conversation

other than the previous conversation we had I had no clue about this. You know and not that I should. Not that I'm a Ph.D. as you're you know as you're you're pursuing but it just is always shocking to find. There's this whole world of knowledge that you didn't know about that so many people are accepted by. You had mentioned briefly that you see some connection to some of these isms you know racism sexism. I wonder if you could talk more about that. No maybe it's hypothetical for you right now. But even if there are loose connections where you see oppression just being brought in and widened by this particular narrow view of sex trafficking.

[00:19:25] I'm answer and I don't know if I can answer your question. So push back if I don't but I'm going to try. So when we think about microaggression microinequities and there's no denying especially among social workers that there are systemic and social inequities among people of color just in general. If you're a social worker and you're we're agreeing we're in agreement that there's power privilege and oppression right. In our world. And so when I start taking into kind of generally that kind of prostitution literature and I use that word not to be a negative connotation to those who are adults but that's just make sure that for listeners and everybody understands that I'm talking about adults who have agency who are engaging in trading and selling sex and that literature you know people will say it's the oldest profession and there's tons and tons of literature on prostitution in general. When we look at that literature and some of them more progressive really good literature that's current on people's involvement in trading and selling sex. We've seen that though people have agency in their decisions of involvement regardless if they're young people or not. Meaning under 18 are not a vast majority of them don't necessarily want to do this sure. And they talk about how I've got to pay my bills. I've got to support my family. Some tragedy happened whether my partner left. My parents passed something along those lines. I don't have other options or because of trans or homophobia. This is where I'm at. You know so they're all linked to the basis for involvement a vast majority of the time is linked to some of these other social problems that we've been trying to combat for years which we know are perpetuated by some of these ism so whether it's adverse life experiences like child abuse neglect or out-of-home placement or you know some of these other big big players when we're looking at social justice issues they're all directly linked to that. It's another form of survival specially when we know that there is discrimination in employment. We have affirmative action whether it's for people of color or women. We know that there's differences in salary versus a man versus a woman let alone if you had extra barriers such as people of color or identifying as trans or so you can see how it all kind of weaves together. Now that isn't to say that there aren't some people who engage in sex work because they want to or they think it's empowering or etc. etc. and I know it's controversial certainly I talked with some of my college who are really pro sex work in saying I don't think that's the vast majority. They certainly exist to push that point even further. We have a small amount of research that really talks about how she did an assessment on a quote unquote trafficker who tends to be male and a victim of human trafficking which tends to be female. It certainly goes both ways. There are certainly females involved in trafficking. Per the language in the federal legislation and vice versa. Boys are certainly victims as well. But if we're talking about the predominant narrative if you did assessments on both of those parties you would see that their backgrounds are relatively similar. When you look at that. I can't help but wonder how gender socialization impacts which one becomes a victim and which one becomes the perpetrator based on language that we use in the law and how we engage with people in our society in rules and will following and breaking.

[00:23:13] You absolutely answered the question I think you've put a lot of different pieces together really well for us. It's so multifaceted. There are a number of things and policies and as you mentioned before money pushing policies you know that lead us to have systems that perpetuate poverty and make people have to make certain decisions that for the most part they don't want to make those decisions. But there is a way to meet what they need financially for that week. And like you said some want to be part of this. And so I you know like I think you said it was a minority but more people are saying I don't want this but it's the way that I'm going to survive survival sex. And

those people we shame for what they do. Correct.

[00:23:55] Sure. And I would say I modeled the theory that a hypothetical it hasn't been tested and perfectly validated but which kind of articulates that the continuum of involvement and trading and selling sex until it built upon Maslow's hierarchy of needs where at the very very bottom we have people who are truly enslaved. Right. We all heard about a case involving Ariel Castro in Ohio where he had girls chained in the basement. You know I'm not saying that doesn't happen at all. But like the pressures are poaching against with childhood sex abuse and we still have stranger danger program. We know a vast majority of people who are going to sexually abuse children are known to them to stranger danger program they're a little bit silly break so along that same thread. We certainly have those cases where people are trapped slaves chained up etc. but it's far rarer and people are pushing that that is more prominent. So the hierarchy goes from kind of that bottom all the way to the top where people are engaging because they believe it's sustainable. They want to they feel like it's healthy for them whatever their perception and then everyone in-between. So people are engaging and trading and selling sex because they have to to pay their bills because they have no other option. Some people are engaging because they're getting a sense of community. They are able to validate or explore their sexual identities. Some people are doing it because they want a coach purse. Now I would argue that there some social messaging around your level of value being dependent on possessions. And so I'll include that in there and it's kind of related to some of the bigger level of isms about what I have to look like or what I have to do to be valuable contribute to society or be meaningful in society you know related to purses and stuff. But again there's always room for debate but that is kind of a really brief kind of overview of the survival effect hierarchy that I created and I've made a statement and my work and my dissertation and in my research that really there's nobody who is engaging in trading sex for means other than survival. But what surviving means for that individual is defined by them.

[00:26:12] Right. You have done such a great job for me and I think for our listeners as well of giving us a broader understanding of what human trafficking is. Thank you I have learned so much from you and and so I think one of the last questions I really want to ask you is as someone pursuing an MSW and going to be going on the field what should I do differently. How do I engage those who are whether by choice or to pay a bill or to buy the purse or because they are forced. How do I engage the World better as a social worker.

[00:26:50] So what I would say first is that we work within the law. Right. We have laws and we have to follow them especially as you go into the world as a social worker. Right. And so engaging in this research and making this discovery it's also been a learning curve for me personally and how I you laws and how we've kind of regulate people and their behavior and right and wrong and all of that sort of stuff. So I want to be really clear about that. And so he's thinking about emerging social workers and saying OK so on one hand we can really understand that broad philosophical what it is for this person. Right. And this person may be 16 or this person maybe 40. Unfortunately because I'm a social worker my response to that person who is 16 is going to be different than the person who is 40 just because of a lot right identifying because we've got our arbitrary age of 18 that says you're an adult at that point. Right. So anything under that. That's a big piece of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act that we didn't cover which has anybody under age of 18 cannot consent to involvement in trading and selling sex positive of that is then that means we have no such thing as child prostitutes which I think it's a lovely wonderful thing. We don't need to be arresting children for being you know quote unquote prostitutes. But unfortunately I think the unintended consequences that swung the other way where OK well they can't be prostitutes. But that doesn't mean that there's not any level of agency involved. And as social workers we need to attend to the person and how they view their experience. That doesn't mean that you don't intervene. That doesn't mean that you don't provide services that doesn't mean that you don't get them out. We don't want children involved in commercial sex rape period whether they're a teen and a half. We don't want

that. And that's a moralistic thing that we just have to accept. And I'm fine with that. I don't want you to feel compelled to have to trade sex either. They want the purse or because they want to validate their sexuality. I want more healthy mechanisms. And again I have to own that that's the value. But when we engage in any work whether it's with those who are trading in selling sex or involved in substance abuse or you know anything in between any of the social issues that we're addressing day to day social workers we really need to understand the experience and the lens of the person involved. Otherwise we do them a complete disservice when we start sharing with them what we think they need to do and will eventually get probably to what they need to do. But that is why in all of the social classes your professors continue to say Beacom right there at Beetham where they're at Beetham where they're at. But you don't know where they're at unless you really let them share with you their story and their journey. You might need to help them piece together. I mean a good clinician and a good social worker can make sense of the behavior. And the quote unquote choices of the individuals. And then you embed complex trauma into how that impacts quote unquote choices and decisions of these people. So the behavior makes sense and then you determine well how can I make something out make sense for this person to be most effective and client centered.

[00:30:17] I have a question too about policy. I'm thinking as you're talking about your own values versus some of your colleagues values and some are going to say you know I want to empower those men and women who are choosing to be sex workers within the world of human trafficking because they're paying a bill or because whatever it is you know there's that side and then there's someone else who says you know I yes I empower them but I don't believe it's their best good. And so when we have two separate sides of what we think is best good you know that it's it's fine to be in this world and it's fine. But I don't want to for you long term. How do we come together to change policy. What will we be driving towards if we disagree what the best good is.

[00:31:00] Well I mean if I knew that and I think I would say to anybody else who's diving into this. Where is that. And there lies the problem. Right. So I go back and forth and I engage with my colleague who I'm like I'm not judging but I think that this is OK I understand why you're doing it. But I think let's get you out. And then somebody will say well that's just because you're not actually letting them decide their fate. That's the core of the complication behind what's OK what's not okay and kind of the morals and values that permeate this issue specially when we're talking about children. And so for me if my end of the day stands is absolutely not OK. For young people to engage in trading and selling sex. But in order to treat them effectively to get them out I have to really listen to them and work with them understand their experience to be a factor. And this becomes far more complicated when we're talking about adults. And are we OK with that or are we not okay with that. And I had students asked me Should we legalize prostitution then. What do you think. Should we not. Should we. Because we understand why people are doing it and it should be regulated. And I don't know the answer to that question because of the complexities of immense levels of trauma how we know that impact the brain mentally the biological pieces of the brain. It's so so complicated right now. I literally am taking it day by day as I move forward and trying to contribute to what we know about this and saying OK we've got to start with not telling young people what their experiences and really listening to what they're experiences. And that's as far as I've got.

[00:32:57] And I think we can talk about it abstractly you know as as much as you want and then I think as you're saying you meet the individual and all your abstractions go out the door. And so although it would be great I think for us to come together you know and decide this is the truth. This is the way to do this. We've we've empirically proven this is the best good. It seems like even if we don't have that you can help an individual or you can help a community.

[00:33:25] We know that a large majority who are involved in Trading and selling sex want out

they want out and they want to do something else. But it's really difficult to go work a fast food job and make you know minimum wage versus making 500 bucks a night. Right. So there are some of those pieces so we know for sure people went out a vast majority of people don't say they want to do this but until we can offer alternatives they get some of these really basic needs met or really trans or schist some of the way we engage with one another culturally and some of these bigger kind of social paradigm. I don't know that we can expect the phenomenon to go away.

[00:34:11] Amber thank you so much for being with us today. This has been such an enlightening episode. I think I've learned so much and I hope that our listeners today are able to take so much away from this. Is there anything else you want to mention before we end.

[00:34:26] I don't think so. I am grateful to have this opportunity to chat with you. And I plan to continue to engage with differing minds so we can do the best we can to sort this out dialoguing about it as. Best we can be right now. Right.

[00:34:42] It's the key. Well thank you so much and we hope to follow up with you and hear more some time.

[00:34:48] You've been listening to Amber McDonald's discussion on the issue of sex trafficking among minors. I'm Louanne Bakk your host for this episode. Please join us again at inSocialWork.

[00:35:09] Hi I'm Nancy Smyth Professor and Dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history or online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.SocialWork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work research center you'll find that under the Community Resources menu.