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Factors that Promote Long-Term Psychosocial Resilience in Reintegrated Female Human Trafficking Survivors

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Abstract

The study examines the factors that support long-term psychosocial resilience among reintegrated female survivors of human trafficking in Harare, Zimbabwe. A qualitative research approach was employed. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, key informant interviews, and observations with 20 participants who were selected based on the information power model and purposive sampling of key informants. The research was guided by Resilience Theory, and data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that victims rely on internal defence mechanisms such as developing "thick skin," which, both theoretically and practically, helps withstand external pressures, along with leveraging the support of "peer allies," temporarily distorting reality

when necessary, and utilizing inner resilience. Overall, the case study also revealed diverse experiences of human trafficking, which necessitated the use of specialized techniques to foster long-term resilience.

Keywords: Human Trafficking, Survivors, Resilience, Reintegration, Zimbabwe

1. Introduction

The idea of resilience is essential to the theoretical and practical issues surrounding the integration of people whose livelihoods may have been affected by natural or man-made disasters (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Jones, 2023). Despite the large amount of research in this area, resilience has not significantly aided or played a key part in the reintegration of human trafficking victims (Sari, 2014). Instead of concentrating solely on resilience theory, it is vital to broaden perspectives and consider different arrangements that can facilitate and encourage the reintegration of victims of human trafficking. Beyond resilience, models and theories that consider factors like social support, trauma-informed care, community involvement, and legislative initiatives address the complicated issue of reintegration. By broadening the perspective beyond resilience alone, one can better understand the opportunities and challenges associated with reintegrating those affected by human trafficking or displacement. The factors that lead to a situation where reintegration into the community is expected, and who is expected to be resilient, determine each combination.

In recent decades, there have been remarkable calls for survivors of distressing events to be resilient in the face of threats to their livelihoods. These demands stem from several challenges faced by people who want to start over after a life-altering catastrophe. One important idea that comes up in such contemplative practice is resilience. Resilience, according to Sari (2014), is the capacity of an individual or group to overcome adversity. The need for human trafficking victims to be resilient

when they reintegrate into their original community after being trafficked has become increasingly important as pressure mounts to ensure that the lives of trafficked individuals return to their pre-trafficking state after the traumatic events of trafficking (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; de Vries & Farrell, 2023). Human trafficking survivors must continue to be resilient, considering two startling circumstances. The first is related to the trauma that survivors endure, including the stigma and stereotyping they encounter from society as they return for reintegration (Williams, 2010; Idris, 2022). The other is the economic vulnerability of the survivors' livelihoods following their eviction from their village and subsequent return with possessions. This study focused on the resilience and integration of survivors of human trafficking for several reasons. First, understanding the factors that promote resilience can help guide therapies and support systems designed to help survivors heal and thrive. By identifying the protective factors that enable people to overcome adversity, social development experts can design targeted programs that enhance resilience and encourage successful reintegration. Second, researching the integration process sheds light on the difficulties and barriers human trafficking victims encounter while trying to access resources, navigate support systems, and start over. Understanding these challenges can help social work researchers support community efforts, service improvements, and legislative changes that promote inclusivity, reduce stigma, and allow survivors to fully engage in society.

2. Literature Review

The study's literature analysis focused on the essential traits that foster the growth of psychosocial long-term resilience traits in reintegrated female human trafficking survivors. Theoretical frameworks for psychological resilience were among the significant subjects and studies that were reviewed. The idea of resilience is essential to the theoretical and practical issues surrounding the integration of people whose livelihoods may have been affected by natural or man-made disasters (Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014; Jones, 2023). Nevertheless, despite the practical discussions, resilience has remained on the fringes of the primary subjects examined in the sustainable reintegration of survivors of human trafficking (Sari, 2014;

Nichols *et al.*, 2023). Because it can represent so many various things, the phrase "resilience" is both intriguing and chameleonic. Resilience encompasses the ideas of attaining and regaining wellness. It also encompasses the crucial concepts of maintaining health in the face of suffering and developing resilience to the adverse consequences of future adversity (Knight & Kagotho, 2023). The word resilience comes from the Latin *resilire*, which means "leap back." Resilience can be defined as the ability to bounce back from hardship. It is widely acknowledged that a key element of the reintegration process is resilience after a traumatic and distressing experience (Williams, 2010; Motseki & Mofokeng, 2022). To go on with their life after reintegrating into their community following a traumatic occurrence like human trafficking, survivors are thought to need to develop resilience. The importance of personal agency and empowerment in building resilience has been highlighted in several studies. Reintegrated female survivors often exhibit a strong sense of agency, actively choosing and working to regain control of their lives. This empowerment can take place through advocacy and lobbying, the creation of supportive social networks, or access to education or employment opportunities (Patel & Gupta, 2012). This study will add to the body of existing literature on long-term psychosocial resilience in reintegrated female human trafficking survivors.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this work is resilience theory, which also served as a guiding lens for the entire investigation. The transition from individual-focused psychology models to a more comprehensive, systems-based approach that looks at how social, ecological, and urban systems adapt and change in the face of adversity is the foundation of the relationship between resilience theory and New Area Studies (Van Breda, 2018). Early proponents of resilience, such as Norman Garmezy, Michael Rutter, and Emmy Werner, concentrated on discovering protective characteristics in people that enabled them to overcome personal hardships, such as self-efficacy and supportive relationships (Garmezy, 1974; Werner, 1989). In contrast, some New Area Studies scholarship focuses on collective capacities to "bounce back," adapt, and transform by applying resilience to bigger, complex systems (cities, communities, socio-ecological systems) (Rega & Bonifazi, 2020). Resilience is heavily influenced by local context, culture, and particular

regional dynamics, according to New Area Studies (McAreavey, 2022). This contrasts with several older psychological models that were more universalizing.

Research conducted in South Africa, for instance, demonstrates the applicability of resilience theory in comprehending how localized indigenous knowledge systems help people in resource-constrained contexts strive towards their development (Malapane, 2025). In New Area Studies, resilience is frequently applied in an action-oriented manner to inform policy and urban development projects. To address the risks associated with extreme weather events, infrastructure disruptions, and public health emergencies like COVID-19 (Aloh *et al.*, 2025), and human trafficking, frameworks for "resilient cities" must be developed. To handle complex regional issues, an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates knowledge from environmental science, engineering, public health, urban planning, and the social sciences (Andres *et al.*, 2021) is needed. Some New Area Studies scholars contend that an excessive focus on individual or system "resilience" can unintentionally divert attention from systemic problems and structural inequality, arguing that systems should occasionally be allowed to collapse (reduce resilience) to promote necessary, equitable transformation (Westerhof *et al.*, 2023). The geographical and sociopolitical framework for using and critically assessing resilience theory in the face of significant, intricate regional difficulties is essentially provided by New Area Studies.

According to resilience theory, an individual's competency at any given moment reflects the potential that arises from multiple interrelated systems, both within the person and in their immediate environment (Richardson, 2002). The interaction of several systems, including the individual, the school, and the external setting of resources and hazards, affects varying degrees of exposure and susceptibility as well as intricate processes of protection and vulnerability. These factors affect how well individuals and organizations can overcome challenges. Resilience is the result of dynamic systems interacting during transactions (Lerner, 2006). In addition to other crucial elements, Rutter (2006) enumerates the following core concepts of the theory: a) Resilience is not just a personal quality; it is the outcome of consistent adaptation based on available resources (b) The catalyst is the environment, not the

individual; and c) a modicum of risk is normal and required as part of the growth process; in fact, exposure to low risk might enhance outcomes and coping strategies. According to Rutter (2006), the theory states that the issue of resilience requires considering a range of possible psychological effects rather than just those that are remarkably favourable. Resilience in the face of stress need not always come from consistently positive experiences; in fact, it is often forged through the successful navigation of adversity (Lyons, 2023). There is no guarantee that a person's personal qualities or traits, or even how they respond to a difficult circumstance now, will always provide the answer. Resilience theory states too that a person's interpersonal interaction styles can significantly affect their resilience (Lyons, 2023). A person's response to risk or adversity varies widely. The theory states that understanding adversity as a situation that compels a system, organization, or individual to be resilient is essential to understanding resilience as a process. Through a range of mechanisms and processes, adversity can impact a system's adaptive development, stability, or viability at several functional levels. In the end, this may compromise the advantageous adaptability of a system. Despite this, competency capacities may still exist. When resilience is shown in the face of adversity, it is considered to exist. According to Li *et al.* (2023), competency in this sense refers to a system's capacity to effectively adapt and satisfy cultural, developmental, and contextual expectations for a certain individual, social structure, or group. Competence is usually enhanced by an adaptive system's integrated structure and operations in a particular environment. Different cultural contexts have an impact on resilience (Masten, 2014; Ungar *et al.*, 2013).

In circumstances where risk factors are generally associated with malignant outcomes in each environment, what are known as assets or promotive elements usually aid in the healthy growth of each group or individual. People are the ones who create and find resources and risks, and are all connected to the negative effects on human growth (Kool & Agrawal, 2020). The vitality of any component for individual growth, however, can be impacted by a variety of resources and hazards found in that system. Other factors may also have an impact on the adaptive importance of a given danger or resource for a certain individual in each situation. In the lives of individuals, families, and communities, risk factors often accumulate or build up (Obradovic *et al.*, 2012). If one parent loses their job, the financial

stability of the family may worsen. This could therefore disrupt home stability, raise stress levels, increase the family's susceptibility to illness, and put a strain on the different social networks that can support a family. Resources and threats can have a direct impact on adaptation. However, the effects of both components may be influenced by several other factors or a combination of resources and hazards. As this study focuses on resilience development and ensuring the sustainable reintegration of human trafficking victims who are returned to their communities, resilience theory becomes applicable when dealing with and evaluating the data acquired from victims.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

The phenomenological research design served as the foundation for this investigation, which was directed by qualitative research methods. When discussing human experience, considering the historical, social, and political factors that influence life's meanings, phenomenology is a very helpful tool (Kumar, 2012). According to participants' descriptions, a researcher using phenomenology finds the core of human experiences with a particular social occurrence (Creswell, 2014). Because it aims to comprehend the lived experiences of study participants, phenomenology is both a philosophy and a methodology. The method concentrated on investigating the lived experiences of individual trafficking survivors and learning the significance they attached to those experiences.

3.2 Population

The study population consisted of all women who survived female trafficking and were reintegrated into their communities in Harare, Zimbabwe.

3.3 Sample size and sampling procedure

Twenty (20) female human trafficking survivors and twenty (20) key informants, ten (10) of whom were survivors' relatives and ten (10) of whom were technical

personnel in the fields of migration and social services, were purposefully chosen for this study. To completely comprehend the perspectives of study participants, the researchers put aside all preconceived ideas, adopting bracketing on female trafficking (De Bruin, 2020). Bracketing, also called epoché or phenomenological reduction, is a technique where researchers lay aside (or "bracket out") their own assumptions, prejudices, and prior knowledge (Oluka, 2025). A crucial component of high-quality qualitative research, bracketing enables researchers to accept subjectivity while simultaneously controlling its possible drawbacks (Oluka, 2025). Focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and key informant interviews were employed to interact with the participants and carry out the investigation. To prevent restricting the participants' responses, the questions were open-ended.

3.4 Data collection

Guided walk interviews were utilized to collect data from women who were reintegrated into their communities in Harare, Zimbabwe, after surviving female trafficking. Evans & Jones (2011) claim that this method gave researchers a special way to comprehend how participants viewed their experiences and daily lives as shaped by their environment. Focus groups (FGDs), semi-structured interviews, and non-participant observation were among the techniques used to collect data. The researchers planned the interviews three weeks ahead of time to give the participants time to arrange their availability. The researchers developed an interview guide based on concepts from the literature, which was used throughout the interview procedure. All the interviews with the study participants were done by the researchers. The interviewer made sure not to interfere with the natural flow of the talk or the intriguing asides that were crucial to this study. Participants had lots of chances to be flexible and talk about any issues that arose from the purpose of the study. As part of the broader qualitative study, each participant took part in a single guided walk interview session. This session's objective was to fully elicit and understand all the significant issues that were distilled into the aim. Along with a few selected family members and close friends of the survivors, the same women who suffered female trafficking took part in focus group discussions (FGDs) and guided walk interviews. Other methods were used to collect data on the same subjects for complementary reasons. In other words, data from focus group talks

were supplemented or enhanced by information from semi-structured interviews and observation. Throughout the conversations, notes were taken.

3.5 Data analysis

Several procedures were used in the data analysis stage to recognize and comprehend the key themes that emerged from the acquired data, including: All significant statements were coded, then grouped and clustered to identify key themes and subthemes that capture the essence of the phenomenon being studied. Bracketing was used to set aside preconceptions and biases and help approach the data with an open mind. Additionally, some interviews were audio recorded and verbatim transcribed with permission. The qualitative data gathered were examined using thematic analysis. One technique for finding, examining, and summarizing patterns (themes) in data is thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, according to Guest *et al.* (2012), richly arranges and characterizes the data set while looking at multiple aspects of the research issue. Finding recurrent patterns of meaning in data sets gathered from focus groups, interviews, or a range of texts is the goal of thematic analysis, according to Guest *et al.* (2012). Thematic analysis is a more approachable type of analysis for a study of this kind since it does not necessitate the same level of theoretical and technical expertise as discourse analysis and grounded theory.

4. Results

4.1 Factors that Promote Development of Resilience Traits Among Reintegrated Female Survivors of Human Trafficking

In-depth interviews with identified female survivors of human trafficking, interviews with the survivors' immediate family members and fellow countrymen, in-depth interviews with government and non-governmental technical persons who work with trafficking survivors, and two focus groups are presented in this paper.

4.1.1 Development of psychosocial long-term resilience

The following sub-themes surfaced during the focus group discussions and key informant interviews with technical participants, as well as the interviews with human trafficking survivors: a) Thick skin development and b) Using internal resilience as a means of fostering intrinsic motivation that bolsters victims' resilience. Several topic categories surfaced within these two sub-themes. Below are these themes.

Sub-theme one: Development of "thick skin"

In this study, young women who had been trafficked and returned to their home communities had to develop personal characteristics that would foster resilience over the long run. The development of what participants referred to as "thick skin" was one of the essential characteristics. Participants in this study had varying interpretations of what "thick skin" meant in this context. Participants claimed that developing "thick skin" had to do with their ability to tolerate the circumstances they had experienced on a mental level. Two primary characteristics of thick skin growth were: a) the capacity to disregard unneeded distractions and concentrate on the present moment, b) harnessing of internal resilience through prayers, meditation and self-belief.

The participants in this study stated that the trauma they had endured, together with the stigma, discrimination, and stereotyping they encountered from the groups they would have reintegrated into, prompted them to concentrate on the present moment and ignore unneeded distractions. After being stigmatized, trafficking survivors developed an internal defence mechanism to dismiss any indications of stereotyping and covert or overt stigma from inside their communities. This is how one of the survivors described it:

...healing starts from within, my brother; it is very traumatic to have been trafficked and be sexually abused, as was my case. You just collapse mentally, and what was making you collapse to epic proportions that will lead you to insanity, especially the stereotyping you then face from the community members. You then should take charge of your own life and tell

yourself that you are a giant and what has happened is not going to end if you keep trapped in the past. You need to toughen up, and in my case, I would say I developed what is known as thick skin. I just stopped caring and thinking about what had happened because there was honestly nothing I was going to change. I had to pick myself up, dust myself off and take control of my life...here I am now; I think I am healing honestly. (S.2.P.B)

The survivors described the trafficking situation (identifying, rescue, and reintegration process) as extremely painful and life-threatening when asked to talk about concentrating on the present, especially immediate needs. Due to these factors, other priorities take precedence over simple prejudice and stereotyping. For instance, locating the nearest Zimbabwean embassy in a foreign country where instability is a concern might be an urgent need. One had to use their inner strength to concentrate more on the escape process than on who was saying what and how. Another victim also attested to similar feelings, saying:

I developed what I call crocodile skin. I had to be tough enough and fight for my identity and life. The sexual assault that I faced when I was trafficked was hell. It led to serious mental torture, and that was worsened by the stereotyping and stigmatisation I encountered when I came here. I was at the brink of a total shutdown, but I told myself I could be myself again if I chose to. I stopped listening to everything and just developed what I called crocodile skin... (S.1.P.A)

The same sentiments were echoed by a survivor who also said:

I had to toughen up. People say a lot of negative things about you, left, right and centre. You really should be tough if you are to survive. I personally developed very thick skin in such circumstances. (S.4.P.D).

What might have been the trigger for the development of some of these fundamental qualities was another topic covered in the interviews. After pointing out that what was promised was not being delivered and that all documents had been seized, some survivors said that being in a life-threatening situation far from home is traumatic to the core and creates an environment where one must delve

deeper within themselves to activate survival instincts. After that, one was compelled to put survival first and disregard any other distractions that would jeopardize the ability to flee danger.

Intrinsic survival instincts would have already emerged by the time the survivors were returned to the familiar surroundings of their families and communities. the capacity to prioritize the urgent requirement over unimportant problems that would have already arisen. Stereotyping in the later phases of reintegration merely serves to strengthen the preexisting capacity to disregard superfluous currents. According to one summary, the survivors would be able to move on thanks to the thick crocodile skin. There were, nevertheless, some astute opinions about the emergence of thick skin as a natural coping strategy. Instead, they use what is known as internal resilience, according to some. Internal resilience is covered in detail in the following section.

Subtheme 2: Harnessing internal resilience

Most participants stated that they used their internal resilience as a means of developing long-term psychological resilience. The components of internal resilience that were discussed center on self-belief, internal meditation, and prayer. According to most participants, one does not fully recognize their own inner power until one is faced with a circumstance that leaves one with no choice but to rely on their inner strength.

One of the survivors interviewed said:

Healing starts from within. You have got to tell yourself that you have your own happiness and healing, and no one else will do it for you. This is what I taught myself, and that way, I developed resilience from within to build long-term internal resilience. That has helped me in a significant way, I think (S.7.P.G).

The same sentiments were echoed by another survivor who noted:

It is about you and no one else. You need to build your own dikes of courage to hold back the flood of fear. I did that for me to be where I am today. That surely starts from within, and I think that is the internal resilience that has made my survival in this hostile environment possible (S.20.P.T).

Utilizing internal resilience was exemplified by several crucial characteristics that were based on the survivor's inner strength as well as their spiritual and religious convictions. Several qualities, such as prayer, meditation, and unwavering self-belief, were identified as important indicators of internal strength. Both the survivors who were interviewed and the key informants and focus group participants mentioned prayer and self-belief as important qualities. The spirit of a person who has a positive self-evaluation and an internal belief that they will conquer through self-motivation is commonly referred to as self-belief. The survivors felt that they could rediscover themselves and acquire strength through divine intervention if they had a stronger relationship with God.

The following passage comes from a key informant who said that one important coping strategy used by individual survivors was prayer.

Prayer was very central to all the interactions I have noted among the survivors that I interacted with. Suddenly, due to maybe a trafficking situation, most of the survivors become more religious and prayerful individually and collectively ... (T.10.N.G).

One intriguing discovery was that the prayers mentioned included both petitions to the ancestral spirits and prayers to the Christian faith. There was still an opportunity for mediation and some kind of prayer for the ancestors within the context of religion, even though some of the survivors were very devout. Any kind of prayer was seen as helping to achieve the aim of complete recovery since, as the survivors pointed out, in the face of extreme struggle, one never knew where assistance might come from. It was observed that there were two variations of the prayer lines: one for escaping danger and the other for healing. Since the survivor

would frequently have been by themselves and so had to participate in self-induced prayer to aid in survival, the former was observed to be highly intrinsic.

Some individuals cited solitude, famously referred to as “me time” for meditation, as essential to their survival and recovery. Meditation has been utilized as a method to help people assess their own situations and rediscover who they are. However, the meditation was *ad hoc* rather than precisely planned or sequenced, typically brought on by problems like dealing with stigma or having a conversation with relatives. Prayer and private time with the spiritual realm were also combined with meditation. Both were intertwined with one another rather than having separate periods. Nonetheless, both qualities, when paired with self-belief, greatly aided in the growth of inner strength and heightened the survival instinct.

4.1.2 Temporary escapism/denial of reality

Considering the developments, some participants also brought up the topic of escapism as a tactic they employed to establish long-term psychosocial resilience following their trafficking and return to their home communities. However, escapism can often be characterised very differently from how it is commonly understood, particularly in whiteness studies. Escapism in the context of this study meant entering what one participant referred to as “an enclave.” Some participants found comfort and tranquilly in these “enclaves,” or areas of seclusion. Several sub-themes surfaced under the heading of temporary escape in denial of reality. These three sub-themes are: a) purposeful misrepresentation of reality as it is; b) forming “peer allies”; and c) transient environmental change. The following section will address these sub-themes in the same sequence, beginning with the first one, which deals with wilful distortion of reality as it already exists.

Sub-theme 1: Deliberate distortion of existing reality

Most participants (human trafficking survivors) reported experiencing stigma and stereotyping from members of their immediate and wider communities after returning to their home communities. Most participants stated that they found it

very challenging to reintegrate into their own communities because of the officiated reality. Some said they ended up purposefully warping the current reality to cope and develop long-term resilience. Two tactics were used to intentionally distort the current reality, which was typically transient: a) self-induced forgetting, and b) information distortion to avoid stigma. Self-induced forgetfulness occurs when survivors either consciously pretend to forget specific aspects of the trafficking process, especially the horrific and exploitative component, how it happened, where it happened, and who committed it, or they fully reject that they have ever been the victim of human trafficking. This was strongly related to misrepresenting various facts regarding the conditions under which the trafficking occurred and the entire procedure. Only a few people whom the survivors believed might not have been able to help prevent the scenario were kept in the dark about this information. Considering this, one of the survivors interviewed said:

At times, you choose to turn a blind eye to reality and act as if nothing at all happened. You know the reality, but at times, you feel paying much attention to it will just bring unnecessary pain. You then choose to act dumb as if nothing of that sort ever happened (S.8.P.H).

Some of the professionals who were interviewed confirmed the foregoing, pointing out that in certain cases, various agencies that worked with the same survivor had conflicting statements on the same story. To ensure that they had a complete tale that would support the survivor, the agencies had to corroborate rather than accuse the survivor of lying. The ability to purposefully misrepresent one's tale was a survival tactic acquired over time. One technical expert and key informant in the study said that:

The survivors I have dealt with who have faced such difficult circumstances sometimes choose to just distort reality. They act as if nothing of that sort ever happened, and it helps them to build the needed resilience. I tell you, the community out there is just very difficult and complex to deal with, and most find it very difficult to live back in it after such traumatic personal

experiences. But distorting reality sometimes works for some of the people I have worked with. (T.6.N.C).

Survivors of human trafficking occasionally used purposeful forgetfulness as a coping strategy and resilience-building technique. Due to repeated interviews conducted by both organisations and at the family level, the participants said that in certain situations, if they did not trust the person they were speaking with, they would purposefully omit certain things. Most of the time, they claimed to forget to limit sharing information that would cause stigmatisation because of their experience in foreign places. In addition to the dread of being misunderstood and misread, there was also the fear that the information might be exploited to stigmatise.

The interviews also revealed that although warping reality was a useful tactic for survivors, it was only a short-term, transient one that needed to be used in conjunction with other tactics. The borrowed reality was not sustainable for the survivors. The survivors were able to reduce their reactions to all the negative forces that were thrown at them by using this tactic as a temporary solution, which gave them some breathing room. Regardless, one can only exist as a haven of warped reality for a limited period; reality will soon begin to set in.

Subtheme 2: Building “peer allies”

Taking a slightly different stance from the “enclaves” and escapist issue mentioned above, some participants pointed out that building internal mental strength is essential to developing the aforementioned “thick skin.” However, the choice to disclose the inner workings of the trauma that the participants experience to what some referred to as “peer allies” and others as “confidantes” fosters this growth in mental toughness. One of the survivors who was interviewed, for example, stated:

I chose to build a laager around me, and I have just ceased to trust people, given the betrayal I endured when I was trafficked. You are fortunate that I gave you audience; otherwise, I just do not want to intermingle that much. I choose to find solace and comfort in the television. I watch my tele-novellas,

and I have suddenly become a fan. I think my love for tele-novellas is largely driven by the fact that I in most cases feel I should be out there to explore love and betrayals in equal measure to exercise better judgment in the future. I see myself in the same view as these people, and I think I have arisen from the ashes like a phoenix (S.10.P.J).

Although it was not easy, some participants found that sharing the inner details of a traumatic event with a chosen and trusted few was a crucial intrinsic factor that enabled them to build the resilience necessary for their survival in an otherwise exceedingly hostile environment. According to this study, the survivors' sharing of this knowledge with people they referred to as "peer allies" or "confidantes" is suggestive of this kind of resistance. The results show that this tactic is one of the most important elements that greatly aid in making sure that people develop the much-needed resilience in an otherwise very hostile atmosphere. According to a survivor interviewed:

...when you get into such a very difficult situation, it is surely not at all easy. Sharing such sensitive information with anyone, even your own mother, is not at all easy. It is very difficult, and often people think it is very easy. It is very difficult; you, at times, think of not sharing at all, but to me, that is a weakness. It is disempowering, yes, and if you share, some people may see you as weak and a person who cannot keep secrets, but you will surely be burning inside. If you keep inside this trauma is cancerous and simply eats you away. So, it starts from within, and you ought to share to be able to survive (S.3.P.C).

Similarly, another survivor said:

I had to vent and release all the pressure that builds up from within. Sharing was key and has been helpful to some extent... (S.12.P.L).

The researchers not only explained how reliance on peer allies operated, but also attempted to determine who, in the eyes of the survivors and their communities, was eligible to be referred to as a peer ally. Two categories of allies were found: a) allies who had been in a similar trafficking situation; these were from the same

community or communicated remotely, but contact was started during the trafficking situation and/or process; b) the second group of allies was related to past confidantes or trusted friends, most of whom were from the same community and were primarily former coworkers or even classmates.

Peer allies who had experienced the same trafficking situation were the most trusted of the two groups because they were thought to have shared a common experience, and it was simpler to share survival strategies and experiences. A few of the survivors connected and remained buddies for life. When asked how the friendship began, several participants said that peer allies who have had similar struggles are more likely to listen without passing judgment, making them a very useful ally to rely on as part of a coping and resilience-building strategy.

Sub-theme 3: Temporary environmental change

One important coping strategy mentioned by the participants was temporarily altering their living surroundings, in addition to disclosing extremely sensitive details about their experiences of human trafficking to their confidantes. Different levels and objectives were served by the temporary environmental modification. Upon arrival, they were given temporary housing at different facilities in and around Harare until they were eventually reintegrated into their communities, according to the participants' chronicles of their reintegration process. This reprieve was crucial because it led to the formation of new connections with allies in certain cases.

The Department of Social Services is required by Chapter 19:25 of the Trafficking in Persons Act to offer safe, temporary housing to identified trafficking survivors. In addition to short-term skills upgrading services, these short-term facilities are expected to offer mental health and psychosocial support services. According to the key sources examined, most survivors had no concerns about these facilities because they offered chances to develop new, lasting friendships and abilities, as well as protection from the traffickers' unseen hands, which could include threats or requests for repayment. The purpose of temporary housing was to offer short-term

shelter for a minimum of twenty-four hours and a maximum of six months, after which attempts at final repatriation and reintegration would be made.

Some participants elected to visit relatives' homes outside of their assigned primary known addresses when asked to select locations where they would be escorted home following their brief stay in the temporary shelter facilities. Some participants said that seeing a trusted friend or family member before returning home "once the dust had settled" was a good idea. One participant made the decision to move permanently to a new setting where the burdens of the past are unknown after briefly returning home. To avoid being reminded of the trafficking situation, particularly when close relatives were involved, to minimize stigma, to start a new life in an unfamiliar area, or to relocate to a new city in search of better opportunities elsewhere, survivors who chose to completely change their familiar communities gave several reasons for their decision.

Some survivors of human trafficking chose to remain silent to avoid being questioned or talking about their horrible experiences. By maintaining a low profile in their new neighbourhood, survivors were able to avoid answering too many questions from neighbours and disclosing too much about their secret history. One would then gradually find new companions with whom to associate without fear of condemnation or recollection of their past. This was consistent with the previously identified escapism. One survivor stated:

I find peace in my loneliness. With this pandemic, I just find peace in being alone in my room. I have suddenly become a television fanatic, and with the screen and the internet, I just lock myself away from this hostile world full of stereotypical people and focus on learning more about how others have fared. I am a reality show person. I therefore spend most of my time watching reality shows, and that way I think I have fared just fine (S.9.P.I).

The contribution of technology and social media to the development of new online friendships was one intriguing discovery. According to the participants, social media provided them with an opportunity to make new friends without disclosing the painful experiences they had had. This allowed them to make virtual friends who

were impartial and unaware of the trauma they had gone through. Particularly throughout the job search process and during periods of temporary self-induced isolation, social media was found to be useful. Survivors found social media and the internet to be tremendously helpful, not just for referrals and resources, but also for virtual connections that allowed them to share and receive survival resources. Accordingly, a survivor stated:

The escape route is to be alone. Get away from the stereotypical society and just be alone. With a lot of social media around, it is far better to form friendships with people who do not even know you. (S.11.P.K).

5. Discussion

Being resilient is a process rather than a personal quality. Although some people exhibit resilience in a variety of situations and results, it cannot be assumed that the same traits would be protective in the face of all hazards. Furthermore, resilience is an interacting concept that can be deduced but not directly quantified as a logical characteristic of character. Resilience as an idea has a very different origin. According to the idea of resilience, people react to environmental threats in very different ways, whether they be psychological or physical (Grygorenko & Naydonova, 2023). Accordingly, resilience can be defined as a decreased susceptibility to environmental risk events, the ability to overcome stress or adversity, or a comparatively positive outcome despite hazardous situations (Sisto *et al.*, 2019). Because of this, resilience is viewed as an interacting notion, and its existence should be deduced from individual differences in outcomes among people who have experienced stressful situations (Sisto *et al.*, 2019).

The idea of resilience has caught the interest of practitioners in the human trafficking discourse who seek to strengthen individuals who have been trafficked and returned to their home communities because it highlights the importance of competence despite exposure to adversity. Both the concept of resilience and the mechanisms underlying it necessitate context-specific analysis and vary from society

or person to person. Adversity, a crucial term in the study of resilience, describes unfavourable situations and events that interfere with or endanger a system's ability to adapt and grow (Obradovic *et al.*, 2012). While some hardships are chronic, others are not. In the case of human trafficking, the real trafficking situation has negative impacts on an individual that disrupt or skew the adaptive processes and functions that support and safeguard an individual's development. Both the victims of human trafficking and their family members suffer from trauma. As a result, these circumstances necessitate fundamental adaptation mechanisms, such as the innate inclination to seek solace and shelter from others.

Competency, according to Windon & Lamo (2024), is the capacity of an individual or system to successfully adapt and fulfil cultural, contextual, and developmental expectations for a certain social structure, group, or individual. As a result of an adaptive system in a particular context, integrated organizations improve competence. When it comes to individual adaptation, modern concepts of competence encompass markers of what is referred to as positive internal adaptation, such as happiness, health, and well-being, as well as what is known as a cohesive sense of self. This also includes exterior measures of proficiency, such as academic performance, employment, adherence to the law, and interpersonal connections (Garcia *et al.*, 2021). The situated expression of competence independent of past or ongoing hardship is a component of resilience, even though specific phenotypes that suggest resilience can vary depending on the level of study, cultural context, or historical moment (Windle & Bennett, 2021).

In the lives of individuals, their families, and their communities, risk factors frequently accumulate and build up (Obradovic *et al.*, 2012). Resources and risks both directly affect adaptation. However, the consequences of these can be impacted by additional variables, or a particular combination of resources and hazards can interact. According to Lerner (2006), a dynamic system's interfaces, when interacting with a dynamic context, are what give it robustness. Many levels of analysis, from molecular to cultural, are considered in current research on resilience, which spans individuals' lifetimes. Families, communities, schools, and countries are among the several systems that are examined in this research (Cicchetti, 2013; Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013; Masten, 2013, 2014). For example,

in the case of human trafficking, there may be functional neural and stress response systems that enable a person who behaves and feels well despite being exposed to adversity to mobilize attention, behaviour, and emotion for successful adaptation. A community with basic functionality, a set of cultural norms and values, involved peers, family members, carers, and close-knit educational settings can all provide a sense of predictability for that person. The resilience theory’s main tenets, as previously mentioned, then provide a framework for analyzing the information acquired for this investigation.

The information acquired is consistent with the resilience hypothesis, which serves as the theoretical foundation for this investigation. Thus, the behaviours of traumatic event survivors are a response to the challenges that society presents to them following traumatic and transformative experiences. The resilience hypothesis goes into detail and captures this problem. Resilience, according to Rutter (2013), is not an easy process. It is important to consider resilience as a multifaceted process that encompasses one's family, community, and the larger society in which the community is situated. This resilience is prompted by forces outside of the person. According to this study, the external factors that influence and determine the victims' capacity for resilience are the community and society in which these women are repatriated. One could argue that victims of human trafficking are compelled to develop ways to be resilient in the face of the stigmatization and stereotyping of the community into which they are returned.

This response is one of several strategies that human trafficking victims use to create resilience, including developing “thick skin,” using internal resilience, purposefully distorting the current reality, creating “peer allies,” and temporarily altering their surroundings. The atmosphere that the victims are in here is what causes them to become resilient in the face of a hostile environment. From this vantage point, it can be argued that the problem of coping is consistent with how female victims of human trafficking are encouraged to cope by developing a variety of internal coping mechanisms, such as developing “thick skin,” which is the capacity to ignore negative forces from the outside world and concentrate on positive energy; using internal resilience, including through personal meditation and a prayerful life as a source of personal comfort; purposefully temporarily distorting

the reality that is already there; relying on the strength of “peer allies” who may have gone through the same thing; and temporarily altering the surroundings to deflect attention from the familiar community. According to the literature on resilience and the resilience theory, for a person or a group to be resilient, they must first be exposed to risks, stress, or shocks. Second, for a person to be resilient, there must be a disruption to the typical or initial order of things. It should be mentioned that “a System” must be able to bounce back from a shock to improve its chances of surviving.

6. Conclusion

In the environment of intense hostility, such as stigmatization and stereotyping by the people of the society where the victim was repatriated and reintegrated, human trafficking victims acquire psychosocial long-term resilience. Human trafficking victims experience interpersonal or internal struggles because of the stigmatization and stereotyping they endure after being trafficked. As a result, victims are prompted to come up with ways to strengthen their resilience to either remain in their current communities or move away and start over somewhere else. These strategies include developing “thick skin that theoretically and practically resists external pressures,” leveraging the strength of “peer allies,” temporarily purposefully distorting the world, and developing internal resilience. These tactics are crucial in and of themselves for helping victims of human trafficking build resilience over the long term. Even though individual victims use different tactics, which vary from person to person, all victims must confront and cope with the same whims that necessitate the use of these tactics, which are essential to their long-term resilience. The type of tactics that victims ultimately use to create long-term resilience is influenced by their personal circumstances, the characteristics of their friends and family, and the networks they are surrounded by and eventually form. All things considered, the case study also highlighted distinct human trafficking experiences, which is why special techniques for fostering long-term resilience were used. A survivor-centred, trauma-informed approach that recognises resilience as an innate inner force and places a high priority on comprehensive, long-term support

and the meaningful inclusion of survivors in anti-trafficking initiatives is necessary to advance knowledge of resilience in women who have survived human trafficking.

Ethics and consent

The necessary institutional review boards granted ethical approval before the commencement of the study. To confirm the study's design and ensure that it complies with ethical guidelines for human subjects' research, this approval procedure was required. Every participant received complete information on the study's objectives, the nature of their participation, and the possible risks and advantages of taking part. Participants were better equipped to decide whether to get engaged with this information. Participants received guarantees that their answers would be handled in the strictest confidence and that their names would not appear in any published conclusions. All personally identifiable information would be eliminated or coded to further protect their privacy, making it hard to link comments to participants. This study seeks to respect the highest ethical standards by getting ethics approval, guaranteeing informed consent, preserving participant anonymity, and placing a high priority on participant well-being.

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Competing interests:

We declare no conflict of interest.

Authors' contributions

The first author worked very hard toward the conception of the work, the second author contributed to the analysis and presentation of findings, while the third

author contributed to drafting the manuscript and applying the use of APA referencing style in the manuscript.

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