Building an Empirical Base to Address Sex Trafficking of Adult Women: A Scoping Review

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Introduction

Despite being a growing public health issue, sex trafficking remains understudied compared to other forms of abuse and interpersonal trauma. As the literature has expanded on interventions to support commercially sexually exploited youth[1], researchers and practitioners alike have called for more program evaluation and research into interventions for adults who are sex trafficked. Recognizing that marginalized women are at high risk of being targeted as victims of sex trafficking, there is an urgent need to build a research base that is trauma-informed, culturally-responsive, and survivor-centered to advance anti-trafficking efforts and minimize barriers to accessing services.

Objectives

The objectives of the present study are to:
- Characterize research methods that have successfully engaged women survivors of sex trafficking, given the methodological challenges in this field.
- Summarize what these empirical studies reveal about survivors' service needs, service utilization, and long-term outcomes.

Method

A scoping review was conducted to characterize the research methods used in empirical studies with women survivors of sex trafficking.
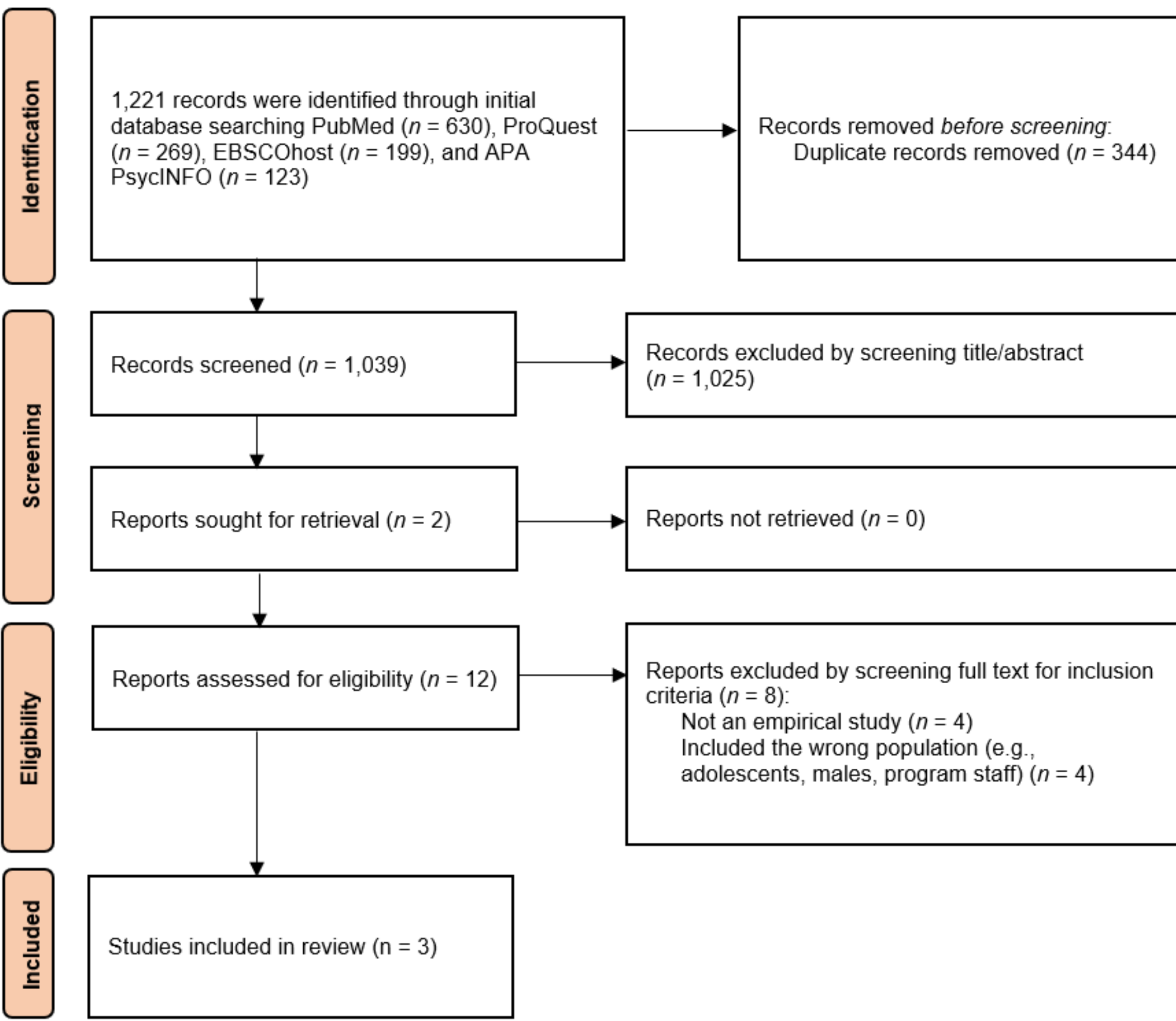
Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria
- Inclusion Parameters: Peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2014 and December 2024, focused on sex trafficking of adult women (18 and older), describing interventions conducted in the United States and published in English.

- Exclusion Parameters: Peer-reviewed journal articles conducted outside of the United States, studies focused on labor trafficking, interventions targeting children, adolescents, youth, or males (regardless of age), systematic or scoping reviews, and theoretical papers without intervention data.

Screening & Selection of Studies
- To guide the search, four academic databases were used with the following search terms: "sex traffick*," "intervention," "service," "program," "treatment," "therap*," "best practices," or "evidence-based."

- All articles were imported to Rayyan. An initial pool of articles were screened, after removing duplicates, to arrive at a subset of peer-reviewed articles that met the inclusion criteria for the scoping review.
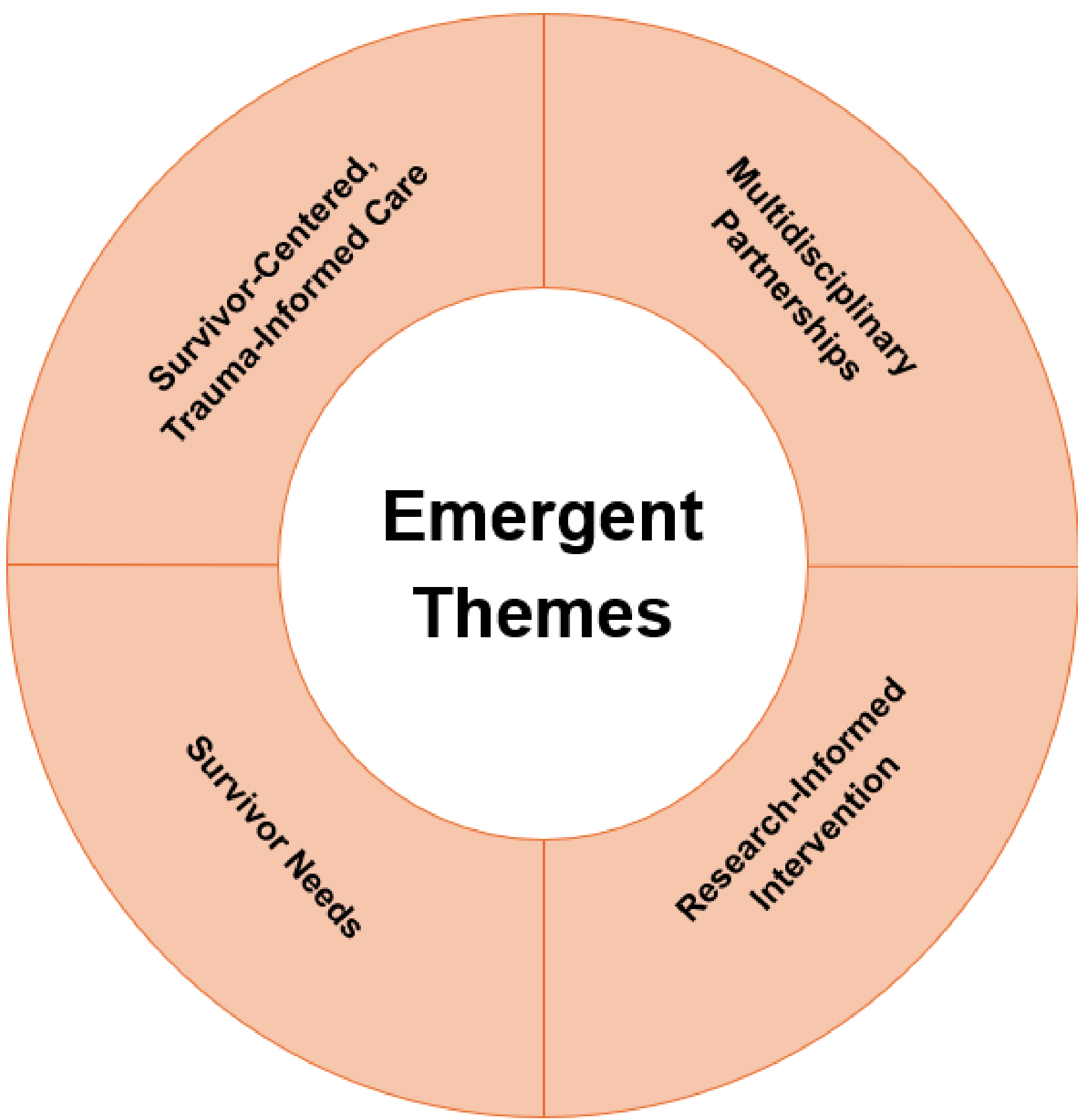
Data Extraction & Charting the Data: Data from each of the 12 articles were extracted in Excel independently by two reviewers and a consensus was reached via discussion. Two of the included articles were based on the same survivor-centered intervention but focused on different research objectives. Data extraction was completed for both articles. Findings from the extracted studies that met the full criteria ($n = 3$) were synthesized into themes.

Results

PRISMA Flow Diagram

Author (Year)	Intervention/Program	Aim/Objective	Study Design/Method	Outcomes/Key Findings
Chen et al. (2023)	EMPOWER (Engage, Motivate, Protect, Organize, Self-Worth, Educate, Respect) Center – a trauma-informed obstetric and gynecologic service to victims of sexual- and gender-based violence	To describe sex trafficking experiences and explore vulnerabilities to re-trafficking in an urban, majority immigrant, population.	Qualitative retrospective chart review via electronic medical records; women patients ($N = 87$) with a history of sex trafficking; evaluated at the EMPOWER Clinic from February 2013 – January 2021	- The most common barriers to escaping "The Life" was threat of violence (28.7%) and financial dependence (19.5%) - The prevalence of re-trafficking was high with 23% of patients being trafficked twice and others three times (3.5%). - Patients who have been re-trafficked were most likely to have a history of being undocumented and experience adverse childhood experiences (ACEs – physical and sexual abuse and living with non-caregiver family members.
Jani (2018)	Ethno-theatre and Narrative Therapy	To describe a therapeutic model intersecting an ethno-theatrical approach with narrative therapy for human trafficking survivors who were trafficked as minors to assess its impact of witnessing lived experience narrated by trained actors.	Qualitative thematic analysis; two observers recorded the semiotic details of survivors followed by a focus group ($N=8$) with the audience and follow-up discussion with therapists.	- Emerging themes: Integrating ethno-theatre in interventions with trafficking survivors helps in externalizing the problem and (2) it touches an unconscious cord where catharsis takes place through indirect association
Munsey et al. (2018)	GenerateHope	To examine the GenerateHope residential program and provide early outcome results for residents living at the program between 6-12 months	Quantitative retrospective review via structured-report measures to improve participant's ($N = 38$) overall well-being: Depression (HAM-D), PTSD (PCL-C), and Self-Esteem (RSES); evaluation period from April 2014 – February 2017	- Significant changes in symptoms of depression (HAM-D), PTSD (PCL-C), and low confidence (RSES). Depressive symptoms decreased, PTSD symptoms decreased, and self-confidence substantially increased

Discussion

The continued lack of survivor-centered, trauma-informed care tailored to trafficked women, coupled with scant research over the past decade, raises concern. This scoping review sheds light on a significant gap that limits the opportunity to engage in research-informed programming so that women survivors can receive better care.

The findings of this review suggest that:
- With limited evidence-based interventions and survivor-led initiatives, interventions/programs/services may be causing more harm due to limited evaluative practices to know what is efficacious, resulting in ineffective care.
- Advanced research-informed programming, including multidisciplinary partnerships, is needed to address the biopsychosocial needs of women survivors who may not have had their needs properly met.
- There is an urgent need for survivors to receive greater financial support, to prevent dependence, and fair compensation for their advocacy expertise.

Implications & Recommendations

Implications for Research-Informed Programming & Practice
- Survivor-tailored programs should focus on both crisis intervention and long-term care for survivors, as both services are essential to their holistic needs.
- Service providers should adopt more culturally-responsive treatment interventions for women survivors with marginalized backgrounds.

Future Directions
- Increase research-informed programming to assess short- and long-term outcomes to provide better trauma-informed care and supportive interventions for women directly impacted by sex trafficking.
- Prioritize survivor-centered interventions/services that address the specific immediate and long-term needs of women.
- Explore more assessment-based measures tailored to survivors' symptomatology to better support their complex needs.

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