

ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine

Book Review by Jessica Collier

For

**Art Therapy Treatment with Sex Trafficking Survivors:
Facilitating Empowerment, Recovery and Hope.**

Edited by

Mary K. Kometiani (2020)

New York, Oxen: Routledge. ISBN 978-1-138-60227-4

ISSN: 2044-7221

Date of Publication: 4 April 2023

Citation: Collier, J. (2023) *Book Review: Art Therapy Treatment with Sex Trafficking Survivors: Facilitating Empowerment, Recovery and Hope*. ATOL: Art Therapy OnLine 13 (1), DOI 10.25602/GOLD.atol.v13i1.1700



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With the appalling military invasion of Ukraine by Vladimir Putin, foremost in my mind when reading this important book was the inevitable connection between conflict, exploitation and the use of rape as a weapon. Increasingly, reports are revealing the danger of abuse and assault that women and children are subject to when exposed to war and violence. Refugees fleeing military hostilities become significantly more vulnerable to exploitation by traffickers. This applies especially to women who are trafficked for sex when war is raging, but the risk increases merely with the presence of any military force (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2003). The systemic and structural use of violence against women is inherent in a patriarchal society and results in women and children being victimised and their bodies used for profit in huge numbers globally.

Art Therapy Treatment with Sex Trafficking Survivors: Facilitating Empowerment, Recovery and Hope is edited by experienced art therapist Mary K. Komatiani and covers work undertaken with this complex population by art therapists, social activists and psychologists in North America, Nepal and India. The book is divided into three parts.

The first of these seeks to offer a foundation to this escalating crime of coercion and physical violence and begins with a description of human sex trafficking as a “destructive pandemic” and a “heinous global crime”. This expressive rhetoric sets the stage for a powerful introductory chapter in which Komatiani defines sex trafficking, clarifies her use of language and outlines the horrifying statistics worldwide. Millions of, mostly female, individuals are exploited; one in four of whom are children, sometimes sold into slavery by their own families. Komatiani appreciates the subject of sex trafficking is challenging to write about in a way that can be digested and not leave the reader feeling hopeless. From the start she encourages a stance of optimism and suggests that while the scale of the human trauma is incalculable, there is an opportunity for clinicians to make a difference through work with women, children, men and gender-variant people who need support. Chapter 2, also written by the editor, explores the various strategies used by traffickers to exploit vulnerable individuals and communities and the consequences suffered by their victims. Tactics and experiences are described,

including a short section on the ruinous physical effects to survivors. Alongside many details of inhuman behaviour is an example of a woman who estimates she had been raped 43,200 times while being trafficked. Unsurprisingly, Kometiani connects the destructive physiological and psychological repercussions with a deep sense of shame and humiliation experienced by the victims and reports that ultimately, many individuals of sexual exploitation in captivity may be murdered by the traffickers or decide to commit suicide. This writing is dense and demanding, but Kotemiani asserts that it is fundamental that the suffering of “unspeakable” injustices is fully comprehended so as to usefully offer an opportunity for recovery.

Chapters 3 is co-authored with Serena R. Coleman. Following another short overview of those vulnerable people who are most at risk, which includes an important section on LGBTQ+ experience, the book moves into a more clinical realm, offering recommendations for using art therapy with survivors of sex trafficking and related issues around substance misuse and homelessness. Coleman and Cynthia Wilson have collaborated on chapter 4 which also offers recommendations for working with individuals affected by sex trafficking. This chapter starts with an author preface in which they frame their work in terms of psycho-education, advocacy and the importance of communication and partnering with multiple service providers. Both authors are art therapists trained and working in North America and the differences in therapeutic styles across the Atlantic are apparent. The clinical examples and recommendations in this chapter, and to some extent throughout the book, focus on modalities of therapy that do not consider psychoanalytic concepts such as unconscious enactments, projection or transference; although these are alluded to as vicarious trauma. Instead, the art therapy practice detailed here, while naming significant principles including boundaries, safety and the necessity of understanding one’s own bias and the importance of cultural humility, describes models in which the therapist directs the client. There is also an emphasis on interventions the authors believe work well in conjunction with art therapy. For example, Eye Movement and Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR), Craniosacral Therapy, Mindfulness, and Focusing Oriented Art Therapy® - a therapy with a Registered Trademark. Collaborating with other professions and clinicians is imperative to ensure practitioners work safely and that good enough care is offered to traumatised individuals, and the attention on trauma

informed therapies throughout the book is welcome. Nevertheless, in my experience, arts therapists internationally are increasingly being made to feel that without additional training in such psychological techniques as EMDR, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, or many other approaches that require manualised direction, they are not well equipped enough to work with complex individuals. My concern here is that when additional training needs are driven, at least in part, by the market the deceptively simple, yet exceptionally difficult art of being alongside, listening and “wit(h)nessing” (Pollock, 2010), brought by experienced art therapists to traumatised patients, becomes slowly eroded in favour of action and instruction. Equally, if we consider context as everything, and this is not a criticism of the important healing work presented in the book, I did wonder if levels of trauma experienced by survivors of sex trafficking might make it impossible to be creatively, quietly and thoughtfully alongside another. In this regard while reading the text I found myself wondering what would emerge for the women if the therapists paused for a moment.

The second part of the book brings theory into practice with detailed clinical case studies recounting work with trafficked women in the North American Mid-West, with two young brothers who have been victims of sex trafficking in middle-class America, and innovative projects with sex trafficking survivors in South Asia. Kometiani writes in Chapter 5 about the problems of trafficking in Ohio which is exacerbated by the devastating effects of poverty, unemployment and the opioid crisis. There is some repetition here, but the case material highlights how important it is for the therapist to create a protected environment to allow opportunities for the women to build supportive relationships and connect with their peers. This chapter concludes with a clear list of recommendations for best practice. In Chapter 6, Chris Drosdick writes about art therapy with young male victims. This case study gives a detailed background to the abuse and offers a contrasting social narrative to what has come before. Once again, a broad range of therapy models are brought into the treatment of the young brothers, with a focus on the trauma, guilt and shame felt by them. Drosnick is also usefully explicit about the possibility of burn-out for the therapist when undertaking such disturbing work, and includes her attempts to look after herself and her own self-care image making.

While prejudiced cultural norms are noted throughout the book, chapters 7 and 8 offer a deeper look into the endemic misogyny embedded in Indian and Nepali society and the devastating and tragic consequences for women and their daughters. This context leaves them vulnerable to HIV infection, torture, disfigurement and domestic violence due, in part, to deeply rooted prejudices with broad origins in the caste system, debt bondage, sex tourism, myths around the impurity of menstruating bodies, ritual honour killings, and even karmic debt. In chapter 7, Smita Singh and Mary K Kometiani identify India as a primary source, transit and destination country for commercial sex exploitation in Asia. Detailing yet more brutal statistics, they describe the Mahima Homes throughout Kolkota. These are refuges that offer vocational training, education, legal and medical advice, and a wide range of therapies to women and children to support them in leaving the sex trade. Again, the case studies bring the importance of this work to the fore and achieve a balance of leaving the reader feeling moved, disturbed and hopeful. Chapter 8, written by Atira L. Tan and Tiffany M. Moore emphasises sex trafficking as an aspect of gender-based violence. They describe the inhuman custom of *gupha basne*, whereby menstruating women are isolated without adequate shelter or nourishment, sometimes resulting in malnutrition, disease, assault or death. In this moving chapter the authors describe another broad programme of diverse therapeutic modalities using a phenomenological stance, focused on a number of key themes beginning with what it means to be a Nepali woman.

The third and final part of the book consists of two chapters. Chapter 9, co-authored by Kathryn Farmer and Leigha Shoup, is concerned with vicarious trauma experienced by advocates working with sex trafficking survivors. The authors describe their research exploring the high rates of staff turnover in this field and the necessity for self-care and life balance. Their interviews with advocates will resonate with anyone who has worked with individuals who have been traumatised and their resulting shame. Among others, it includes sections on the importance of intentional practice; meaning purposeful self-care, and the value of maintaining realistic expectations about what can be achieved, as well as the essential requirement for team work and clinical supervision. Kometiani's concluding chapter re-examines the challenges and looks to the future. She lists the hinderances to identifying victims, the barriers for engagement and reiterates the themes that have been identified

throughout the book, highlighting shame once again as integral to the experience of sex trafficking survivors and pleading that we take action to support them.

Throughout this book, the journeys and stories of sex trafficked people are considered through a social prism. Many sociological reasons are given for the continued and evolving sex trade, including perpetrator greed, poverty, political instability and natural disasters. Gender inequality is taken as the global status quo. Given that the statistics quoted tell us that 99% of victims of sexual exploitation are female, I would have valued more analysis of the systemic and structural misogyny - and internalised misogyny - underlying women's vulnerability and seemingly inherent lack of self-worth in the United States, in addition to the strong accounts from India and Nepal. For example, the book identifies that previous experience of sexual abuse is the strongest predictor for trafficking in adolescence in the United States, from which we can infer that multiple layers of misogynistic sexual abuse must be inherent in that society. With this in mind, the narrative that sex trafficking "... is a crime of people who have lost their moral sense" seems simplistic. A chapter including therapy with a perpetrator of sex trafficking would have added an important dimension to help us understand how and why this moral sense has been lost.

The title of this book is something of a misnomer, as it advocates for holistic treatment programmes, including creative therapies, and emphasises clearly that a range of services and professional experience for victims is paramount in meeting their psychological and emotional needs. Nevertheless, *Art Therapy Treatment with Sex Trafficking Survivors: Facilitating Empowerment, Recovery and Hope* is a necessary, challenging and ultimately optimistic book. It offers affecting case studies, thought-provoking facts, shocking statistical information and practical advice written by inspiring and compassionate individuals.

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About the author

Jessica Collier is an art psychotherapist and clinical supervisor working for the NHS with women in prison in the UK and in private practice. She is co-convenor of the Forensic Arts Therapies Advisory Group. Jessica has taught, lectured and published widely on forensic art psychotherapy including as the co-editor of *The End of Sentence: Psychotherapy with Female Offenders*, *Intersectionality in the Arts Psychotherapies* and the *International Journal of Forensic Psychotherapy*. Jessica is currently completing her PhD at the University of Warwick. Her research offers an interdisciplinary dialogue between feminist criminology and art psychotherapy to examine how images made by women in art psychotherapy contribute to understandings of the complex construction and self-perception of gendered identities in prison.