

## **TACKLING THE PERNICIOUS ISSUE OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING THROUGH A SYSTEMS THEORY APPROACH**

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### **Abstract**

Human trafficking is a pernicious issue that requires a holistic systems approach to eradicate it. Human trafficking operates in an incredibly complex system incorporating various systems of agents including economic, cultural, systemic, and institutional factors that contribute to the cycle of violence. To understand this social policy issue, a systems theory approach was used to navigate this complex issue, integrating elements, interactions, functions, and leverage opportunities. The EMC Change Systems Theory functioned as a framework to articulate the issue, map the system, identify leverage points and plan/implement change. After the discovery phase, a four stage change process was proposed based on this theory. This call for a holistic systemic examination of human trafficking is an important foundational step. It is vital to understand the interconnected set of elements, the feedback loops and leverage points to be able to decipher between the symptom vs root cause of human trafficking.

This detailed intervention plan in addressing human trafficking is based on systems thinking. The comprehensive analysis included an examination of the complex issue of human trafficking, a mapping of the whole system based on the deconstruction of the Integrated Political Bioecological model, the identification of leverage points via an iceberg model and analysis and proposal for the implementation of the intervention. The planning and implementation change proposal was systematically laid out via the Four-Stage Change Process. The proposed name of this social policy intervention program is the Four Stage Change Process to Eradicate Human Trafficking through the Leverage Point of Awareness. Although this issue is extremely complex, there is the need for change and the group can make a significant difference. The power lies in the collaborative work based on this systems approach.

### **Keywords**

Human trafficking, EMC Change Systems Theory, Holistic systems approach, Intervention, Awareness

### **1| Introduction**

Human trafficking is a pernicious issue that requires a holistic systems approach to eradicate it. Currently, around 25 million people are trafficked worldwide (Polaris, 2025). Children account for 35% of all victims (ICAT, 2024). Human trafficking has detrimental effects on children physically, cognitively, socioemotionally and neurocognitively ((Creeden, 2009; Fergusson et al., 2008). Human trafficking operates in an incredibly complex system incorporating various systems of agents including economic, cultural, systemic and institutional factors that contribute to the cycle of violence (ILO, 2022; Chung, 2009; Collins, 2014; UNODC, 2022). To understand this social policy issue, a systems theory approach will be used to navigate this complex issue, integrating elements, interactions, functions, and leverage opportunities.

The EMC Change Systems Theory will be used as a framework to articulate the issue, map the system, identify leverage points, and plan/implement change. After the discovery phase, a four stage change process will be proposed based on this theory. It is imperative to first understand the whole system before trying to fix it (Stroh, 2015). This call for a holistic systemic examination of human trafficking is an important foundational step. It is vital to understand the interconnected set of elements, the feedback loops and

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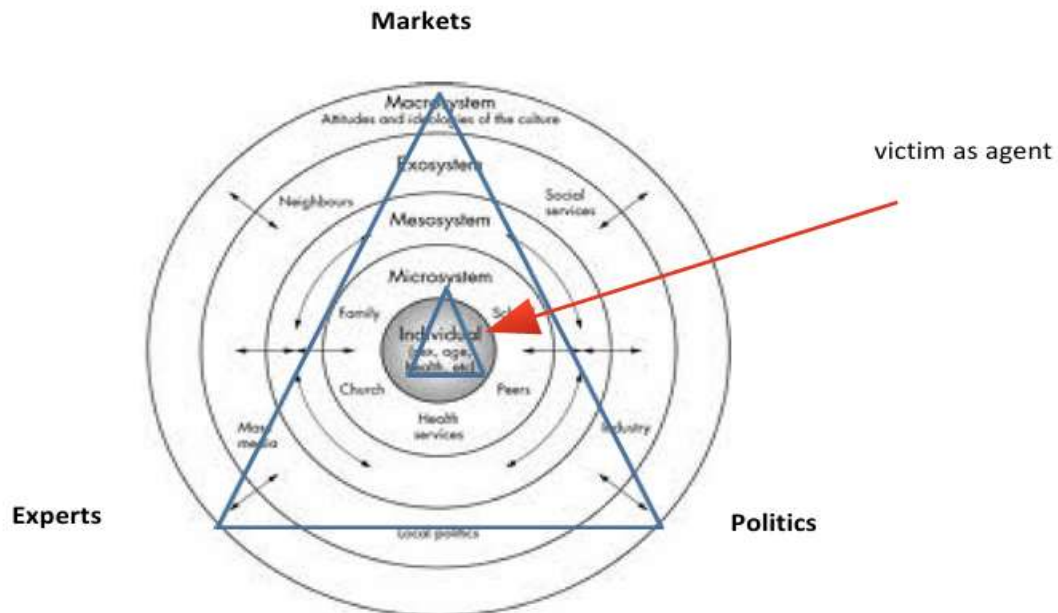
leverage points to be able to decipher between the symptom vs root cause (Stroh, 2015) of human trafficking.

This paper is a conceptual analysis of the systems theory approach, developed in response to growing theoretical and practical interest in eradicating human trafficking. Rather than presenting empirical findings, the paper draws upon existing literature and theoretical frameworks to examine the interdependent relationships within this complex system and propose a leverage-based intervention plan based on the Four Stage Change Process model. The aim is to synthesize current perspectives, identify theoretical gaps, and offer a new conceptual analysis that advances understanding of tackling human trafficking through a systems theory approach. By situating the discussion within the EMC Change Systems Theory and examining the elements through the Integrated Political Bioecological Model, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of human trafficking, with implications for future research and practice.

## 2| Theoretical Foundations

To examine the issue, the Integrated Political Bioecological Theory (Kolesnikov, 2015) will be deconstructed to understand the reasons why human trafficking happens, who is responsible and how to address it. This holistic framework was created to understand the pernicious issue of human trafficking, since then it has been used to study the awareness level of human trafficking at a community college. This framework will be used to understand the elements, interactions, functions and leverage points in the complex system of human trafficking. The Integrated Political Bioecological theory consists of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecology Model of human development, Munger's Tensions Between Policy Makers and the Activity Theory. The Integrated Political Bioecological theoretical framework

*“shows how policy makers can influence the development of a child. Not only is this influence at the macrolevel but also the effects of its policies trickle down through all of the levels. The child's development happens through the process person-context-time model. These steps are integrated in this model as inert factors, interactions and variables that provide for change and development” (Kolesnikov, 2015, p.20)*



**Figure 1: The Integrated Political Bioecological Theory**

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## **2.1| Elements**

There are disputes among researchers and public policy makers on who is responsible for eradicating this issue. Over the years, it has become clear that a collective approach is needed. This collaborative approach has led to a better understanding of the elements in this complex system. This issue is so complex but some of the main elements are the black market, criminal networks, victims, families of victims, policy makers, researchers, social/political/cultural institutions, cultural norms and the elements in the ecological system including health services, schools, social services, employment opportunities and more.

The black market and criminal networks are an extremely profitable business system that is difficult to enforce. Munger's Tensions Between Policy Makers theory shows the interdependent relationship between markets (the black market/criminal networks), the experts (researchers) and politics (policy makers). This tension between markets, experts and politics exemplifies the evasive and influential role of criminal networks/the black market. In this theory, we can see the elements and the interactions between them. Later on, the interactions and leverage points will be examined.

Policy makers and researchers also play a vital role in addressing human trafficking. The lack of policies or insufficient enforcement protocols allows for the markets to be uncontrolled and vice versa. If there are strong political structures that rely on effective research, leverage points can be more effectively activated to enforce the black market/criminal networks.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model elucidates the impact of systems on a child's development and trajectory in life. This is also mediated by the Activity Theory which purports the significance of the agency of the child and how it affects the vulnerability for victimization. The systems consist of the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem and the chronosystem. Within this framework, we can not only see the elements but also the interactions and possible leverage points. The elements include but are not limited to the child, the family, the schools, the community, peers, industry, social services, politics and attitudes and cultural norms.

## **2.2| Mapping of the System**

To get a glimpse of this complex, interdependent and difficult to decipher system, a system map has been developed based on the Integrated Political Bioecological theory.



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more welcoming is to remove policy institutions and enforcement practices that would normally apprehend johns aka the purchasers of sex trafficking. In these areas, the criminal network and black market are intertwined with governmental permissions that erode the safety and wellbeing of marginalized communities.

Political institutions and enforcement agencies are vital for the eradication of human trafficking however they are not always built with the mechanisms to support such a mission (Wilson et al., 2006; Wooditch, 2012). An example of this is the creation of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000 and its inability to actually enforce state legislation and enforcement. Another issue is the difficulty in apprehending the perpetrators, pimps and the criminal network compared to the victims.

Social institutions such as access to education, health care, unemployment/disability benefits, nutrition resources, community support and rehabilitation services play a significant role in the eradication of human trafficking (Guinn & Steglich, 2003; Roby, 2005). An example is when the communities in which victims live, do not have educational institutions. A lack of education not only limits individuals access to resources and economic stability, but it also prevents the transmission of important awareness information on the existence of human trafficking itself.

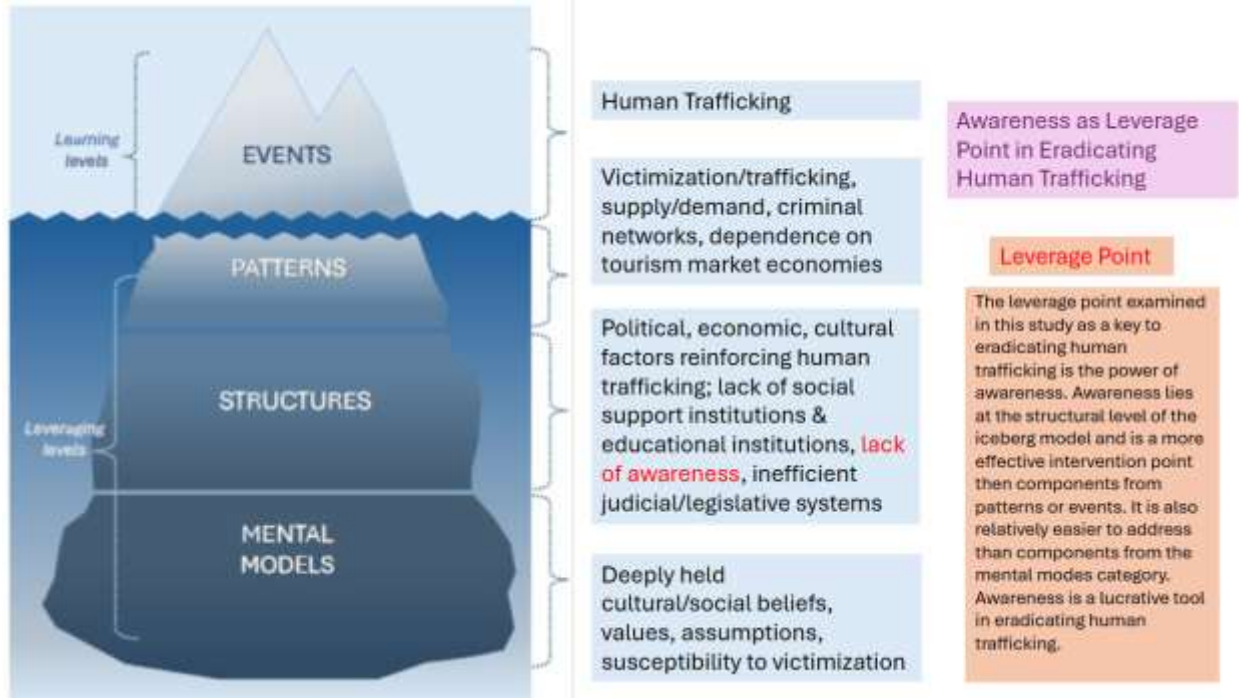
### **3| Analysis**

#### **3.1| Leverage points**

Education and awareness can play a pivotal role in eradicating and preventing human trafficking (Lemke, 2018; Savoia et al., 2024). For example, educating teenagers about the signs of trafficking can help them navigate away from it. It is also important to bring awareness to other actors like parents, teachers, community members, and social workers.

Research conducted at a local community college showed discrepancies between the knowledge and awareness level of signs of human trafficking between students and faculty/classified staff (Kolesnikov, 2019). This study found it imperative to focus on the issue of awareness as a preventative tool. Awareness can serve as an important leverage point in bridging the gap of knowledge and preventing human trafficking.

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**Exhibit 3.** Leverage Points.

The leverage point examined in this study as a key to eradicating human trafficking is the power of awareness. Awareness lies at the structural level of the iceberg model and is a more effective intervention point than components from patterns or events. It is also relatively easier to address than components from the mental modes category. Awareness is a lucrative tool in eradicating human trafficking. This leverage tool will be used as the core strategy of planning and implementing change design. This design will be elucidated via Stroh (2015) Four Stage Change Process.

### 3.2| Four Stage Change Process

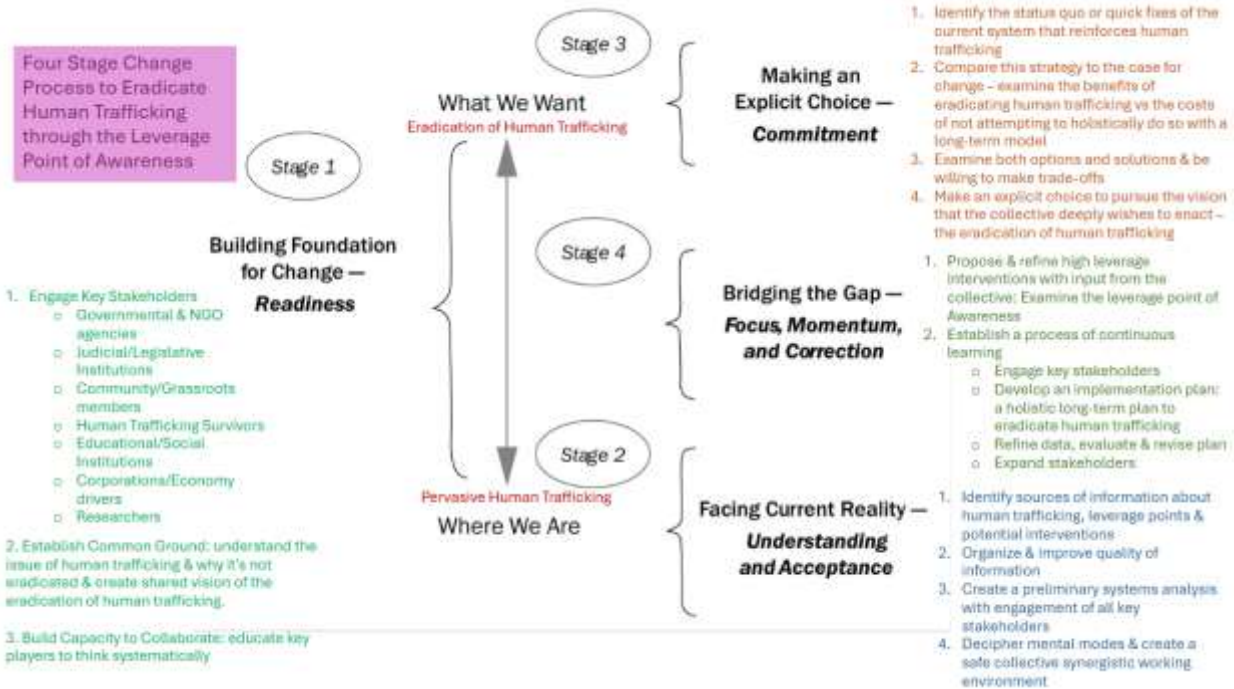
A holistic approach is necessary to address human trafficking, why it happens, who is susceptible and how to prevent it (Kolesnikov, 2015). Systems theory calls for a holistic approach in not only understanding the whole system but in including the voices of all entities as a collective in understanding issues and creating systemic interventions (Stroh, 2015). The issue of human trafficking requires the application of such a model. The four-stage change process is composed of the following steps:

*“Build a foundation for change and affirm their readiness for change, clarify current reality at all levels of the iceberg and accept their respective responsibilities for creating it, make an explicit choice in favor of the aspiration they espouse and begin to bridge the gap by focusing on high-leverage interventions, engaging additional stakeholders, and learning from experience” (Stroh, 2015, p.74)*

The four-stage change process is mapped below to visually represent the components of the Four Stage Change Process to Eradicate Human Trafficking through the Leverage Point of Awareness.

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**Exhibit 4.** Four Stage Process to Eradicate Human Trafficking through the Leverage Point of Awareness



**Stage 1 – Building Foundation for Change: Readiness.** The purpose of this stage is to create a strong foundation for sustainable and optimal change. It’s vital to establish creative tension and a “shared vision, mission, set of values and shared understanding” (Stroh, 2015, p. 73). The relevant stakeholders for this social change process are: Governmental & NGO agencies, Judicial/Legislative Institutions, Community/Grassroots members, Human Trafficking Survivors, Educational/Social Institutions, Corporations/Economy drivers and Researchers.

The aim will also be to establish common ground which is to understand the issue of human trafficking & why it's not eradicated and to create shared vision of the eradication of human trafficking. The final goal of this phase is to build capacity to collaborate when key players will be taught how to think systematically.

**Stage 2 – Facing Current Reality: Understanding and Acceptance.** The main purpose of this phase will be to help the collective fully understand the scope of the current reality of human trafficking. Furthermore, the goal will be to not only understand the severity and complexity of human trafficking but to create a shared understanding and to empower the constituents with the role of their responsibilities (Stroh, 2015).

The tasks of this phase will be to identify sources of information about human trafficking, leverage points & potential interventions, organize & improve quality of information, create a preliminary systems analysis with engagement of all key stakeholders and to decipher mental modes & create a safe collective synergistic working environment. This phase will be built on the strong foundation of phase 1.

**Stage 3 – Making an Explicit Choice: Commitment.** The aim of this phase is to empower the collective to make an explicit choice about their ultimate goal of eradicating human trafficking. This is an important step to take after understanding the complexity and difficulty of this phase and previous failed quick fixes.

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The goal is to allow for the collective to “consciously commit to their highest aspiration with full awareness of the costs” (Stroh, 2015, p. 76).

The tasks of this phase include to identify the status quo or quick fixes of the current system that reinforces human trafficking, compare this strategy to the case for change – examine the benefits of eradicating human trafficking vs the costs of not attempting to holistically do so with a long-term model, examine both options and solutions & be willing to make trade-offs and to make an explicit choice to pursue the vision that the collective deeply wishes to enact – the eradication of human trafficking.

**Stage 4 – Bridging the Gap: Focus, Momentum and Correction.** This final stage aims to help the collective bridge the divide between what they care about: eradicating human trafficking and where they are now: evasive human trafficking. Furthermore, the purpose is to identify leverage points for successful interventions and to create a process for expanded engagement and continuous learning (Stroh, 2015).

The component of this phase are to propose & refine high leverage interventions with input from the collective: examine the leverage point of awareness, Establish a process of continuous learning, engage key stakeholders, develop an implementation plan: a holistic long-term plan to eradicate human trafficking, refine data, evaluate & revise plan and to expand stakeholders.

### 4| Discussion

This proposed Four Stage Change Process to Eradicate Human Trafficking through the Leverage Point of Awareness is recommended as an approach to eradicate human trafficking. Although the research based preemptive leverage point is Awareness, when the collective is in this process, they will reexamine the validity of this leverage point and decipher if other leverage points will lead to more sustainable and effective change.

This process is not always linear (Stroh, 2015) and the constituents are encouraged to not give up. That is why creating a strong foundation will be vital in ensuring the success of this evasive and complex social issue. Finally, the collective must be prepared for unexpected consequences and build it into the plan. This conceptual paper examined the potential to eradicate human trafficking through the integration of the systems theory approach. The inclusion of a practical policy advocacy approach can be seen as a limitation as it lacks empirical data. Further research is recommended to elucidate the validity of this theoretical integration into action-based research.

### 5| Conclusion

This detailed intervention plan in addressing human trafficking is based on systems thinking. The comprehensive analysis included an examination of the complex issue of human trafficking, a mapping of the whole system based on the deconstruction of the Integrated Political Bioecological model, the identification of leverage points via an iceberg model and analysis and proposal for the implementation of the intervention.

The planning and implementation change proposal was systematically laid out via Stroh (2015) Four-Stage Change Process. The proposed name of this social policy intervention program is the Four Stage Change Process to Eradicate Human Trafficking through the Leverage Point of Awareness. Although this issue is extremely complex, there is the need for change and the group can make a significant difference. This conceptual analysis sets the groundwork for future empirical action-based research into this field.

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