



Co-funded by the
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ESWOCHY

Outreach social work with youth victims of human trafficking in Italy: an intersectional approach.

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ISCTE- University Institute of Lisbon, 2023



ABSTRACT

This study uses a qualitative approach to capture the personal experiences of five former victims of international human trafficking in the city of Verona (Italy), who were sexually exploited during their teenage years and their young adult lives.

The aim of the research was to explore the intersecting factors that prevent victims of sexual exploitation from seeking help and turning to services and therefore define the implications and needs for social work interventions, while suggesting possible directions for future research. Along with the analysis related to preventing help seeking factors, attention was also paid to the dynamics of violence inherent in the condition of victimization, and vulnerabilities prior to trafficking.

With the aim of contribute to the development and implementation of social work outreach activities to reduce human trafficking victimization, it has been necessary to consider the intersectional approach, which considers the multiplicity and intersectionality of factors such as gender, nationality, age, socioeconomic status; that was found to contribute to the very core of vulnerability to human trafficking and are analyzed within this context as structures of inequality and power relations.

This study solely focuses on victims of sexual exploitation, as it turned out to be the most prevalent type of human trafficking in the world, mostly involving women and children. Incorporating evidence from structured interviews with five former sex trafficking victims and with two outreach workers, this study provided better insights into the underlying motivations that prevent victims of sexual exploitation from seeking help and turning to organizations that can help them.

Intersectional approach allowed not only to proceed methodologically, but also to thoroughly understand the multidimensionality of the subject matter. The results further highlighted that both the vulnerability elements that initially lead to victimization and the gender based violence dynamics present at the time of sexual exploitation were interrelated and were at the root of victims of sexual exploitation refusal for help. Finally, useful insights were revealed for the improvement of social services working with victims of sex trafficking, particularly with regard to micro and mezzo social work.

KEYWORDS

Intersectionality, Gender sensitivity, Human trafficking, Sexual exploitation, Outreach social work, Gender Based Violence.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

OSCE: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

UNODC: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

GBV: Gender Based Violence

LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus

AVAWA: Australian Women Against Violence Alliance

PRC: People's Republic of China

ASGI: Associazione per gli Studi Giuridici per l'Immigrazione (Association for Immigration Legal Studies)

ICAT: Inter-Agency Coordination Group Against Trafficking in Persons

IOM: International Organization for Migration

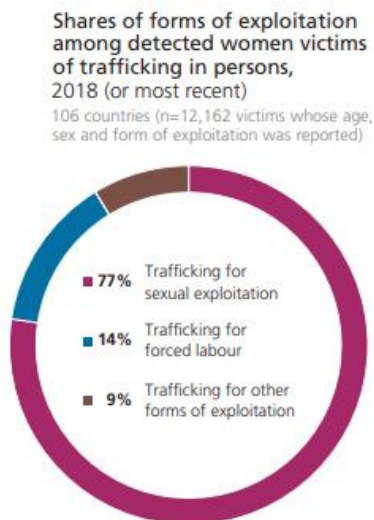
UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

DMST: Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking

RTS: Rape Trauma Syndrome

Introduction

Human trafficking is a type of modern-day slavery in which individuals are recruited or transported into another country without their consent. Human trafficking provides financial gain to the traffickers. (Wooditch, Stevenson, Leonard, 2021) Lucrative activities for traffickers are: sexual exploitation, forced labor, domestic servitude, forced criminal activity, removal of organs, begging, forced marriages, baby selling, and other mixed forms of exploitation. (UNODC, 2020) According to the UNODC Report (2020), female victims continue to be the most affected by trafficking in persons: for every 10 victims, 5 are women and 2 are girls, with most of the victimized children appearing to be trafficked for sexual exploitation, usually in high-income countries. (UNODC, 2020) Among all forms of trafficking in persons, the most prevalent appears to be for sexual exploitation purpose: 77% of women and 72% of girls. While 66% of boys are recruited for forced labor instead. (UNODC, 2020)



Source: UNODC elaboration of national data.

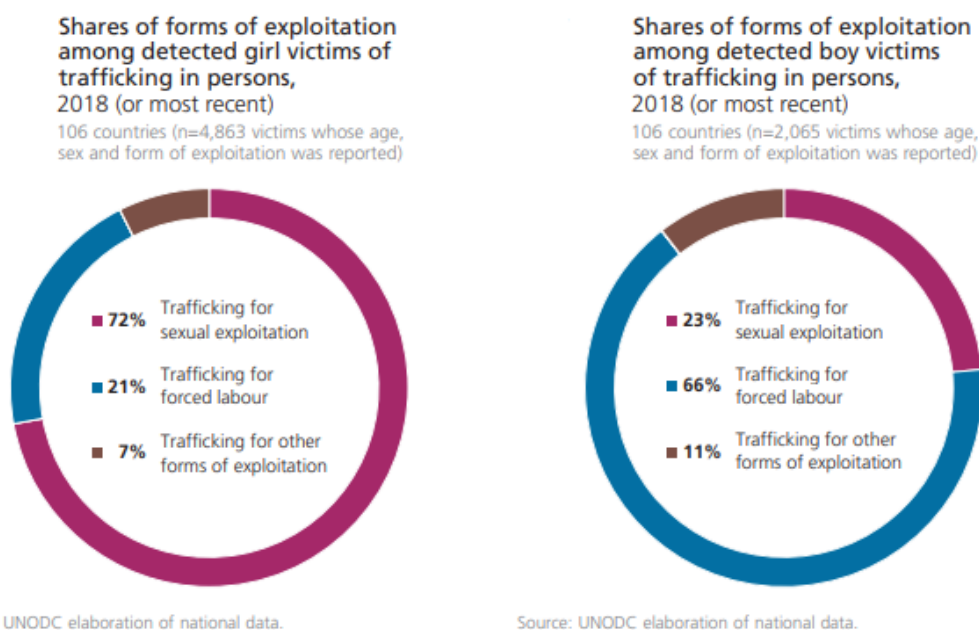


Figure 1: Shares of forms of exploitation. (UNODC,2020)

As the chart illustrates, it is crystal clear that not only is sexual exploitation the most prevalent mode of human trafficking, but that women are the gender most involved in human trafficking. Not only women are most involved as human trafficking victims, but women trafficking women is in fact commonplace in several regions of the world, with cases where the victim continues to be exploited by the trafficker while simultaneously being involved in the exploitation of another victim. (Chatzis, 2020)

In line with the human trafficking OSCE report (2021), which says: “*in order to better understand how and why participating States should apply gender-sensitive approaches to prevention programming, it is important to explore how gender is intertwined with the identification of various prevention needs*”, this study will also expand this question. The use of gender and intersectional lens allows in fact a continuum line to be drawn between gender inequalities, cultural apparatuses, socioeconomic status, and human trafficking, which is indispensable for the implementation of effective interventions focused on human trafficking.

Given the data mentioned above, it is in fact necessary to consider the phenomenon of human trafficking from an intersectional perspective. While research has largely addressed the causes, and the risk factors to human trafficking, there has been less focus on analyzing the factors that keep the human trafficking victim in the exploitative

situation, from a gender and intersectional perspective. Intersectionality is in fact a modern concept, in some ways remained alien to the social work field for a long time. The novelty brought by this study is in fact particularly revealed in relation to the application of the intersectional approach to the area of implementing and improving outreach activities with victims of sex trafficking.

The intersectional social work approach, which takes into account the multiplicity and intersectionality of factors such as gender, nationality, age, and socioeconomic status; that contribute to the very core of vulnerability to human trafficking and are analyzed within this context as structures of inequality and oppression, must be taken into consideration in order to help with the development and implementation of social work interventions aimed to reduce victimization from human trafficking. The experience of the covid 19 pandemic has also highlighted complex issues that require further reinforcement of a social work approach that uses an intersectional perspective.

Working with the interlocking nature of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and other axes that constitute structural inequalities, is indeed a complex challenge for social workers, but indeed a necessary one. (Featherstone, 2022) In fact intersectional approaches open up social work to new understandings of how multiple systems of oppression shape the lived experiences of the service users, thus being able to see the person in all his or her complexity, rejecting a view that relegates a problem to single, separate causalities. (Featherstone, 2022) For social workers it is indeed necessary to conduct research in this area because it enables them to better comprehend the underlying causes of sex trafficking and consequently develop the most effective approaches to prevent it, while pondering how to better provide support for the victims. Social workers can in this way discover efficient methods for locating victims, offering assistance and resources to survivors, and averting more cases of trafficking by analyzing outreach initiatives. Social professionals may be then better able to assist their clients and effectively combat sex trafficking with the use of this expertise.

Using an intersectional approach to the field of social work, this study will attempt to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What intersecting factors prevent youth victims of human trafficking from seeking help?
- 2) What kind of dynamics of violence and abuse are inherent to the condition of victimhood?
- 3) How do vulnerabilities to human trafficking contribute to the refusal to ask for help?

- 4) How outreach social workers can effectively intervene while using an intersectional and specifically a gender sensitive approach to human trafficking?

The analysis of the phenomenon of human trafficking in some of its most important nuances as a global phenomenon, will be then followed by an investigation of the intersecting vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation highlighted by the existing research on the topic.

Sexual exploitation will be thus observed as Gender Based Violence (GBV). Through the overlap and similarities between the two phenomena, it will then be possible to outline a research design aimed at understanding the intersecting vulnerabilities prior to trafficking, the dynamics of violence inherent to the phenomenon itself, and the factors that ultimately keep the victims trapped. The intersectional approach will allow not only a deep understanding of the multidimensionality of the vulnerabilities that led the victim to trafficking, but also how these same vulnerabilities, along with recurrent dynamics of violence, affect the very factors that prevent the victim from seeking help. It was in fact during my volunteer activity with an NGO in the city of Verona (Italy) that deals with fighting human trafficking, that it was possible to notice specific behaviors and attitudes of sex trafficking victims, who almost always refused any kind of help offered to them from the workers.

The attempt to explain why many victims remain in exploitative situations, along with looking at the individual consequences of trafficking in persons, is of utmost importance in order to suggest improvements regarding the design of outreach activities in the area of sexual exploitation. So as to improve outreach interventions, it will also be important to analyze the direct experiences of outreach workers and the ways in which they apply an intersectional approach to their work.

The major limitations that arose during the study mainly refer to what concerns participant recruitment. Although the initial idea was to recruit participants who were exploited at the time of the interview, it was later necessary to opt for participants who had already been freed from trafficking, due to the following limitation.

One difficulty would have been the age of the victims, as many of them may have been minors at the time they were exploited and having no legal guardian would have made it impractical to interview them. In addition, it was decided to recruit former victims also with the aim of avoiding possible re-traumatization of victims who are experiencing a situation of extreme vulnerability and to not further harm their well-being.

The same ethical paradigm was adopted in the selection and the framing of questions to the participants, although despite this many still refused to talk when asked about episodes of violence. In most cases the interviews were conducted in Italian and consequently translated into English, apart from two cases in which the informant felt more comfortable speaking in English, therefore a translation was not required when writing the transcripts. Another limitation, however, was related to the specificity of the terminology used in the study. Indeed, it is necessary to specify that in this context I will refer specifically to human and sex trafficking and not to sex work in generic terms. The term of sex work does not presuppose in fact the exploitation of another individual and it refers to a person willingly taking part in the sale of sex, and it doesn't affect their human rights. (George, Vindhya, & Ray, 2010) As will be seen below, it is also thanks to a careful analysis of the phenomenon through an intersectional perspective, that it will be evident how the act of willingly take part in the sale of sex, turns out to be a fuzzy matter precisely because of psychological dimensions within dynamics of abuse and coercion.

Chapter 1

1.1 Theoretical framework: Intersectionality

“Having a feminist human rights framework is respectful to me as a woman, as a person. It helps to understand what I endured in a social political patriarchal structure context because I felt so alone as a child, as a girl, captive, tortured by multiple men”.

(Gordon E., p. 853, 2020)

Intersectional social work is an approach that recognizes how different social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class, interact to shape people's lived experiences and power dynamics. In order to build a more equitable society, intersectional social work also acknowledges the existence, interactions, and systems of privilege and oppression. In actuality, this entails creating intervention tactics that are both culturally competent and anti-oppressive while considering the particular needs of individuals and communities. (Mattsson, 2014) In this paradigm, a gender sensitive strategy that considers gender identity, gender roles, and gender power dynamics can be seen as a fundamental component of the intersectional approach. It also acknowledges how the experiences of individuals and communities are shaped by the intersections between gender and other identities, including race, class, and sexuality. The term intersectionality (or intersectional theory) was originally used in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, an American civil rights activist and eminent expert in critical race theory. (Bernard, 2022) Although Crenshaw's work was initially related to the socio-historical conditions of African American women in the United States, later the term intersectionality was broadened so that its application could form the basis of numerous studies concerning the nature of concepts such structural power (Towns, 2015) and systemic disadvantage. (Kleven, 2008)

As Featherstone (2022) points out, the discipline of social work has often emphasized the importance of individual responsibility, neglecting, or sidelining the influence of the structural features that constitute the social substrate, such as issues such as: right to health and education, income disparities, housing inequalities, which increase the risk of vulnerability of disadvantage categories. In order to properly engage with diversity and difference in social work, it is necessary an examination of how contexts of oppression

and inequalities underlie the social problems that social workers have to confront. (Bernard, 2022) Specifically with regard to the study of sex trafficking in Italy, the intersectional approach is necessary. First of all, the majority of the detected victims appear to be women, or they identify as women, highlighting the issue of gender. As Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen (2019) point out “*the issue of gender is relevant to vulnerability, with women experiencing higher rates of modern slavery in domestic work, the sex industry and forced marriage*”.(p.10)

The majority of them are also of different nationalities, each with an extremely different culture from the others, therefore stressing the issue of nationality.

In addition, victims who are part of the LGBTQ+ community emphasize the complexity regarding gender identity and sexual orientation. The extreme multidimensionality and intragroup difference found in the context of sexual exploitation pose greater challenges and questions the extreme multidimensionality and intragroup differences (or commonality such as the status of illegal immigrants) found in the context of sexual exploitation pose greater challenges and questions about the possibilities of social work to approach the phenomenon. Indeed, the investigation of factors that prevent victims of sexual exploitation from seeking help and turning to services, takes on different characteristics depending on the victim, making the intersectional approach a necessity for social workers who are involved in outreach activities.

It is also not possible to talk about intersectionality without addressing the constructiveness of terms such as race and gender. (Busche, Scambor, & Stuve, 2012)

The most visible way through which sexual difference is made "naturalized" by the discourse of gender is what is referred as embodiment, through which the cultural essence of being a body is made explicit, which is produced in a specific culture and society, with conditioned and circumscribed limitations and possibilities (Butler, 1997). Through the process of embodiment, the subject performs gender, and this performing is always conditioned by one's social relations and the social, cultural, and political context in which the individual conducts one's existence (Butler, 1997). The concept of gender can also be defined as a set of roles, behaviors, activities, and qualities that are socially built and culturally distinct and are considered proper for men and women. Gender identity deeply affects how people perceive themselves and other people, and how they relate to others. On the other hand, the term sex indicates a person's biological composition, and it is frequently considered distinct from gender.

Based on physical traits including skin tone, hair type, and eye shape, race is a social construct that divides people into groups. Although this is frequently the case, it is not always used to indicate a person's ethnic origin or heritage. (Chandra, & Wilkinson, 2008). Race is a sociological construct that is not supported by any scientific data. It can be used to categorize people in arbitrary ways, which can breed bias, oppression, and discrimination. (Reskin, 2012)

How factors such as gender and race may interact with each other and consequently create advantages or disadvantages regarding the individual's life well-being, (Symington, 2004) must be a main goal useful to social work's approach to sex trafficking.

Because it can provide us a better understanding of the underlying causes of the problem, intersectionality is a useful tool for combating sex trafficking.

Social workers can therefore successfully approach the victims by comprehending the complexity of intersecting identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and class and how they interrelate in increasing the victim's risk of becoming stuck in the exploitative situation, and thus making it complicated to seek help from social services. Improved access to education and career opportunities, economic growth, the provision of health and social services, and gender-sensitive methods of law enforcement and legal procedure are a few examples of what could be done. In addition, it turns out to be extremely interesting what Gerassi and Nichols (2021) stress concerning the lack of the study of an intersectional approach to sex trafficking in social work curricula. According to Gerassi and Nichols (2021) "the intersectional framework is necessary to understand both the nature of trafficking risks and barriers to service access". (p.27) This represents a paradigm change, away from a binary and one-dimensional paradigm, and toward a dynamic, contextual, multidimensional strategy that takes into account the power of recognizing the existence of such forces in both the public and private domains and the societal construction of oppression and injustice.

The direct consequence of applying intersectionality, is the acquisition of a gender-sensitive perspective, which specifically focuses on gender-related issues. Gender-sensitivity stands as fundamental not only to the analysis of phenomena such as sexual exploitation but should be part of the broader theoretical framework used by social workers to tackle the multidimensionality of social issues. When social workers, mental health professionals, and educators deny the importance of this approach, they deny the seriousness of situations that still occur today in most countries around the world. An example is the Italian case, which occurred in January 2023, where an anti-rape pamphlet

titled "Preventing Assault, Combating Gender Violence" was distributed in some middle and high schools in an Italian region. In the text there are some directions for girls: "do not give ironic or provocative smiles to strangers." Or again, "avoid wearing clothes that are too tight." (Cigna, 2023) The severity of the incident not only proves the many gaps about gender-based violence knowledge, but also proves that in 2022 victim blaming is still normalized, thus denying the real root of the problem that only a gender-sensitive perspective can address. Specifically in relation to sex trafficking, the gender-sensitive perspective is placed as essential regarding the analysis of the phenomenon and the subsequent development of targeted social work interventions. As Alston M. (2019) points out, social workers must be aware of the structural elements that affect the lives and circumstances of women and girls so that their interventions do not increase clients' vulnerability to further neglect. To be sensitive and fully conscious of how certain social structures interrelate in keeping trapped women and girls who are victims of sex trafficking, it is necessary to analyze in-depth the factors that shaped the victims experiences. Not only the gender perspective stands out as indispensable for the observation of sex trafficking, but it is also a necessary tool for understanding social work as a profession itself: "women are over-represented in low-paid occupations, vastly outnumbering men in professions such as childcare, nursing and social work; and are dominant among the vast army of unpaid carers and volunteers contributing to the welfare of society". (Alston, 2019, p. 4)

Alston's analysis is very interesting because it addresses the issue of gender sensitive social work from multiple perspectives. She also asserts that although the majority of professionals in the social work field are women, there has always been distrust and perplexity in 'using feminist or gender sensitive frameworks in the mainstream services- as opposed to services specifically dedicated to women, which, however, lack substantial funding. (Alston, 2019)

Indeed, the role of the social worker is still seen as a "caring occupation," consequently a kind of extension to women's traditional unpaid caring roles, with consequences for what concerns the social status of the job itself, pay rates, and management roles that are largely filled by men. (Alston, 2019)

Important is what Adams (1971) refers to as the "compassion trap": a situation in which women in the role of social workers risk working long hours while underpaid, for the sake of their clients, putting their own personal welfare and benefit on the back burner. In fact, the lack of gender-related awareness on the part of professionals in the field can lead to a

reinforcement from social workers of biased views of women and therefore reinforcing social policies that are against women's rights. (Alston, 2019) Working in the area of sexual exploitation must necessarily mean ability to perform a type of social work that is gender sensitive. The risk of not having specific trainings in this regard, indirectly involves failing to consider the needs of women as independent and not necessarily related to their family and caregiving roles. The risk of not using gendered lenses can potentially result in reinforcing stereotypes and gender roles that are not only unhelpful but also oppressive. (Alston, 2019)

A 2016 Report from Australian Women Against Violence (AVAWA), indeed highlighted that insufficiently trained social workers and counselors even pose a potential risk when working with victims of abuse or violence. In fact, AVAWA (2016) reports on the case where insufficiently trained social workers and counselors encouraged women who had been victims of violence, to negotiate with their abusive partners, as they believed that domestic violence was nothing more than a consequence of an underlying communication problem of the couple, encouraging the service user to focus on their own change so as to decrease the level of violence they had experienced.

What these studies highlight is how there are still structural problems that only a gender-sensitive approach can address. There is in fact no denying that gender plays a key role in the problem of trafficking for sexual exploitation, according to Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, and Matekaire (2020): girls and women are in fact purchased and sold as sexual objects for the men pleasure.

It is women and girls who are largely sexually exploited, but it would be limiting and simplistic to view this category as monolithic and unitary, thus denying the extreme fragmentation and diversity inherent in the category. Not only a gender-sensitive lens will be necessary to analyze the specificity of being a victim of sexual exploitation as a woman, but the intersectional approach will also allow to investigate the individual specificities of these women and girls, not only considering their gender identity, but also considering their country of origin, their class, their ethnicity, and all specificities that require a multidimensional approach from the social workers addressing the issue of human trafficking. Human trafficking represents a phenomenon of great proportions, affecting different areas of the world.

As a multifaceted phenomenon that takes on certain characteristics depending on context, it will serve the purpose of the study to trace some of the characteristics of this global phenomenon.

1.2 Trafficking in persons: an overview of a global phenomenon

It is important to distinguish trafficking in persons from other forms of transnational organized crime, such as migrants smuggling. In fact, human trafficking and migrants smuggling can be intertwined, and one can even cause the other (such as in cases where smuggled migrants may become additional victims of human trafficking). However, some of the key differences between the two phenomena are the consent of the migrant to migrate, whereas for trafficking victims, consent appears to be irrelevant because factors such as use of force, deception, abuse of vulnerabilities are present. (UNODC, 2018) The purpose of the two crimes is different: while the migrant is smuggled to facilitate an irregular entry in a country, the purpose of trafficking in persons is the exploitation of the victim (UNODC, 2018) Finally, while transnationality is indeed the main characteristic of migrants smuggling, human trafficking can occur both transnationally and within a country's borders. (UNODC, 2016)

Regarding trafficking in persons that occurs within national borders, it may be useful to consider that sex trafficking involving women and children takes on different characteristics, depending on the geographical area. In some cases, sex exploitation can even represent traditions and cultural norms, such as the Devadasi system, in India. (Shingal, 2015) The Devadasi system involves girls only five or six years old being "married" to a Hindu goddess through a ceremony involving the entire village, and later being sexually exploited by men from higher castes. (Shingal, 2015)

Also in the United States, a shocking number of sex trafficking victims are trafficked within the country's border. (UNODC, 2020) In both of these cases the typology of human trafficking is considered domestic, as opposed to international human trafficking, where the victim is trafficked in order to be exploited in another country. (Macy, & Graham, 2012)

Regarding recruitment tactics of victims of human trafficking, they vary depending on where the victims come from, their age, their gender, and their socioeconomical status. The UNODC Report of 2020 points out that in many cases involving developing countries recruitment takes place through agencies with the specific purpose of recruiting migrants seeking work abroad. Interesting enough is the case of South Korea, where many women,

especially from countries such as Philippines, Indonesia, Russia, Thailand, are trafficked to S. Korea. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) The victims are brought into the country with an E-6 entertainment Visa after being recruited online, where they are offered jobs as singers or dancers. Unfortunately, once they arrive in South Korea, they realize that the work required is far different from expectations, and they are forced into commercial sex in order to repay the debt to the owners of clubs and bars, including “foreigners only” bars that are frequented by tourists and foreign military personnel. (Hughes, Chon, & Ellerman, 2007)

In rural communities traffickers usually approach families who live in extreme poverty, with the aim of convincing the parents to send their children to work and therefore helping the family. (UNODC, 2020) A specific tactic that is employed in recruiting victims for sex trafficking involves deception and manipulation. Traffickers feign romantic interest in the victims, and therefore abuse of the emotional bond formed with the victims, in order to lure them into prostitution. (Johansson, 2022)

In addition to the South-Korea case, there are many other examples that represent the corruption of the system itself. Glaring is the scandal that involved the United Nations and the local police, during the peacekeeping operation in Bosnia. (Angathangelou, Agathangelou, & Ling, 2003) In both cases it is important to note how power dynamics, gender, and social class are factors in power to delineate vulnerability to human trafficking. In both cases the victims are often underage, inexperienced girls from poorer, marginalized backgrounds who are exploited at the hands of powerful men. Power relations in a post-war country, such as the case of Bosnia, are not only even more visible, but they also highlight dynamics of corruption at the political level, revealing once again the strong patriarchal imprint of the system itself.

Nowadays the use of technology has changed how victims are recruited, and the use of technology has provided traffickers with multiple ways in which they actively approach the victims in online spaces (hunting strategy). Another mode of recruitment, however, is what is called fishing strategy, in which it is the victim who firstly responds to ads posted by the perpetrator. (UNODC, 2020) Anonymity is the main feature that traffickers using technology-based recruitment rely on, as tracing traffickers turns out to be extremely difficult. In sex trafficking cases, the use of technology also allows the use of online platforms to broadcast and livestream acts of exploitations and abuse, thus reaching more buyers all over the world. (UNODC, 2020)

The past few years have witnessed two events that have globally impacted human trafficking: the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine. (Todres, Diaz, 2020; Cockbain, & Sidebottom, 2022). The Covid 19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and social issues that were already present beforehand, in some cases creating the circumstances conducive to human trafficking. Inequalities and societal problems that were previously evident before the Covid 19 pandemic have been made worse, in certain cases providing the conditions that make human trafficking possible, making it harder to deliver social work services to those in need, because of the services closure. (Todres, Diaz, 2020) The pandemic from Covid 19 has had disastrous effects on the global economy and many people became unemployed, causing a snowball effect of vulnerabilities to human trafficking.

Moreover, while technologies provided a network of support and help during isolation during this time, they also meant that many children and minors were spending more time online, making them at greater risk of human trafficking. (Todres, Diaz, 2020)

In February 2022, while society was still reckoning with the effects caused by the pandemic, the outbreak of war in Ukraine created another fertile environment for human trafficking. (Cockbain, & Sidebottom, 2022) According to research, war can increase opportunities for crime, such as human trafficking and exploitation. Therefore, it makes sense that there would be worries that the war in Ukraine would result in an upsurge in exploitation and trafficking, especially among displaced women and children. (Cockbain, & Sidebottom, 2022)

The examples provided by the cases of India, South Korea, Bosnia, or the possible increase in human trafficking due to the war in Ukraine, highlights how the phenomenon of sex trafficking affects all countries in the world. Specifically, for the purpose of this study, it will be necessary to go into the specifics of the phenomenon of sex trafficking in Italy. As will be seen in the next section, there are in fact precise characteristics that distinguish this phenomenon in this part of Europe.

Sex trafficking in Italy: characteristics of detected victims

The victims of human trafficking who were interviewed for this research were trafficked in Verona, a city of Northeast Italy.

According to UNODC Report (2020) most detected victims of sex trafficking in Southwest Europe are women, while the majority of convicted traffickers are men. Most detected victims are foreigners, with Sub-Saharan Africa being the most represented region among them. Other victims come from Central and Southeastern Europe (17%), and East Asia (9%). (UNODC, 2020) LGBTQI+ individuals, from Brazil and other Latin American countries, are also some of the detected victims of sex trafficking in Italy. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) It is important to emphasize again how the phenomenon of human trafficking has different characteristics depending on where it occurs, therefore it is useful to describe as comprehensively as possible the features and patterns of the phenomenon in this region. Many victims of sex trafficking in Italy come from: Bulgaria, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Cote d'Ivoire, the Gambia, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Romania, including ethnic Roma. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) As a result of the pandemic, there has been an increased occurrence of sexual exploitation within private homes, and increased use by traffickers of online platforms to recruit victims. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) Another key feature that characterized sex trafficking in Italy, is that the majority of the victims coming from P.R.C. are mostly exploited in beauty centers, clubs, and massage parlors, as well as labor trafficked in PRC national-owned businesses. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) There are also many victims of sexual exploitation from Nigeria who are trafficked to Italy. Due to the ongoing operation of organized Nigerian trafficking networks, women and unaccompanied minors in Nigeria continue to be especially vulnerable to trafficking. Gangs and trafficking networks are becoming increasingly brutal, well-organized, and smart. According to estimates from international groups, up to 75% of the women and unaccompanied minors from Nigeria who came in 2018 were victims of trafficking. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) Among the characteristics that distinguish the exploitation patterns of Nigerian traffickers is that they tied Nigerian women and girls to sex trafficking through debt-based coercion and voodoo rituals. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) Another group largely represented by sex trafficking victims in Western Europe and therefore in Italy, is women and girls from Romania. (Van Rij & McAlister, 2020) The phenomenon of human trafficking, which affects both women from African countries and those from Eastern Europe, highlights in this context the phenomenon of organized crime, where multiple criminal groups operate through a cooperative network approach. (Van

Rij & McAlister, 2020) This feature not only makes it more complicated for law enforcement to identify these groups, but also makes street outreach work more potentially dangerous.

Akor (2011) states that the majority of girls and women who come to Italy from Nigeria do come from Delta and Edo state. The belief that they will have more opportunities in Italy than in their own country is what drives many of these women to migrate. Regarding the social protection program for the victim of trafficking in persons in Italy, the Article 18 (Legislative Decree 286/98) provides that a residence permit may be issued both in cases where criminal proceedings have been initiated with regard to the facts of violence or serious exploitation, following the victim's complaint (so-called judicial path), and in cases where the person does not denounce but adheres to a social assistance and integration program. (ASGI, 2015) If the victim wishes to return to his or her country instead, assisted voluntary repatriation is provided. In the case that he or she is a minor identified as a victim of exploitation, the social path in which he or she will be placed will also include aspects such as school service, psychological support, job placement, medical and legal counseling. With the aim of answering the questions of this study, it was important to trace the characteristics that make up the phenomenon of human trafficking, globally and in Italy, the country where the research took place.

However, some individuals are more at risk than others to abuse, (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019), and as it will be illustrated in the next section, there are various factors that constitute the vulnerability to sex trafficking of some individuals rather than others.

1.3 Intersecting vulnerabilities to human trafficking

Vulnerability is defined as “a condition resulting from how individuals negatively experience the complex interaction of social, cultural, economic, political and environmental factors that create the context for their communities”. (UNODC, 2012)

The word "vulnerability" is frequently used to describe personal traits and circumstances that, in a given setting, raise the possibility or threat of a person being trafficked, thus emphasizing the individual/internal role, as opposed to the external role which is represented by the risk. (ICAT, 2022)

As ICAT Report (2022) states: “it is apparent that understanding vulnerability is relevant in responding to and preventing the crime of trafficking in persons”. (p. 1)

The literature confirms that the vulnerability to human trafficking is not evenly distributed. Some individuals are in fact more vulnerable to abuse than others, and it is precisely how the factors that make one individual more at risk of abuse than another interact that shed light on the different aspects of risk to human trafficking. (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019) The research also illustrates that there are a variety of intersecting factors that enhance the vulnerability of some individuals to human trafficking. (ICAT, 2022) Among the vulnerability factors that the research highlights are age and gender, which in a context of inequality, discrimination, and violence, play a key role in vulnerability to human trafficking. (ICAT, 2022) Furthermore, research on adolescents (14-17) and youth (18-24), conducted by IOM and UNICEF suggest that not only age and gender are vulnerability factors for children, but also racial discrimination plays a role in some children being more at risk of victimization than others. (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019)

Vulnerability factors can be distinguished into three different groups:

- Individual/Personal factors: age, gender, ethnicity, disability.
- Situational factors: temporary illness, unemployment, legal status.
- Contextual factors: Discriminatory laws, policies, social and cultural norms, armed conflicts, economic crisis.

The literature also highlights how immigrants can often be particularly vulnerable to human trafficking. Some of the migrants vulnerabilities to human trafficking include: inability to speak or understand the language of the country, lack of access to social services, alcohol and drug abuse, previous experiences of violence and abuse prior to

trafficking and particularly during childhood, can increase vulnerability to being trafficked or re-trafficked. (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019) Socio economical level such as poverty during childhood, and low education levels, also have impacts on vulnerability to exploitation. Very interesting to consider are the cultural norms that promote risk-taking while ignoring warnings, where migration is considered as the best path to fame and distinction. (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019) Besides migrants, the other group particularly at risk of human trafficking, particularly sexual exploitation is the LGBTQ community. (Xian, Chock, & Dwiggin, 2017) Other vulnerability factors are beliefs in patriarchal forms of societal power, which give male offenders privileges over women, and beliefs that sex workers are devoid of sympathy, which allows offenders to regard their exploitation as justified. (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019) These beliefs can be described as consequences of gender discrimination, and socio-cultural apparatuses that maintain predetermined gender roles, in which women are the disadvantaged group. Polaris Project emphasizes that the majority of trafficked victims identified in the United States are people who have historically experienced discrimination and its effects on politics, society, and the economy: People who identify as LGBTQ+, people of color, and members of indigenous communities experience in fact disproportionate victimization. Moreover, people living in poverty, homeless individuals, people struggling with addiction, trauma, or abuse, are at higher risk for trafficking victimization. (Chen, Kelly, 2021) Traffickers are skilled at finding victims whose particular needs they can satisfy or pretend to satisfy. Support in terms of money—a decent job, a secure place to live, and drugs. They frequently provide the illusion of affection, belonging, safety, or approval, which is less tangible but no less important. (Chen, Kelly, 2021) Factors such as: absence of safety net, lack of adequate access to education and economic empowerment, marriage and family planning, and access to justice, also pose as determining factors regarding lifelong discrimination that increase the risk of human trafficking. (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, & Matekaire, 2020)

In a background of systematic and structural inequality, in cases of extreme poverty some girls may find themselves "accepting" sexual advances from men in order to be able to obtain basic goods, such as food, money, shelter. Indeed, in research conducted in Kenya, it was observed that lack of access to basic goods such as sanitary pads, represents a risk of vulnerability among young girls with regard to the exchange of sexual acts in order to

obtain access to sanitary pads. (Phillips-Howard, Otieno, Burmen, Otieno, Odongo, Odour, & Laserson, 2015)

Some examples that highlight discriminatory practices and their direct link to law and policy is the case of Russia. Indeed, in 2017, Russia decriminalized domestic violence that does not require a hospitalization for the victim, consequently it only represents an administrative offense, therefore increasing the risk of gender-based violence. (Semukhina, 2020). Consequently, the state's failure to ensure a safety net capable of supporting a woman fleeing a domestic violence context increases vulnerability to human trafficking. (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, & Matekaire, 2020).

Those in need of financial assistance, undocumented immigrants, youngsters from dysfunctional homes, marginalized people, and people with mental illnesses are among those who are particularly susceptible to traffickers. (UNODC, 2020) The marginalization factor is significant as a key contributor to vulnerability to human trafficking; as a result, social interventions aimed at fostering social connections through engagement with local communities and organizations serve as a foundational element of successful anti-trafficking strategies. (UNODC, 2020) Marginalization also constitutes a double-edged sword, whereby not only it is one of the causes of vulnerability to human trafficking, but it could also be a factor preventing the victim from seeking help. The analysis of vulnerabilities at the intersectional level thus enables the development of targeted social work interventions, and it is also an important tool to investigate the underlying reasons for the lack of demand for help from some victims. The intersectional theoretical framework offers a necessary perspective regarding the analysis of sex trafficking, both from a descriptive perspective of the phenomenon and from the perspective of the vulnerability of individuals to exploitative situations. In order to answer the research questions, however, it is necessary to further investigate the phenomenon of sex trafficking from an intersectional perspective, specifically a perspective that first considers the gender of the victims of this type of exploitation. It is in fact because of the close connection between gender and sex trafficking that, as will be seen in the following chapter, scholars refer to sexual exploitation in terms of gender-based violence. (G.B.V.)

Chapter 2

2.1 Sex trafficking as Gender Based Violence (GBV)

This chapter will discuss the common characteristics of sex trafficking and gender-based violence, first by analyzing socio-cultural apparatuses and discriminatory practices that contribute to gender inequality, as they can be patriarchal and misogynistic structures. (Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald, 2020) Not only is the common ground between sex trafficking and gender-based violence represented by a socio-cultural context permeated with subtle unbalanced power dynamics. Abusive dynamics and specific pattern of behaviors such as coercive control, are in fact common in both situations of gender violence, and trafficking.

At the end of the chapter the specifics of outreach social work, which is the type of intervention that will be investigated in order to answer the research questions, will be discussed and further analyzed.

The definition of violence against women is: “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”. (UN General Assembly in its resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993)

On the other hand, human trafficking is defined as: “situations of exploitation where a person cannot refuse or leave due to threats, violence, coercion, deception, abuse of power.” (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019)

Why is it necessary to analyze sex trafficking as gender-based violence? A case law on trafficking for sexual exploitation analyzed by UNODC, emphasized the connection between domestic and intimate relationship abuse and human trafficking (UNODC, 2020) In fact, according to the case analysis, at least 25% of human trafficking petitions involved numerous types of gender-based violence (either in the past or while being exploited, in some cases since childhood).

As Sorensen, Piazzano, DiPretoro, & O'Donnell (2012) point out, gender-based violence plays a fundamental role in the vulnerabilities of women and girls to human trafficking.

Women and girls around the world are part of socio-cultural systems in which they are systemically disadvantaged. (Burke, Amaya, & Dillon, 2020) This disadvantaged status is seen as a manifestation of what is referred to as patriarchy, which indicates all sociocultural behaviors and beliefs that normalize socially manufactured gender inequalities that favor males and oppress women. (Ebert, 1996)

These structures of oppression are also part of the vulnerabilities to sex trafficking of women and girls, on which traffickers focus most, precisely because of the systemic discriminatory practices. (Burke, Amaya, & Dillon, 2020) Indeed, the discriminatory practices prevalent in many socio-cultural apparatuses make it more complicated for women and girls to access standard educational and employment paths, resulting in their inability to support themselves or their children, therefore they are more vulnerable to human trafficking. (Burke, Amaya, & Dillon, 2020)

The strong disproportion between female victims and male perpetrators doesn't come down to a gender essentialism, but rather to socio-cultural factors that keep women in a position of inferiority and to the stereotypes themselves that reinforce this social position. In addition to socio-cultural factors that reinforce men's position of power and women's position of inferiority, there is also real legal and economic discrimination. As highlighted by The World Bank (2015), in 100 countries women are relegated to low-paying jobs, and 86 countries out of 121 have discriminatory practices or laws that leave women completely dependent on a male relative. (UN Women, 2012)

In a context that privileges men as heads of households, political leaders, women are stereotyped as having less value. Indeed, their value is mostly measured by sexual and reproductive attributes and roles, (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, & Matekaire, 2020) being further diminished when other forms of intersecting discriminations such as race, class, immigration status, disability, ethnicity, religion intervene. (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, & Matekaire, 2020)

Indeed, the higher poverty rates are, and the more gender inequality is pervasive in a country, the more women and girls are at risk of isolation, therefore increasing their vulnerability to being trafficked. (Sorensen, Piazzano, DiPreto, & O'Donnell, 2012)

An interesting inter-linkage factor in human trafficking and gender-based violence is the coercive control (UNODC, 2020), which turns out to be also part of the power and control wheel (Pence, Paymar, 1993) which is an indispensable tool for analyzing gender-based violence.

The Power and Control Wheel, also called the Duluth Model, was designed by Pence and Paymar in 1993. It is a visual representation of the methods used by abusers in abusive relationships. The purpose of the power and control wheel is to highlight various types of abuse, including coercive control, which refers to a collection of power and control techniques, that, along with physical and sexual abuse, are the root causes of domestic violence. (Towns, 2015)

Since coercive control has been conceptualized as the main defining aspect of this type of violence, (Stark, 2007) a line can thus be drawn with the tactics used by traffickers to victimize, and subsequently maintain this status, of human trafficking victimization.



Figure 2: Power and control wheel. (Cain, 2022)

Abuse and control tactics common to both human trafficking and domestic violence are clearly visible in the graph above depicting the Power and Control Wheel, originally used in the context of domestic abuse, and used in this framework to describe patterns of behavior that are common among traffickers.

As outlined by the graphic, it can be seen that traffickers exercise power and control in a wide variety of ways, with varying degrees of intensity. As a result, it is difficult for some victims to recognize themselves as victims or seek support.

These tactics, which can be very insidious, are often extremely difficult for the victim to identify, particularly when the victim has developed an intimate relationship with the trafficker/abuser or is being manipulated.

The problem related to the self-identification as a victim of human trafficking, can be often at the very root of what makes a social work intervention difficult. (Van Meeteren, & Hiah, 2020). Along with coercive control, trauma bonding is often related to both domestic violence and human trafficking, particularly in situations where the trafficker is a person close to the victim, as is the case with familial trafficking or when the trafficker is the partner. (Casassa, Knight, & Mengo, 2021). Trauma bonding contributes in fact to the victims' difficulty in self-identification: coming to accept the abuse as normal is actually a coping technique for surviving extremely abusive and traumatic conditions. The victims who have developed a trauma bond with their trafficker, frequently deny the presence of violence or threats of violence, justify violence, or think they have some control over the abuse. (Casassa, Knight, & Mengo, 2021) The problem with the self-identification of victimhood affects the ability to report the abuse itself and consequently remain undetectable to the authorities. (Van Meeteren & Hiah, 2020) If potential victims fail to self-identify will not only be less likely to participate in criminal investigations, but they will also be unlikely to ask for help; making it more challenging to create the proper support structures for effective intervention. (Van Meeteren & Hiah, 2020)

With the aim of investigating the motivations and dynamics that in some cases prevent the victim from seeking help and thus beginning a path of emancipation from exploitation, it is therefore necessary not only to identify the intersectionality of the factors that have previously placed her in a condition of vulnerability, but also to broadening the analysis in order to highlight the dynamics of violence and abuse inherent in the condition of victimhood. The elaboration of proper social interventions aimed at fighting human trafficking, cannot fail to consider the intersectionality of all the above factors and the psycho socio cultural processes that lead the victim to remain hidden. Only with proper investigation that takes these intersecting dimensions into account it will be possible to understand how to properly engage victims through outreach interventions.

Important is to point out the cases of human trafficking that occur within the domestic sphere, which pose an even greater challenge in terms of the detecting of the victims. The victims of this crime are mostly children, girls, and women, who are often trafficked by the very people who should be taking care of them instead. This crime is often known as domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST). (Mapp, 2020)

Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald (2020) have done important work regarding the analysis of what influences in making children, girls, and women more vulnerable to sex trafficking and thus violence, specifically by studying cases of women who had been sexually trafficked in childhood. Their work highlights the societal formation of patriarchy and misogyny, where men's dominance, positional authority, and control, are found in four key places. (Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald, 2020) This outline explains how patriarchal-type principles and cultural beliefs that maintain male dominance and female subordination are housed in social structures and practices that influence the control, oppression, and power and relational violence perpetuated on women.

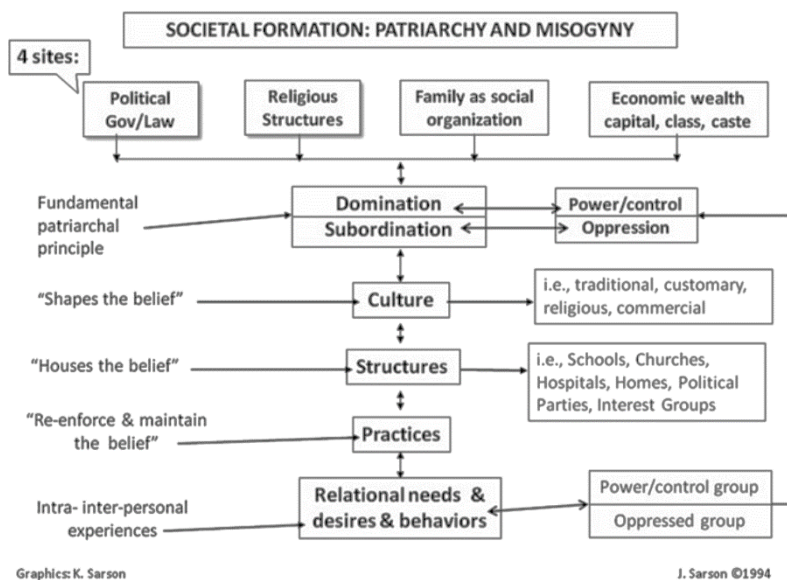


Figure 3: Societal formation: patriarchy and misogyny (Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald, 2020)

In the context of sex trafficking as a gendered violence, of particular interest is the site “family and social organization structures”. Within this site, patriarchal structures situate women in a position of subordination, control, objectification and sexualization. These structures act, for example, on cultures and societies where "marriages" with girls are still possible, with men being able to marry 8- or 9-year-old girls. These marriages are one of the very expressions of the patriarchy of inequality and subordination. (Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald, 2020) As United Nations Statistics Division (2015) points out, approximately, 30% of female population, regardless of income, age, or education, have suffered physical and/or sexualized violence perpetrated by a partner or a non-partner.

The importance of making explicit and being aware of how these principles of male domination and female subordination operate, it is important to keep in mind that cultural beliefs, attitudes, and practices subtly shape perceptions of inferiority of women and girls. These filters thus apply to intrapersonal experiences that play out in workplaces, homes, and in relationships as oppression, control, and violence, (Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald, 2020) thus being an important tool to analyze human trafficking and to address victims vulnerabilities and needs.

Furthermore, also according to Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, & Matekaire, (2020), there are strong linkages between gender-based violence and sex trafficking, stating that a girl or woman who was previously a victim of sexual abuse during childhood, or who is fleeing from a domestic violence situation, may be more vulnerable to human trafficking. As a study across 11 European countries confirms, 60% of sex trafficking victims reported violence prior to being trafficked. (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, & Matekaire, 2020).

When considering both the context of misogynistic culture that tends to put female girls in an unfavorable position, and the dynamics of coercive control to which victims of sex trafficking are often subjected, one wonders how social workers can effectively intervene. the next section will therefore discuss the outreach social work intervention, which is most suitable in the context of sex trafficking. With the aim of answering the research question inherent to an efficient social workers response to tackle the issue, advantages and challenges of this type of intervention will be analyzed.

2.2 Addressing the challenges of sexual exploitation through outreach social work interventions.

A branch of social work called outreach social work involves interacting with people and communities to offer support and help. Outreach social workers usually work in the areas of homelessness, drug abuse, mental health, youth problems and street prostitution. The goal of outreach social workers is to link people with the services and resources they need to improve their quality of life, so it is necessary that there is an extensive network of contacts with the organizations on the territory. In this study, will be considered specifically the street-outreach social work, also called detached outreach, that is, outreach activities involving social workers, youth workers and volunteers, who directly reach out to the target group on the streets that can be stigmatized, criminalized or that fear judgement towards their attitudes and lifestyles. (Hunter & May, 2004) What distinguishes this type of approach is that while all other social work interventions take place within structured settings, such as offices, or places where social workers are in control. (Szeintuch, 2015) Social workers “professional power is mediated through the spacial structure” in usual settings, therefore in the outreach work it is important that they motivate their presence in the streets. (Andersson, 2013, p. 179)

The main tasks of outreach social work are: contact making, identification of needs, promoting, and initiating social change processes by motivating to change, and providing the support needed in order to keep the process of change going through a linking to the services. (Andersson, 2013) What makes this type of social work both important and complicated at the same time is the lack of structure in the setting, where in fact the social worker is in lack of control over his or her surroundings. (Andersson, 2013) Other aims are to make sure that information is advertised and promoted in relation to health and initiatives, provide a referral and support gateway to other services, raise awareness on legal rights of the target group. (Potter, Horwood, & Feder, 2022) The difficulty posed by this type of intervention is the fact that the people to whom the outreach workers go often do not want any kind of professional relationship or help, perceiving a kind of intrusion and aggression on the part of the outreach workers. This poses a double vulnerability: a target group that feels exposed without having decided to, and as a consequence, the outreach worker is potentially at risk of reactive aggression from the target group. (Andersson, 2013)

Another type of outreach social work involves what is called harm reduction, an approach to public health that employs doable tactics to lessen the negative effects of particular high-risk behaviors. For instance, a harm reduction strategy for drug usage can entail educating a user about the dangers associated or providing them with sterile syringes, or in the context of outreach with sex trafficking victims, give them condoms or other basic necessities. However, this typology has been criticized by other outreach social work associations, which argue the ethical problem with this type of approach, as it would seem almost like providing supplies that facilitate their exploitation. Even though responding to the immediate needs of the target group could be a way to establish a relationship of trust with the target group while providing them with health education. (Holger-Ambrose, Langmade, Edinburgh, & Saewyc, 2013)

Outreach work proves fundamentally useful, as it offers people in need a service they would not otherwise use (Andersson, 2013) as the case of the victims of sexual exploitations.

Street outreach is characterized by the flexibility of intervention, the empathetic and highly individualized and contextualized approach. (Andersson, 2013)

Personal engagement is in fact considered as the key to engage with clients in outreach social work, as well as showing respect, adopting a non-judgmental approach, and work toward inspiring trust.

What makes street outreach so crucial in the social service field are the many barriers at accessing social services, which clients targeted by this intervention encounter throughout their lives. In their study in the United States of young homeless sex workers, Kurtz, Surratt, Kiley, & Inciardi, (2005) point out that there are both structural and individual barriers to accessing health and social services, despite the many needs of the target group. The structural barriers are represented by social stigma, legal status requirements, program staff communication and understanding skills, information accessibility, transportation, and the program structure itself that might not consider the specificity of the target population. (Kurtz, Surratt, Kiley & Inciardi, 2005)

On the other hand, some of the individual barriers encountered by the authors are: unawareness of the services, drug abuse, life distractions/sense of time, mental and emotional stability, fear of arrest, client communication skills, client appearance, inability to make decisions, distrust, negative attitude, inability to identify their own needs. (Kurtz, Surratt, Kiley & Inciardi, 2005) Often, outreach workers find themselves in situations where, the barriers that prevent clients from approaching services also ensure that even

in cases where services themselves engage them, as in the outreach case, they reject them. Resistance is in fact a common attitude in most counselling relationships, and it is a term employed by social workers to define an unwilling attitude to change and therefore refusing to engage in a worker-client relationship whose purpose is the positive change. (Ho & Chui, 2001) Resistance is also defined as an unconscious attempt to preserve the status quo. (Strean, 1985) Indeed, there is no question that growth and change are strenuous and very often painful processes, where changing old behaviors and adopting new ones requires perseverance and courage. Especially in the context of human trafficking, where the will to change collides with multidimensional factors that prevent it from happening. The very fact of being involuntary users of the outreach service itself poses quite a few obstacles to the success of the intervention; with a tendency for some users to be unaware of their problems. (Ho & Chui, 2001) Being unaware of one's situation is also closely related to the social position of a trafficking victim, who is often in a foreign country, knowing little or no local language, with a limited social network, and little access to information and knowledge about their rights. (Van Meeteren, & Hiah, 2020) Along the lines of the work of Ho and Chui (2001), the literature has also attempted to provide an explanation regarding the barriers to exit from sex work, which in this context is understood as not limited to human trafficking. However, the work of Baker, Dalla, & Williamson (2010), turns out to be of utmost importance in understanding the many variables that can keep a victim of sex trafficking "in the net," which is essential for a proper outreach intervention. In order to make the analysis of outreach interventions with victims of sex trafficking more comprehensive, it has been important to include research that is not purely inherent to the condition of a trafficking victim, but relates to sex work in general. Choosing to include this type of research was necessary given the theoretical gap regarding a possible model of exit from prostitution (such as that of Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010) that is instead solely focused on victims of human trafficking and thus considering the social and psychological nuances inherent to this condition. By analyzing the individual, structural and social variables that prevent a sex worker (exploited and non-exploited) from quitting, Baker, Dalla, & Williamson (2010), have developed an integrated model of intervention for exiting prostitution.

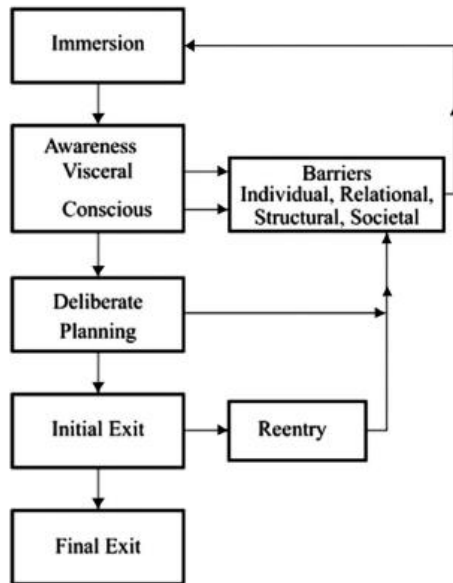


Figure 4: Integrated model of intervention for exiting prostitution. (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010)

The first step, *immersion* is the time when the woman or girl is still totally immersed in her work, with no intention of leaving and in some cases without even being aware of the need to change. This is when the first contacts with the outreach worker occur, and it is important to remember that many clients will unfortunately never go beyond this stage. The second stage is *awareness*, in which the client begins to have the first doubts and thoughts regarding a possible change of course. This stage is followed by *deliberate preparation*, which is the actual implementation and preparation of the plan to leave the street. Now the victims start to assess the support resources in the community. This stage is characterized by gathering data and seeking support. In both of these stages, the role of the street outreach worker is very important, as he or she can help the victim raise awareness, and at the same time provide the victim with the necessary practical information. The last two stages are *initial exit stage*, and *final exit stage*. The former can often turn out to be an "entry-exit-re-entry" stage (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010, p.19) where the initial exit proves itself to be short-lived and lead to a return. Baker, Dalla and Williamson argue that seldom will a sex worker reach the final exit stage on the first attempt, as the barriers that prevent the final exit (social, individual, relational, structural factors), are extensively persisting at each phase. (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010)

The barriers that appear to compete within this model, are individual factors (mental health such as trauma from adverse childhood, having experienced violence, chronic psychological distress, self-esteem, shame and guilt, and lack of knowledge of services). Relational factors, on the other hand, include the presence of pimps, and social isolation, while social factors include discrimination and stigma. Structural factors, on the other hand, are lack of other types of employment, limited job skills, having to provide basic needs such housing, lack of education, criminal record, and inadequate services. (Baker, Dalla, & Williamson, 2010) All these factors need to be analyzed within an intersectional perspective, as most research lacks sufficient analysis of these individual and socio-structural barriers from a perspective that takes into account gender, ethnicity, age, and socio-economic class as the main vectors of vulnerability.

It is in fact essential to not only identify the intersectionality of the factors that have previously placed the victims in a condition of vulnerability, but to also investigate the dynamics of violence and abuse inherent in the condition of victimhood, in order to analyze the motivations and dynamics that, in some cases, prevent the victim from seeking help and thus beginning a path of emancipation from exploitation.

The convergence of all the aforementioned elements and the psychosocial and cultural processes that cause the victim to remain unrecognized must be taken into account when developing effective social interventions to combat human trafficking. Understanding how to effectively involve victims through outreach interventions can only be achievable with thorough inquiry that takes these overlapping factors into account.

Given that social exclusion, illegality, and invisibility characterize the condition of victims of sex trafficking, outreach interventions are undoubtedly those that most enable social workers to create a bridge of assistance with users.

As the general aims of this study are to explore the experiences of victims of sex trafficking and to suggest improvements regarding the design of outreach activities in the area of sexual exploitation, the next chapter will cover the details of the field research that has contributed to answering the research questions.

Chapter 3

3.1 Research design and data collection

All that has been covered so far have served as guidelines for the practical part of the study. First, this chapter will cover the research design, which was partly developed as a result of volunteering with victims of human trafficking in the city of Verona, Italy, who often displayed attitudes of avoidance and rejection toward outreach workers.

Following the research design, the methodology inherent in data collection will be explained, along with the limitations regarding the study subject. In the second paragraph, the findings of the study will be explained and then discussed in the final paragraph. Finally, the chapter will be concluded with reflections and insights regarding possible social work interventions in light of the findings of the study, along with suggesting directions for future research.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the topic under examination, it was deemed necessary and appropriate to further investigate the phenomena of sex trafficking using the method of qualitative research.

Qualitative research leads in fact to a deeper comprehension of the people, setting, culture, attitudes, habits, drives, and experiences of the subjects. Precisely because the purpose of the research is to investigate the experiences of victims of sex trafficking and understand their unique point of view, by attempting to explain why many victims remain in exploitative situations, along with looking at the individual consequences of trafficking in persons, this kind of research is particularly beneficial, especially given the complexity of the phenomenon. Further considering that since there is no type of research on the territory of the city of Verona, which takes into consideration the point of view of survivors, it was determined that a qualitative study, using a narrative research approach, would be the most appropriate. Narrative research is in fact beneficial in examining the challenges that people face in real life, and the former sex trafficking victims provided the researchers with extensive, honest descriptions during one-on-one interviews. A purposive sampling (a non-representative sample that is focused on a particular aim or research question), has been used for this study, according to the following criteria:

- Must have been a victim of sex trafficking any age between 18 and 26.
- Must be a paid or non-paid outreach worker working with sex trafficking victims.

Informant 1	Nigeria	F	22
Informant 2	Nigeria	F	24
Informant 3	Nigeria	F	25
Informant 4	Romania	F	24
Informant 5	Romania	F	25
Informant 6 (Volunteer outreach worker)	Italy	F	
Informant 7 (Volunteer outreach worker)	Italy	M	

Table 1: Participants

This study only focused on adult female sex trafficking survivors (i.e., those who were forced into prostitution) who were at least 18 years old and who may or may not have been sex trafficked while they were minors, despite the fact that sex trafficking of children and males is also a serious problem. It was possible to locate and get in touch with potential study subjects thanks to collaboration with "key informants," or dependable businesses and people who assist or are connected to sex trafficking victims. If interested, participants directly replied to the volunteers and outreach workers to set up a convenient time and place for the interviews. Although the initial plan was to recruit participants who were being exploited at the time of the interview, it was ultimately decided to choose individuals who were freed from trafficking because of the limitations such as age and risk of re-traumatization. Many of the current victims of sexual exploitation who were outreached by the workers were in fact minors, and having no legal guardian would have

made it impractical to interview them. In addition, it was decided to recruit former victims also with the aim of avoiding possible re-traumatization of victims who are experiencing a situation of extreme vulnerability and to not further harm their well-being. The same ethical paradigm to avoid re-traumatization (Chambers, 2019) was adopted while selecting and framing the questions for the former victims who participated to the interview. Notwithstanding this, many former victims still refused to talk when asked about episodes of violence, that were probably very painful to remember.

Former victims were met in association offices or in their residences in group homes and the interviews were recorded via cell phone. As for the two outreach volunteers, they responded to interviews previously sent via e-mail, with WhatsApp voice messages. The study was properly explained to all participants before they gave their agreement, and any questions were solely addressed after that. Only then did interviews start. To protect their privacy, participants were given both a copy of informed consent and a non-disclosure agreement form to sign. The interview was completely voluntary, and participants were free to leave at any point. The Interviews with the former victims were then audio recorded with the permission of the participants. All 7 interviews were consequently transcribed in English, with 5 of them being translated from Italian. The length of each interview was about 45 minutes. These digital recordings and transcripts were uploaded to a secure, password-protected Google Drive personal account and once transcribed, all the data were deleted to ensure data protection.

It was decided to conduct content/thematic analysis, (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017) identifying consistent structures and patterns based on the frequency with which the words are repeated in order to hypothesize the meaning of these repetitions, where the replies were reviewed in search of themes and meanings. The analysis involved a top-down coding approach, where the key codes were developed based on the main goals and conceptual focus of the study, and on the interviews purposes. (Lichtenstein, & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2021)

Following the interviews' transcription, the text was manually coded; short words or phrases that represented the descriptive or analytical essence of a section of the transcript. Patterns and recurring words were identified and then group together into clusters. Following the coding process, the primary themes and sub-themes that encompassed the initial clusters were determined, and then related those to one another. Five interviews with survivors of sex trafficking and two with outreach workers proved sufficient for the purpose of answering the study questions. Theoretical saturation surfaced, since at the

end no new or relevant data seemed in fact to be emerging, nor suggested new insights into the topic (Bryman, 2001). Consequently, it was decided to stop at this number of participants.

With regard to the ethical aspects of the research, the following were taken into consideration: voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, avoidance of potential harm. (Bryman, 2001). In fact, completely voluntary participation in the study was communicated to participants before the beginning of the interviews, and informed consent was shown and signed. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured by the non-disclosure agreement, also ensuring that participants remained anonymous, and the processed data safely stored in PC and protected by password. With regard to avoidance of possible harm, it was important to consider the possibility of re-traumatization of former victims, which is why it was preferred to opt for people who were free of trafficking at the time of being interviewed. It was also made sure not to ask questions that could hurt the participants, while also emphasizing the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time or availing oneself of the ability not to answer.



Figure 5: Procedure

3.2 Findings

This sub-chapter explains the results of the data analysis whose procedures were reported in the previous one.

Following the coding process, the primary themes and sub-themes that encompassed the initial clusters were found, as seen in Table 1.

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Vulnerabilities prior to trafficking	-Gender roles -Socio-economic status -Family violence
Gender Based Violence	-Physical coercive control -Nonphysical coercive control
Factors preventing help seeking	-Isolation -Resistant behaviors -Victim-mindset
Intervention	-Micro social work improvements: Trauma-informed care, prevention of re-victimization. -Mezzo social work improvements: Training and funds, stakeholding.

Table 1: Findings

A concept map (as can be seen in figure 6) was subsequently made, in order to accurately pinpoint the focal areas that needed to be discussed and interpreted with the aim of attempting to answer the research questions.

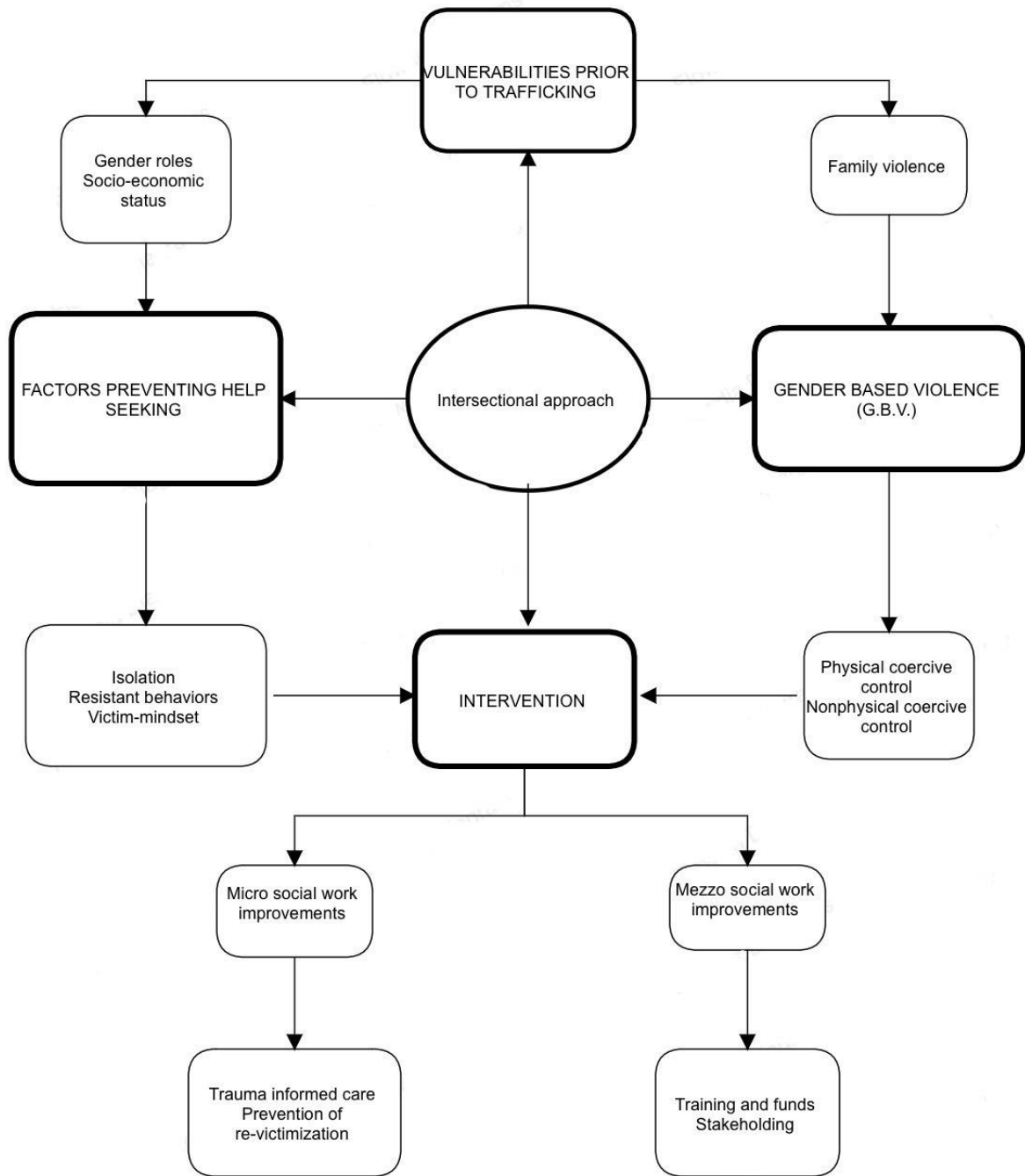


Figure 6: Concept map

3.3 Discussion and implications for social work interventions

The outcomes if this research have provided better insights into the underlying motivations that prevent victims of sexual exploitation from seeking help and turning to organizations that can help them. Attempting to address the issues presented by sexual exploitation of girls and women, the results of the study answered the research questions posed. Attempting to address the issues presented by sexual exploitation of girls and women, the results of the study answered the research questions posed. In order to adequately analyze and interpret the data obtained from the research, an intersectional approach was used, which, as mentioned in the previous chapters, allowed not only to proceed methodologically, but also to thoroughly understand the multidimensionality of the subject matter. The results highlighted that underlying the refusal of help by victims of sexual exploitation, there are interrelated both those vulnerability factors that had previously led to victimization and those vulnerabilities inherent at the time of sexual exploitation. In addition, thanks to this study, it was possible to analyze the characteristics of the dynamics of abuse and violence inherent in the condition of victimization, showing how these in turn constitute a strong disincentive with regard to seeking help.

- **Factors preventing help seeking**

Isolation

When asking about having any support network at the time of the exploitation, victims reported to not know people outside their environment. As a participant pointed out *“The only people I knew were the people I worked for, the girls who lived with me, and the clients.”* (Informant 1)

One of the outreach workers who participated stated: *“Most often these girls live in social stigma and isolation and contact with people who are not affiliated with their world is very rare if not nonexistent”.* (Informant 7)

The isolation in which victims of sex trafficking live and their difficulty in accessing services is revealed in the experiences of one outreach worker, who remembered an episode in which a young sexually exploited girl had to be taken to the emergency room for conjunctivitis. In his own words he recalled: *“She would not have even known where*

the hospital was, and she had never been to a doctor during her entire stay in Italy”
(Informant 7)

Resistant behaviors

As a volunteer pointed out: *“It happens many times that the victims do not want to talk to us”*. (Informant 6) A former victim also stated: *“I didn’t trust anyone that wanted to help me, I didn’t believe them”, “I didn’t ask for help, I just met a client who married me and helped me to pay my debt”*. (Informant 2)

What the volunteer states can be analyzed through the *classification of resistant behaviors*, specifically what are called Innocuous behaviors (Pipes & Davenport, 1990) namely:

- Changing the subject away
- An unemotional recounting of powerful experiences
- Becoming helpless and passive
- Becoming confused
- Retreating into silence

Pipes & Davenport (1990) formulated a classification of resistant behaviors, while attempting to explain why a client sometimes resists to cooperate with someone who is trying to bring positive change in the individual. “An unemotional recounting of powerful experiences” was also possible to spot during the interviews, a way for the participants to emotionally distance themselves from past experiences.

Victim-mindset

A victim mentality can be described as a cluster of beliefs about being victim of life circumstances. Feelings such as helplessness and not having control on the current situation was apparent during the research. Experiences of being *“used to that life”* and *“feeling stuck”* (Informant 1), or again *“I felt sad, but I didn’t know what else to do”* (Informant 5), were not uncommon feelings among the former victims. As the outreach worker explains: *“Many women feel trapped, even psychologically, it’s like they don’t believe they can deserve an alternative”*. (Informant 7)

What is reported from the interviews, can be defined as a form of learned helplessness. (Seligman, 1972)

Learned helplessness is a psychological phenomenon that resulted from studies of what causes prolonged exposure to uncontrollable stressors. Seligman's studies have revealed that the most identifiable consequences are precisely helplessness and hopelessness. (Seligman, 1972)

And even when given the chance to do so, it has been observed that the victims cease trying to control the outcomes of their circumstance and stop trying to fix the problem as a result of their sense of powerlessness. Learned helplessness of sex trafficking victims can therefore be defined as a failing to attempt to escape the exploitative situation because some past experiences might have taught them that it won't change anything, leading to a decrease in action and a decrease in motivation. Important to note for the purposes of the study is how the intersectional and gender sensitive approach allows a line to be drawn between the dynamics of physical and psychological violence experienced by trafficking victims, and the factors that keep them in the condition of sexual exploitation.

- **Gender Based Violence (G.B.V.)**

Gender based violence, appeared to be a common experience to the former victims of sex trafficking who were interviewed. It seems clear from this testimony how gender-based violence in this context has direct effects on victims' ability to seek help. As previously found in research, coercive control is a common denominator of G.B.V. and sex trafficking. (UNODC, 2020) Coercive control is a form of abuse in intimate relationships that involves a pattern of behavior used to maintain power and control over the other person. (Cain, 2022)

As the study by Van der Watt and Kruger (2020) stresses, control methods mean that the trafficker can exert absolute dominance over the victim, both on the physical, mental, and emotional levels. Victims of sexual exploitation seem to have no control over their own lives, let alone their own bodies. As the outreach worker pointed out: *“Some Nigerian women told us that it is also very common that if a woman gets pregnant, the Maman will force her to get an abortion”*. (Informant 6) In particular, this strong control and manipulation exerted on the victim causes the victim to be convinced of his or her own complicity in the activity being carried out. (Van der Watt and Kruger, 2020) Given the

very difficult in identifying these manipulative and abusive behaviors, it is therefore not unusual for the victim not to identify as such. (Van Meeteren, & Hiah, 2020) The lack of self-identification tends in fact to emphasize that exploitation takes place within settings that involve power relationships, which legitimize those imbalances on the basis of perceived vulnerabilities. (Datta, & Bales, 2013) In the case of G.B.V. the victims vulnerabilities perceived by the trafficker/boyfriend mainly have to do with their gender. Both physical and psychological violence appeared to be important, as they were experienced by all participants and as the most preponderating factor when it comes to not escaping the condition of victimhood.

Physical coercive control

Although avoidance reactions were encountered during the interviews, regarding the topic of violence, joh

The volunteer explained: *“Their lives are filled with violence and subordination”*.

(Informant 7) Physical abuse as a coercive control, makes sure that the traffickers maintain the victim ability's to work while not being detected (Van der Watt and Kruger,2020), therefore making sure they will not ask for help. As a former victim pointed out: *“I didn't want to go to the streets, and I got beaten up”* (Informant 1) Particularly important were the testimonies reported by the Informant 3: *“I was getting infections all the time and my health was bad.”* And again: *“I could never rest, not even during my period.”* (Informant 3) What stands out from her words, is the deprivation of basic human needs, a tactic employed with the aim of weakening the victim's physical and mental capabilities, so as to stimulate physical and mental exhaustion that will further contribute to the victim's sense of helplessness, thereby decreasing the chances of escape. (Van der Watt and Kruger,2020) From the interviews conducted to Nigerian participants, the figure of Maman appeared to be a common denominator: the Maman is a former victim of sexual exploitation, who then became a trafficker herself. Human and technology-based surveillance is another physical coercive control method implied by traffickers, (Van der Watt and Kruger,2020), as the volunteer stated: *“Sometimes the Maman controls them so that they do not run away”* (Informant 7)

Another type of surveillance used by traffickers to make the victim helpless, is to take all of her documents. as the outreach worker explains: *“Usually they don't have documents with them, because the traffickers took it”* (Informant 7)

Nonphysical coercive control

This type of control method is the first one that is used by traffickers in the early stages to persuade the victim, which is called grooming. (Van der Watt and Kruger,2020) The ways in which the trafficker succeeds in persuading the victim are mainly based on deception, for example avoiding telling the victim how the debt system works to which they will be tied for years. Two participants reported: *“I was always thinking to stop but I had the debt to pay back”* (Informant 1) and *“The work was scary, but it was the only way to give back the money needed to come here”* (Informant 2). Another way in which traffickers secure greater control is by denying privacy to the victims, as a participant pointed out: *“I was living in a place with other 12 women and there was no privacy, noises all the time and mess”* (Informant 1). Denying privacy to the victims of human trafficking is a way to humiliate them and deny them dignity; a process of degradation that contributes to hopelessness and loss of will. (Van der Watt and Kruger,2020)

Important in this context turns out to be the cultural and spiritual aspect of Juju, employed by traffickers to make sure victims will comply. Juju is also referred to as “witchcraft”, “black magic”, or “voodoo”, and it is part of the cultural context of divine and religious practices present in the West Africa, that implicates people communicating with spirits in a way that influences their lives. (Van der Watt and Kruger,2020) The power this ritual has on the victims' minds is explained in these words by the volunteers: *“Some victims who come from Nigeria are victim of a ritual called Juju, where a sorcerer of sorts makes her promise to remain loyal to her Maman or traffickers and if this pact is broken, terrible things can happen, both to her and her family. I've known women who are truly terrified of this. Some told me that the “witch doctor” had told them they would go mad if they ran away once they reached their destination”* (Informant 6)

These words suggest that traffickers also exercise relationship control, in which personal relationships between people are used as a means of controlling victims and making them vulnerable. (Van der Watt and Kruger,2020)

The victims interviewed who had not been subjected to this ritual, were not from Nigeria, and their experiences of psychological abuse related primarily to their romantic relationships. A participant who was involved in an abusive romantic relationship at the time of the victimization, recalled: *“My ex used to be very violent towards me and once I had to go to the hospital”*. (Informant 4)

Important was also the opinion of the volunteer who stated: *“Others, are not only victims of sexual exploitation, but also of psychological and physical abuse by the hands of their partners”*. (Informant 7)

A vicious cycle of manipulation appears clear from the words of the former victim, regarding the reasons why she came to Italy: *“I followed my boyfriend because he told me I could work in his shop and make some money”*. And *“I wanted to help my boyfriend because I loved him, even though it was not the job I hoped for”*. (Informant 4)

Feigning romantic interest with the aim of exploiting a girl or a woman is in fact a common tactic. (Johansson, 2022) What is most striking from the interviewee's words is her total romantic investment in the relationship with her boyfriend, who had on the other hand a clear financial interest in her. Looking closely at the intersections between abusive romantic relationships and sex trafficking, we see that grooming, that is, the initial phase of approaching the victim, is another feature in common, even in cases of abusive relationships where sex trafficking is not involved. Victims can be groomed through the love approach, and then slowly transform the type of relationship, where intimidation, control and violence are alternated with affection and emotional dependence. (Van der Watt and Kruger, 2020) As the authors point out: *“these interpersonal features resemble typical domestic violence situations where violence and abuse do not consist of a single event but involve a continuous process which cannot be easily stopped”*. (Van der Watt and Kruger, p. 942, 2020)

From the perspective of psychological control, a common feature in gender-based violence cases, it could be hypothesized that, as already stated by some authors, what influences either the absence of self-identification, or the refusal to seek help, is the defense mechanism called trauma bonding. (Casassa, Knight, & Mengo, 2022) As Van der Watt and Kruger, (2020) note, the term trauma bonding, also used in place of indoctrination, brainwashing, and Stockholm syndrome, stands for dysfunctional emotional attachment between two people that develops in dangerous situations where there is a strong power imbalance between the victim and the 'abuser/offender, as reflected in the words: *“I didn't see any specific reason to do it. I wanted to help my boyfriend because I loved him, even though it was not the job”* (Informant 4). Indeed, the former victim says she loved her boyfriend at the time of exploitation, and gives herself as a motivation to help him, despite at the same time expressing dissatisfaction with that kind of job.

- **Vulnerabilities prior to trafficking**

As analyzed above, several authors have highlighted vulnerabilities to human trafficking. As determining factors for lifelong discrimination that raise the likelihood of human trafficking, variables like the lack of a safety net, inadequate access to education and economic empowerment, marriage and family planning, and access to justice also play a role. (Ferrell-Schweppenstedde, Hunt, & Matekaire, 2020). As stated by a volunteer: *“When you live in economic limitation and educational and cultural poverty, it is a snap to fall into traps of exploiters who promise a better life.”* (Informant 6)

As also previously pointed out by existing research, vulnerabilities prior to trafficking that also contributed to the refusal to ask for help were identified during the interviews as possibly influential.

Gender roles

As one outreach worker pointed out when talking about the victims she encounters: *“They are all females and in many cases very young”* (Informant 6), thus emphasizing how the intersecting factors of age and gender are the determining factor on vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Not only does being female constitute a vulnerability from the standpoint of mere physicality, but a clear pattern of thoughts and beliefs regarding gender roles emerges from the data, confirmed by the volunteer who states that: *“Girls are often the first to have preconceptions about their role in society as women”*. (Informant 7) Also one of the former victims appeared aware of these dynamics: *“There is this idea that women have to meet males demands, whether they are from a man you were pressured to marry, whether is from a stranger in the street”* and again *“You know males as they are, as long as certain things are in demand, there will be always girls to do it”*. (Informant 3) Intra and interpersonal experiences such as relational needs, and desires, (Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald, 2020) indeed shape expectations and behaviors of men and women, consequently a kind of normalization of the exploitation of women for sexual purposes can be seen. The theme of marriage also appears from the words of another former victim, who says, *“If I could back in time I would have probably listened to my mom's advice and get married soon”* (Informant 1) making it clear that the alternative to leaving for Italy was marriage. In the case of another former victim, marriage instead

represented her way out of human trafficking: *"I met a client who married me and helped me to pay my debt."* (Informant 2) In the marriage paradigm, not only is it possible to see a clear gender expectation, but also the contextual factor that fuels vulnerability to trafficking. Indeed, as was previously highlighted by the theoretical framework related to the societal formation of patriarchy and misogyny, (Figure 3) the findings resulted to be coherent with the work of Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald (2020). Findings reported in fact how cultural practices such as marriages keep girls in a subordinate position, as it appears to be the only future perspective they can rely on.

Socio-economic status

Culture not only can affect vulnerabilities related to expectations about gender roles, but also the individual's beliefs, as in the case of Juju ritual. In this sense, a cultural and religious belief can be a factor of vulnerability, being a tool of victim control. Socio-economic and cultural factors also constitute underlying vulnerabilities consequent to the systemic disadvantage and structural power to which some individuals are subjected in society. (Towns, 2015) (Alvarado Merino, & Lara, 2016). Lack of economic opportunities in the country of origin constitute further vulnerability to human trafficking (Van der Watt and Kruger, 2020) along with low education, as reflected in the words of these former victims: *"Back home there were no money and my family was very poor. I didn't finish school and I wanted to be a hairdresser."* (Informant 2) and *"I didn't finish school, so I grew up fast"*. (Informant 5)

In this sense, the intersectionality between socioeconomic status and traditional gender roles can be explained. Indeed, in a context where socioeconomic possibilities are almost nil, a fortification of gender norms that see marriage as a solution both socially and economically will be a direct consequence. As argued above by informant 2, the presence of the male figure in her life, which represent the socioeconomic power, (Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald, 2020) turns out to be not only the a priori cause of her sexual exploitation victimization, but also the only possible way out of it.

Family violence

Important are the words of the outreach worker who explained: *“Many have no family behind them, and still others have a troubled family with histories of abuse and exploitation within the family itself.”* (Informant 6)

The data revealed in fact that the vulnerabilities prior to trafficking experienced by some former victims also consisted of situational factors such as family violence. Past history of family violence does indeed appear to be in the experiences of some of the participants. According to one volunteer: *“Some women begin to experience extreme forms of violence even before they reach their destination in Europe.”* (Informant 6) This was further confirmed by the experience of a former victim who stated: *“Back home my dad was violent with me and my mom”* (Informant 1). Another participant also recounted about his abusive father: *“My dad used to beat me. When he left home my mom sent me to work as a maid, when I was 16. But this man was not good to me.”* (Informant 5) Interesting is the intersection between the experience of past abuse within the family of origin, and the subsequent abuse in the life of these women, consequently creating a vicious spiral of abuse. (Reid, Richards, Kulig, 2020). While in the sexual exploitation victims’ past the abuse constituted a vulnerability to exploitation, at the time of victimization this same vulnerability becomes a factor preventing help seeking, in the form of gender-based violence, due to which the victim is coercively controlled.

- **Intervention**

Finally, the results of the research gave key insights regarding how social workers can effectively intervene while using an intersectional and gender-sensitive approach to human trafficking.

The volunteers who were interviewed demonstrated in fact a good understanding of what this approach entails, while providing intuitions regarding the way they apply this approach. The first outreach worker who participated in the study, explained what applying an intersectional approach means to her: *“Giving a multidimensional look that considers the individual’s culture, religion, country of origin”*, and again: *“Identifying and addressing the potential disparities or discrimination”*. (Informant 6)

The male volunteer also explained how this approach is helpful to him during his work: *“I do a kind of briefing on myself, to check if I am having any preconceptions, biases.”* And *“By adopting this perspective, it is possible to see the dynamics interposed in the lives of these women that lead them to the “life choices””* (Informant 7) For him, an intersectional and gender-sensitive approach not only offers a tool to improve his personal approach, but also *“Inducing reflection and criticality”* (Informant 7) in the victims of sex trafficking with whom he interacts.

As claimed precisely by Gerassi and Nichols (2021), the intersectional framework is required to comprehend both the nature of trafficking threats and limitations to service access. And it is useful to notice how various oppressive institutions impact the service users' lived experiences, allowing one to perceive the person in all of his or her complexity and rejecting a theory that reduces a problem to one or more distinct causes. (Featherstone, 2022)

The implications for social work intervention that have been revealed by the research addressed two major sub-themes in order to improve outreach services dedicated to victims of sex trafficking.

Micro social work improvements

Both outreach workers who were interviewed for this study emphasized the importance of maintaining a nonjudgmental approach: *“It is important not to give an authoritarian idea, or an idea of “moral superiority”, because that way they will never trust you and will never allow us to help them.”* (Informant 6) In fact, obtaining trust represents the

characteristic of one of the main tasks of outreach social work, which is contact making. (Andersson, 2013) (Alrabe, Stover, Fulton, Raafi, & Walker, 2017)

Maintaining a non-judgmental approach also means to be open to differences, as the other volunteer stated: *“Confrontation without prejudice with one culturally opposed to yours can sometimes be a challenge”*, and: *“Open-mindedness to differences is something to work on every day.”* (Informant 7)

The interviews also revealed mental health consequences as a result of the condition of sexual exploitation, therefore a need of trauma-informed care. As the volunteer explained: *“When I confront a woman on the streets I must always consider that she may have experienced some form of violence”* (Informant 6) Experiencing physical and psychological violence has in most cases devastating effects on the victims thus making it necessary for outreach services to adopt a trauma-informed approach enabling outreach workers to be properly trained in this aspect. Consequences related to the mental health of the participants was revealed by the following statements: *“I didn’t like to sleep with strangers, it was very humiliating”* and *“I had reached a point where I simply couldn’t take it anymore. I was getting infections all the time and my health was bad. Sometimes I wanted to die”*. (Informant 3) Captivity and loss of autonomy are embedded in human trafficking experiences, therefore causing in the victims difficulties trusting others, problems with their own agency, assertiveness, and decision-making. (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019). Indeed, considering the extreme psychological consequences that victims of sexual exploitation experience, it is essential a trauma-informed approach by which social workers and volunteers can overcome attitudes of distrust and mistrust of the victims, who do not ask for help precisely because of the aforementioned consequences.

The study also found how common rapes were, although none of the interviewees reported it firsthand, probably as an avoidance attitude from the traumatic event. As explained by Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald (2020), dissociative survival responses allow the victim to disassociate from the violence suffered, perceiving it as inflicted on someone else.

A former victim recalled: *“I heard stories of women being raped”* (Informant 1)

The outreach worker also confirmed the experiences of traumatic and brutal violence that victims often undergo, stating: *“A woman once told me she was raped and beaten multiple times by the same men she was traveling with”*. (Informant 6)

The most frequent factor contributing to women's Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, is sexual assault (Ledray, Burgess, Giardino, 2011), therefore it can be referred to as Rape Trauma Syndrome (RTS). RTS was identified by Burgess and Holmstrom in 1974 and symptoms include flashbacks, intrusive rape thoughts, fear, anxiety, nightmares, day terrors, and phobias. (Burgess, & Holmstrom, 1974) It is important for service providers to recognize these symptoms, along with co-occurring disorders, such as alcoholism, eating disorders, depression, or anxiety. (Ledray, Burgess, Giardino, 2011)

Using a victim-centered, rights-based, non-judgmental models when working with survivors of trafficking and sexual assault also allow service providers to keep in mind that a trauma-informed care has to take into consideration the traumatic bonding some victims might have developed for the traffickers. As conceptualized in Casassa, Knight, & Mengo's work (2022) one of the consequences of trauma bond is the victim's gratitude toward the trafficker when he has positive interactions, and self-blame toward herself for negative interactions. In this sense, Sarson, Gordon and MacDonald (2020) explain how important it is interacting with victims to raise awareness.

“Raising awareness of patriarchal social construction helps illustrate to victimized women that they are not alone. This supports women to realize that it was not their fault or the fault of their vagina. Blaming their vagina led to some women to have deep expressions of body hatred- including self-cutting of their vagina. Realizing that being told it was their fault were lies the torturers inflicted onto them using misogynistic dehumanizing tones to intentionally slash at women's human dignity can also reduce self- blaming responses” (Casassa, Knight, & Mengo, p. 6, 2022)

The desire not to feel alone is expressed in the words of Informant 4, who stated: *“It is good to feel like you are not alone”*.

The study revealed how seeking alternative employment, and community and psychological support, is believed to be of great help in the prevention of re-victimization. When asked how they thought social services and organizations can be useful in avoiding that women go back to the streets, replies were: *“Helping them to find jobs and give them support”*. (Informant 1)

“Provide support to find work legally”. (Informant 2)

“I think it is important for girls to feel that they have other options than prostitution”. (Informant 3)

“A lot of psychological support and community support”. (Informant 4)

As previously depicted in the Integrated model of intervention for exiting prostitution by Baker, Dalla, & Williamson (Figure 4), it is clear how "The initial exit," that is, the first attempt to leave prostitution, is also the most delicate moment, during which many victims re-enter. During this stage victims return to the same individual, relational, structural, and social barriers that had previously caused the victimization, therefore moving back to stage 1: "Immersion".

Just according to this model, which supports what was revealed by the interviews, it can be inferred that community, psychological and job/opportunities related supports, constitutes a safety net that prevents the victim from falling again into the victimization caused by individual, relational, structural, and social barriers.

Multiple exits and returns are very common for the victims of sexual exploitation, as reported by a former victim: *"I escaped already twice prior to the last time"* (Informant 3).

Indeed, it is during the first exits from exploitation that victims need the most support. While not strictly outreach work, it includes a collaborative effort of social workers, psychologists, and law enforcement. It is in fact the early moments of rescue that are critical for the individual's ability to cope.

Providing services such as a central location for support; vocational and job training, health care, psychological care, counseling, and therapy, are indeed fundamental for proper recovery. (Arlow, 2016). An effective intervention with sex trafficking victims, as Arlow's (2016) research points out, must include:

- Building a positive, reliable rapport with the client.
- Evaluating the needs and strengths of the survivor.
- Creating a service strategy in collaboration with the client to accomplish desired results.
- Finding, connecting, and maintaining contact with required services and support.
- Keeping track of, coordinating, and modifying services and supports to produce the intended results.
- Offering support and services for crisis prevention and intervention.
- Self-advocacy training for the client as well as advocating on their behalf.

Both adult survivors and minor survivors must receive the proper legal and social support in order to secure their safety and well-being. This could entail giving them access to schooling, temporary housing, and medical care, as well as making sure they have access to social services and legal representation and that their rights are upheld. Increasing

protection for victims once they self-identify, must therefore be one of the primary goals of proper intervention. (Latham-Sprinkle, David, Bryant, & Larsen, 2019)

The volunteer stated: *“It is often very difficult for outreach workers to gain access to such an isolated and stigmatized type of population, especially in cases where workers are not properly trained”*. (Informant 6)

The difficulty in reaching this type of population is also found in 2022 ICAT Report, where it is stated that when the impacted population is virtually hidden, oversight and enforcement are far more difficult, especially when victims are deterred from coming forward by factors like the prospect of being prosecuted for crimes committed while being exploited. (ICAT, 2022)

Collaboration with law enforcement is necessary since it is responsible for identifying and prosecuting traffickers and investigated the cases of trafficking. Collaboration between law enforcement and social services is therefore imperative to address sex trafficking, so that a coordinated response can be created in order to combat the phenomenon.

However, it is important for law enforcement officers to be properly educated about the trauma of sexual exploitation, and the devastating effects it has on victims, both for the purpose of promptly recognizing the signs of sex trafficking and preventing future cases from occurring, and to offer appropriate support that does not get in the way of that of social workers.

Mezzo social work improvements

In addition to findings that relate purely to the relational area, or lack of proper training and funds, the study also highlighted how important stakeholding is: *“It would be important to strengthen partnerships with other local organizations, schools, churches so as to reach a wider population and build community connections.”* (Informant 7) and *“I think there should be more occasions for the girls to get involved with the local community.”* (Informant 1)

Both informants agreed on the necessity to strengthen partnerships among different stakeholders. Stakeholding can help in fact to build a holistic framework to ensure that victims are not only protected but also provided with education, job training, and other resources to help them rebuild their lives after being trafficked. Stakeholders can also

help to raise awareness of the issue of sex trafficking in their local communities. As the volunteer stated: *“I think we need to do more targeted campaigns and educate more of the population itself that is not involved in human trafficking, about what the reality of trafficking is.”* (Informant 7) Increasing public understanding and support for the victims is crucial for building up a network of services that are tailored to their unique needs. Not only is education of the population about sex trafficking indirectly helpful in outreach to victims, but it is of fundamental importance in prevention work. Educating the public about the prevalence of sex trafficking, can in fact help to reduce demand for trafficked persons and also help to protect vulnerable populations from exploitation. Indeed, joint work between social services, law enforcement, schools, community centers, workplaces, and media campaigns constitute important prevention work. (Samarasinghe, & Burton, 2007)

The issue regarding the lack of proper training unfortunately affects not only law enforcement, but social workers and volunteers themselves. As the outreach worker claimed: *“While the help of many volunteers is needed in this kind of work, very complicated and sensitive cases are often relied on by volunteers who should be properly trained, but this often does not happen, particularly when there are funding cuts and all activities carried out become basically not funded”.* (Informant 6)

Not only are there often volunteers who are not properly trained, but also the scarcity of financial funds turns out to be a problem: *“A good improvement would be making sure all the staff is properly trained and the programs well-funded, to ensure the possibility for it to sustain itself over time and therefore reaching out to more and more sex workers.”* (Informant 6)

Still other times, however, according to this volunteer, there is a lack of staff at all, consequently leading to an inability to reach out to those in need: *“Sometimes it is hard to reach out to all sex workers in the area due to the lack of staff.”* (Informant 7)

Conclusion

The results of the study answered the research questions that had been posed, providing important insights both for improved social work intervention and for possible future research. With the aim of answering the first question; what intersecting factors prevent youth victims of human trafficking from seeking help, findings showed a context of isolation, resistant behaviors towards social workers, and a pervasive victim-mindset as the major factors contributing to refusal for help. The results to the following question regarding the dynamics of violence and abuse inherent to the condition of victimhood, pointed out that gender-based violence in the form of physical and non-physical coercive control either by partners or by traffickers was present in almost all the participants recounts. The third question answered to how vulnerabilities to human trafficking contribute to the refusal to ask for help, highlighting that gender roles, the socio economic status, and family violence play an important role, in the willingness to get help. Finally, the results of the last question gave important insights on how outreach social workers can effectively intervene while using an intersectional and specifically a gender sensitive approach to human trafficking. Findings suggested that both micro social work improvements and mezzo social work improvements are necessary. An approach that is dedicated to the prevention of re-victimization, and at the same the use of a trauma informed care approach, is the first improvement regarding micro intervention. The mezzo intervention should instead focus on improve the quality and quantity of trainings offered to outreach workers, and more income for funds, along with improving the stakeholding network so that the community is more involved.

The results of the study highlighted the intersectionality inherent in the factors preventing youth victims of human trafficking to seek help and the connections with both dynamics of violence and abuse inherent to victimhood and the vulnerabilities prior to human trafficking. In fact, the dynamics of violence and abuse, which were encapsulated in gender-based violence, were found to be present both in vulnerability prior to trafficking and as an important factor in preventing help seeking, proving how inescapable the intersectional approach is for the analysis of sex trafficking. Isolation was proved as an impactful factor in the victim's life, as it causes the victim to reject

help offered by outreach services. Isolation of victims also constitutes a non-physical coercive control method by traffickers, who exert control and manipulation over victims. Control and manipulation were also found to be present as a vulnerability prior to trafficking in the lives of some participants, highlighting a history of abuse and family violence that are often present in those who are victims of gender-based violence as adults. Given the data for which victims of sexual exploitation are subjected to gender-based violence as an underlying factor to the victimization situation, there is a need for micro intervention for outreach workers to be trauma informed, also with the aim of preventing re-victimization, which was found to be very common. G.B.V. framework helps to explain factors preventing help seeking such as victim mindset and resistant behaviors, once again enhancing further intersections.

The cultural context of the informants was particularly important in determining dynamics such as Juju and precise expectations of gender roles, with the latter being instrumental in creating vulnerabilities to human trafficking.

As pointed out by the volunteers themselves who were interviewed for the research, an intersectional approach to sex trafficking is imperative to understand the dynamics and effects of the phenomenon. The intersectional and gender-sensitive approach, are useful both in implementing micro social work interventions that consider the intersectionality inherent in vulnerabilities and what they entail, and in mezzo social work interventions, where the multidimensionality of sex trafficking requires a multi-level intervention comprising different social actors.

It would be recommended for future research to support this qualitative study with quantitative research in order to confirm hypotheses about the phenomena brought by this study, in order to predict causal relationships and describe characteristics of the population on large scale. Indeed, one of the limitations of this study was that more participants could not be accessed. It would be necessary to broaden the scope of the research to include both more social workers and individuals who are still victims of sexual exploitation at the time of the research. The inclusion of individuals from the LGBTQ+ community would also give more data regarding the specific vulnerabilities of this population and consequently investigate their receptivity to outreach services. Existing research also does not demonstrate enough data on the sexual exploitation of men so that comparative data can be developed. Another aspect to consider for future research is the study of the intersections between different types of exploitation. Indeed, given the multi-dimensional nature of the phenomenon of trafficking in persons, it would

be useful to analyze the convergences between domestic servitude, forced labor and sexual exploitation, which particularly affect women and children from disadvantaged countries. Finally, it is important to expand research in the field of sex trafficking prevention as well as on interventions. So that the core causes of sex trafficking continue to be addressed, while putting effective preventive techniques into practice, which will ultimately lead to the development of a more safe and fair society.

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Appendices

Interview questions

Interviews with former sexual exploitation victims (5)

1. How old are you?
2. Do you identify yourself as woman, man, transgender, transsexual?
3. Where are you from?
4. How long have you been living in Italy? How did you come?
5. What made you decide to come to Italy?
6. Were you afraid of doing this travel? What were your thoughts and feelings back then?
7. Can you describe your life back home?
8. Were your family and friends supportive of your travel?
9. How would you describe your personal experience of coming here?
10. How did you feel? Was that what you expected?
11. Had you ever thought of asking for help back then? Can you tell me more about it?
12. Have you ever experienced episodes of violence both while living in Italy or prior? or heard of other girls experiencing it? Can you tell me more?
13. What were your feelings when you would think of seeking help?
14. Can you describe your support network here during that time?
15. How did you imagine your future during that time?
16. Is there anything would you change about your past? Can you tell me more?
17. What made you finally decide to ask for help? Is there any episode in particular that made you decide?
18. What happened when you asked for help?
19. Why do you think many victims prefer to not report their situation?
20. Do you think you might ever go back to that kind of work in the future? Why not/yes?
21. For what reasons, do you think many girls end up being sexually exploited?
22. How do you think social services/ organizations can be useful in avoiding that women go back to the streets?

23. How do you think these services can be improved?

Interviews with volunteers-outreach workers (2)

1. How would you describe the intersectional approach/gender perspective while doing outreach work with victims of sex trafficking?
2. How do you think those perspectives are taken into account?
3. Can you give me an example from your experience on how do you apply these approaches?
4. What are the most common forms of violence experienced by victims?
5. What are the challenges you face in providing this type of street support?
6. Why do you think many victims do not escape the exploitative situation?
7. What happens when a victim says she wants to escape the trafficking situation?
8. What opportunities do the existing programs provide and how do victims respond?
9. What do you think are the causes of vulnerabilities of the sex trafficking victims you encounter?
10. In your opinion what are the limitations of this type of work and how could it be improved?



Funded by the
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App.4 Declaration of informed consent for fieldwork

Informed consent

The following is a presentation of how I will use the data collected in the interview.

In order to ensure that projects meet the ethical requirements for good research I promise to adhere to the following principles:

- Interviewees in the project will be given information about the purpose of the project.
- Interviewees have the right to decide whether they will participate in the project, even after the interview has been concluded.
- The collected data will be handled confidentially and will be kept in such a way that no unauthorized person can view or access it.

The interview will be recorded as this makes it easier for me to document what is said during the interview and helps me in the continuing work with the project. In my analysis, some data may be changed so that no interviewee will be recognized. After finishing the project, the data will be destroyed. The data I collect will only be used in this project.

You have the right to decline answering any questions or terminate the interview without giving an explanation.

You are welcome to contact me or my supervisor in case you have any questions (e-mail addresses below).

Student name & e-mail

Supervisor name & e-mail

Interviewee



NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT

Lucia Brindisi (European Master's in Social Work with Children and Youth, ESWOCHY) hereby agrees not to disclose, publish, or otherwise reveal any of the Confidential Information received from _____, outreach workers or other participants of the project to any other party whatsoever except with the specific prior written authorization of _____.

All data will be kept stored confidentially and deleted once the research is completed.

Signature

**MYKOLAS ROMERIS UNIVERSITY
FACULTY OF HUMAN AND SOCIAL STUDIES
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES AND SOCIAL WORK
DR. RIMVYDAS AUGUTAVIČIUS**

To Whom It Might Concern

REQUEST

2023-05-09

Vilnius

I hereby request to allow Lucia Brindisi, 2nd-year student of full-time studies in Erasmus Mundus funded European Joint Master in Social Work with Children and Youth (ESWOCHY) to carry out a research project for her Master's thesis on the topic of "Outreach Social Work with Youth Victims of Human Trafficking in Italy: an Intersectional Approach" at the institution under your supervision. Aim of the research: exploring the experiences of victims of sex trafficking, and suggesting improvements regarding the design of outreach activities in the area of sexual exploitation.

ESWOCHY is implemented by the universities of the Consortium that is Mykolas Romeris University (LT), Riga Stradins University (LV), The Catholic University in Ruzomberok and Iscte University Institute of Lisbon (PT).

Supervisor of Master Thesis:



Dr. Rimvydas Augutavičius

Director of Institute of
Educational Sciences and
Social Work:



prof. dr. Valdonė Indrašienė

Non-plagiarism declaration

Submitted to the Erasmus Mundus Master’s Program in Social Work with Child and Youth:

- Has not been submitted to any other Institute/University/College
- Contains proper references and citations for other scholarly work
- Contains proper citation and references from my own prior scholarly work
- Has listed all citations in a list of references.

I am aware that violation of this code of conduct is regarded as an attempt to plagiarize and will result in a failing grade in the program.

Date (dd/mm/yyyy): .22/05/2023.....

Signature:

Name (in block letters):Lucia Brindisi.....