



Article

Anti-Trafficking Professionals and Institutionalized Violence in Spain: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract: In recent decades, an anti-trafficking legislative and policy framework has been developed in Spain, coupled with the funding of initiatives related to the protection of trafficked persons, especially women, largely carried out by faith-based and secular organizations. Using 25 interviews conducted with people employed in programmes targeting trafficked women in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, this article provides deeper exploration of this under-studied subject with a view to gaining a better understanding of the work experiences of professionals involved in these initiatives, with special attention paid to the challenges they face in enacting anti-trafficking activities while avoiding producing violence on assisted persons. The experiences of these professionals highlight that the neoliberal outsourcing of services to non-governmental organizations nevertheless contributes towards making anti-trafficking an apparatus in which violence materializes and reproduces. Significantly, this violence involves not only the people who are being assisted as trafficking victims but also some anti-trafficking professionals.

Keywords: human trafficking; neoliberalism; violence; Spain



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1. Introduction: Trafficking, Anti-Trafficking and Violence

Since the end of the Cold War, the discourse of different governments, non-governmental organizations and international agencies has converged in recognising “human trafficking” as a problem and describing it as a form of violence.¹ It has come to be understood as a violation of individual bodily integrity and, under the influence of radical feminism, has largely attributed to patriarchal sexual domination and criminal behaviours (Clemente 2023; Suchland 2015; Ward and Wylie 2017). This convergence is reflected in the diffusion of portrayals of the problem in newspapers, films, artistic works and celebrity interventions that mainly rely on presenting spectacular depictions of the bodies of innocent and passive female victims who have been tortured by foreign male traffickers, then saved by Western rescuers (Andrijasevic and Mai 2016; Molland 2019; O’Brien 2019). These understandings and representations of human trafficking contribute to normalizing carceral policies and interventions focused on saving individual victims and punishing deviant individuals (Bernstein 2018; Musto 2016).

Rather than outlining a detailed genealogy of mainstream discourse on human trafficking, considering that this issue has been extensively explored in prior studies (Suchland 2015; Weitzer 2007), the focus in this article will be on some criticisms of this narrow understanding of human trafficking as a highly visible form of extraordinary physical violence perpetrated on individual victims. More specifically, this involves engagement with critical trafficking studies—sometimes described as “anti-anti-trafficking studies” (Marcus and Snajdr 2013)—a school of thought that has attempted to redirect attention towards a more complex view of human trafficking, seeing it as a product of larger structural systems that

create massive inequalities, as well as classed, gendered and racialized forms of discrimination, resulting in a restriction of social and spatial mobility for many individuals and groups (Suchland 2015; Wylie 2023). This means that there is a need to recognise that hegemonic human trafficking discourse can support a kind of silent “structural” or “indirect” violence that “shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances” for certain individuals and groups (Galtung 1969, p. 171).

As structurally generated violence, human trafficking has been described as something that cannot be solved through “short-term ‘solutions’” (Schwarz 2023, p. 537) focused on the punishment of traffickers, leaving little room for policy change, including current migration and employment regulations (Clemente 2022b; Piscitelli 2022). Drawing on peace studies, Gillian Wylie (2023) added that classic narratives that focus on the physical violence of traffickers can be understood as forms of “cultural” violence in themselves, repressing knowledge of the complexity of the migration experience and stereotyping protagonists (see Galtung 1990). Moreover, according to Wylie (2023), mainstream orientalist representations of trafficking mask and legitimize “structural” violence that leads to the exploitation of many people on the move, as well as the “direct” violence of securitized anti-trafficking responses that rely on border controls, “raid and rescue” operations, detentions and deportations (Bernstein 2018; Kempadoo 2004; Piscitelli 2013; Silva et al. 2013; see also Galtung 1990).

Research on the “protection” of trafficked persons confirms the violent nature of mainstream discourse on human trafficking. In fact, although the implementation and operationalization of protection measures can vary greatly between regions and countries, violent misrecognition of the emotional and material expectations of trafficked persons and the imposition of certain “solutions” by anti-trafficking “actors” characterizes interventions in many different contexts. This violence—also described in terms of “symbolic violence” (Bearup 2020; see also Bourdieu and Passeron 1977)—is, firstly, produced by the substantial subordination of the “pillar” of the “protection” to that of the “prosecution” of traffickers, which often jeopardizes even the formal identification as “trafficking victims” of persons who are unwilling or unable to cooperate in criminal investigations against traffickers (Bearup 2020; Brunovskis and Surtees 2012; Clemente 2022b; GAATW 2010; UNODC 2009).

Moreover, analysis of shelter-based services—an integral part of many protection programmes—reveals the violence produced through the imposition of gender-biased services and limitations of freedom, an isolation from broader society and, even before all this takes place, the involuntary placement and detention of trafficked migrants in shelter programmes against their will (Bearup and Seng 2020; Cordisco Tsai et al. 2022a, 2022b; Gallagher and Pearson 2010; Lee 2014; Wilson 2019). Judgment, stigmatization, control and discipline of the victim’s body via a quasi-punitive system of custody, which tends to favour the “cure” at the expense of “care”, are among the elements that have influenced relationships within trafficking-specific services, reproducing violence within anti-trafficking apparatuses (Brunovskis and Surtees 2012; Clemente 2021a; Cordisco Tsai et al. 2022a; Giordano 2014; Lee 2014).

This raises numerous questions related to the experiences of individual anti-trafficking professionals, people who can be passionate and enthusiastic, sincerely motivated by the idea that their work matters (Marcus and Curtis 2014). However, they can also do enormous harm to “trafficking victims” without intending to, merely by performing their duties as defined by the institutions and organizations in which they operate (Galtung 1985). Evidence produced in various contexts confirms that these anti-trafficking professionals can, in fact, be accomplices in the violence perpetrated during “protection” interventions (Brunovskis 2024; Clemente 2021b; Cordisco Tsai et al. 2022b).

Building on critical trafficking scholarship, this article aims to contribute to debate on the link between trafficking, anti-trafficking and violence, focusing on workers involved in providing assistance to trafficked persons within anti-trafficking non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These professionals are a pivotal element of protection interventions. In fact, international instruments such as the Council of Europe Convention on Action

against Trafficking in Human Beings recognise the critical role played by NGOs in the provision of services to victims of trafficking, resulting in many countries setting up their own forms of institutional co-operation with certain NGOs, to whom responsibility for giving support to victims has been delegated (Clemente 2022a).

The article further employs the concepts of “systemic violence” and “institutional violence” (Ruggiero 2019). The first concept helps expose the harm trafficked persons suffer from the social structure that anti-trafficking apparatuses sustain and reproduce throughout their policies and practices, preventing “victims”—and other individuals, such as some anti-trafficking professionals—from satisfying their needs and expectations. The harm suffered within anti-trafficking can, sometimes, be an outcome of violations perpetrated by certain individuals and NGOs acting within anti-trafficking against the principles and philosophies that they outwardly adhere to, allowing them to hold positions of privilege. In other words, this harm takes the form of “institutional violence”. Keeping in mind the need for a deeper understanding of anti-trafficking individual workers and the world they inhabit (Lindquist 2013), this article aims to ask: What is the understanding of protection practices among these professionals? To what extent can professionals engaged in protection of trafficked persons promote social justice, contributing to satisfying the expectations, needs and rights of assisted persons? Do they have the possibility of transforming apparatuses that are pregnant with violence into less violent ones?

In order to respond to these questions, the article focuses on the Spanish context where, between 2018 and 2020, 25 qualitative interviews were conducted with professionals employed in protection programmes of anti-trafficking NGOs. As we will see in more detail in the methodological section, these professionals work as programme managers, project coordinators, social workers and social educators in the Autonomous Community of Madrid.² The discussion that follows highlights the fact that many professionals recognize systemic and institutional violence perpetrated on “trafficking victims” within “protection” interventions. Meanwhile, the working conditions of many of these professionals challenges their ability to act in a way that responds to the expectations, needs and rights of assisted persons, particularly violent unequal power relations within anti-trafficking limits the ability to promote social justice of these individuals. Instead, the neoliberal ethos that pervades anti-trafficking responses contributes to an institutionalization of violence within the anti-trafficking apparatus, violence that may, in fact, be extended to anti-trafficking professionals themselves, who are, in turn, faced with the challenge of reconciling their personal and professional expectations with reality. All this contributes to making these professionals another set of “victims” of the systemic and institutional violence of the anti-trafficking apparatus.

1.1. The Spanish Context

Proceeding towards an elaboration of the context of the study, since the offense of “human trafficking” was introduced into the Spanish Criminal Code (CC) in 2010, Spain has been developing an anti-trafficking legislative and policy framework, receiving a certain amount of international recognition for its efforts to combat human trafficking (GRETA 2023; US Department of State 2023). The 2023 United States (US) Department’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, for example, classifies Spain as a Tier 1 country, meaning that it meets fully the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)’s minimum standards for the elimination of human trafficking (US Department of State 2023). While the TIP reports—as well as the TVPA—have been heavily criticized for being, among other things, punishment oriented and influenced by US geopolitical interests (Bernstein 2018; Chuang 2006), they also end up describing countries like Spain as examples of commitment to anti-trafficking, and as such, deserving of special attention. However, the experiences of professionals engaged in protection interventions of anti-trafficking NGOs in Spain remains relatively under-studied, providing a rationale for questioning this view in this article.

It should also be said that Spain is usually described as a “destination” and “transit” country for trafficked persons. In particular, according to the recent GRETA report (2023),

a total of 1,687 persons were identified as “victims of trafficking” in the country between 2017 and 2022. In this national context, characterized by heated clashes between radical feminism and sex work feminism on prostitution (conceptualized by the former as an expression of patriarchal male violence against women and, in the latter, as a form of legitimate labour), public and political debate on trafficking has historically focused on trafficking in women and girls for the sex trade. Even one of the most recent instruments Spain has adopted—the “Operational Plan for the Protection of the Human Rights of Women and Girls Victims of trafficking, Sexual Exploitation and Women in Contexts of Prostitution (2022–2026)”, also known as *Plan Camino*—confirms, starting with its title, a special concern with the trafficking of women and girls. Human trafficking also tends to be framed as a form of gender violence that “exists because prostitution exists” (MHSSE 2008, p. 8, authors’ translation), and “the demand for sexual services is identified as one of the main causes of trafficking for sexual exploitation” (MHSSE 2015, p. 6, authors’ translation). The prevailing idea is that the sale of sex does not contemplate the possibility that this might actually be an employment option for certain women, men and trans people, as has been suggested by an important body of literature that has also challenged the ideological overlap between sex work and sex trafficking (Acién-González 2022; Juliano 2005; Maqueda Abreu 2020).

Furthermore, as is the case in various European contexts, assistance measures for victims of trafficking in Spain include accommodation, psychological assistance, medical assistance, material assistance, interpretation services and legal counsel (GRETA 2023). The recent *Plan Camino*, that foresees approximately EUR 204 million being allocated towards the implementation of anti-trafficking activities during the period 2022–2026, has doubled the budget available for these actions compared to the past (MHSSE 2015, 2022a), with the provision of victim assistance services primarily focused on accommodation in long- and short-term shelters. However, these resources, in addition to being mainly targeted at sex trafficked women, are not uniformly distributed across the country, being concentrated in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, wherein, among other things, the largest number of accommodation places for trafficked women can be found.

These circumstances have suggested focusing on the Autonomous Community of Madrid, considering in an innovative way the experience of professionals involved in protection interventions. That research conducted specifically on anti-trafficking interventions has largely focused on the evolution of the Spanish national legislative and its operational framework provides additional justification (León 2010; Miranda-Ruche and Estiarte 2021). Such work has only exceptionally involved the participation of migrant workers who have been identified and assisted as “victims of trafficking”, despite there being a rich body of studies that includes the participation of migrants, especially women in the sex market, highlighting numerous forms of “collateral damage” arising from anti-trafficking measures in this country (Dottridge 2018; see also Acién-González 2022, 2024; Antolínez Domínguez and Jorge Barbuzano 2017; Cordero Ramos and Cáceres 2020; Riopedre López 2019). More recently, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, research has increasingly focused on the implications for sex trafficked women and sex workers—although the latter remain essentially outside of political concerns and interventions (Acién-González and Arjona-Garrido 2022; García-Vázquez and Meneses-Falcón 2023; see also Agustín 2007). The few empirical studies that have focused on the experience of people assisted as victims of trafficking in Spain have, however, highlighted the fact that interventions can reproduce forms of violence not present in popular representations of trafficking, which tend to focus on abuses associated with violence in international trafficking networks (Sierra-Rodríguez and Clemente 2023).

As a whole, this body of research seems to be suggesting a reproduction by the Spanish anti-trafficking apparatus of forms of violence as has been encountered in other contexts. We refer specifically to the violence produced on victims of trafficking, and migrant workers not labelled as such, who are limited in terms of possibilities to improve their life situations through interventions oriented around the securitization of migration

and the interpretation of trafficking through an exclusive criminalization lens. Violence also arises from the “omissions” of an apparatus that is not interested in the recognition of sex work as work, thus ignoring the needs of many migrant sex workers exploited in the sex market (see also [Ruggiero 2019](#)). This violence overlaps and intertwines with the violence produced by the imposition of a certain trafficking discourse on “victims” and their “protection” that allows new forms of control and discipline in anti-trafficking interventions to emerge.

As previously stated, we consider that better knowledge of individual workers involved in the assistance of trafficked persons and their experiences can offer important insights into the functioning of the Spanish anti-trafficking apparatus and the possibilities of transforming an apparatus laden with violence into a less violent one, providing impetus for this article.

2. Methodology

Regarding methodological approach, this article integrates the analysis of documents, including Protocols, Laws, Action Plans and Reports, with interviews conducted with anti-trafficking professionals employed in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Autonomous Community of Madrid. In total, 25 interviews were conducted with programme managers, project coordinators, social workers and social educators at different times between 2018 and 2020.

During the research, 15 NGOs involved in anti-trafficking activities in the Autonomous Community of Madrid were contacted.³ Six NGOs made the participation of their staff possible, the result being that over half of the participants in the research, a total of 13 participants, were from these institutions. However, most of these organizations limited the participation of their staff members for reasons related to their work commitments. As a result, 12 further participants were found via contacts made by the second author of this article during previous work in the anti-trafficking sector.

This complex recruitment process firstly suggests that there are some challenges to consider in future research by scholars outside the anti-trafficking field. In the context of our research, the dynamics of recruitment contributed to a strong representation of participants from three organizations: the Association for the Prevention, Reintegration and Care of Prostituted Women (APRAMP), the Commission for the Investigation of Mistreatment of Women (CIMT) and the Esperanza Project.⁴ While these organizations have a leading role in assistance activities in the context of the study ([Comunidad de Madrid 2016](#); [GRETA 2018](#); [MHSSE 2022b](#)), it should be noted that there are potential biases in the types of experiences captured, including a potential over-representation of work experiences that are described as challenging and sometimes traumatic.

The participants were 23 women and 2 men between the ages of 25 and 55. Overall, 4 were under 29 years of age, 16 were between 30 and 39 years old, 4 were between 40 and 49 years old and 1 was over 50 years old. All had experience in different work roles and aspects of the protection process, including victim detection and residential care programmes.

Throughout the research, ethical standards, as defined by the University of Granada in accordance with the legislation of the European Community, the Spanish State and the Autonomous Community, were maintained, with interviewees provided with details of the study and consent obtained prior to the start of each interview. The interviews lasted between 30 and 80 min; 24 were carried out in Spanish and 1 in English. Twenty-two of the interviews were face-to-face, in places defined by the participants, while 1 was online and 2 were via telephone. None of the participants received any payment. The interviews were recorded, then transcribed, translated and analysed by the authors. Anonymity has emerged as a relevant aspect during the study due to a fear of possible retaliation from organizations in which interviewees were employed, leading to the anonymizing of identifying details.

The topics covered in the interviews centred on protection interventions in which anti-trafficking professionals were involved and the post-trafficking experiences of assisted women. Even before this, interviews explored the work experience of participants within the NGO in which they are employed, with this article focusing on themes including job precarity and the working conditions of anti-trafficking professionals, as well as their relationships with the management structures, their colleagues and assisted women.

3. Results

3.1. Working in Anti-Trafficking: Stable Precariousness and Widespread Exploitation

In this section, we focus on answers to questions regarding participants' work within the NGOs in which they are currently employed. As we noted in the introductory section, the humanitarian focus and the principles adhered to by many Spanish anti-trafficking NGOs have enabled them to generate symbolic and economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). However, this does not seem to create optimal working conditions for professionals directly engaged with people who are assisted as "trafficking victims".

Our research actually reveals that workplaces are, in fact, characterized by widespread job insecurity. However, this does not involve all of the professionals interviewed, with differences according to level of seniority. Approximately half the participants who took part in the research had permanent positions, seven as programme coordinators and project managers and six as social workers and social educators. The remaining interviewees held temporary positions, employed as social workers or social educators through what are known as "work or service" contracts, a form of fixed-term contract in force prior to 2022 in Spain that allowed employers to hire workers for a fixed period of time for specific services within a company. This explains the high degree of labour precarity among social workers and social educators and provides a foundation for a polarization of power and resources that is to the detriment of these professionals, who also happen to be the same people who have the greatest proximity to the assisted people, engaged in demanding emotional labour with them on a daily basis (see Hochschild 1983).

To obtain a better idea of the complex experience of such workers, it is necessary to consider that around half of them referred to the alternation of such temporary posts with voluntary positions within an organization, creating a kind of stable precariousness. This was the experience of one social worker, who explained that:

I started with an internship. Then I continued as a volunteer and, after six months, they offered me a temporary contract of 20 h a week. I work within projects, with 20 h a week, and as a volunteer between one project and another (Interview 15, October 2019).

Similarly, the following participant noted that:

My main function is to cover the central areas of the city and industrial polygons.⁵ I collaborate in all activities related to the topic of prostitution—European projects, network meetings, participation in conferences, etc. I started about three years ago as a volunteer for six months. Then I spent a year and a half abroad. When I returned, I took it up again as a volunteer. I have been working within this organization since April and was officially hired in September, because we were involved in a fairly extensive European project, and now I am working within it (Interview 11, January 2019).

Volunteers, therefore, would seem to be entrusted with the functions of the professional placement and ensuring the stabilization of a state of precariousness: objectives that are very distant from the, perhaps romantic, ideal of practicing and spreading the values of solidarity, subsidiarity and democracy. If we want to be more severe, volunteering—something that needs to be understood in this context as unpaid work—might be described as a form of exploitation that means professional social workers and social educators are effectively paying to have access to precarious work through sacrificing their own time to their employers.

Alongside this form of precariousness, numerous professionals referred to widespread work overload. This was especially the case for people involved in victim detection, an activity that can occupy long and intense working hours. One of the participants explains the circumstances that encouraged her to leave identification work within one of the anti-trafficking NGOs:

I was very good at it and could identify victims quickly. I spoke Romanian with them because many did not know how to express themselves in another language. During the interventions I felt very alone: when they [the victims] collapsed, I collapsed with them, and my colleagues thought it was better to leave us alone. After talking to the victims, I had to tell my colleagues what we had talked about and I had to write the report. Since I spoke Romanian, I was exploited to the maximum by the organization and when I couldn't take it anymore, I had to leave (Interview 15, October 2019).

Over one-quarter of the total participants in this study also reported carrying out activities and taking on responsibilities that were not foreseen in their contractual commitments. As explained by this interviewee:

[Within the organization] they expect us to perform the functions of social educators, but they hire us within the category of social educator assistant because the remuneration is lower. The salary tables and functions are totally different but we do reports, workshops and planning, all the things that are typical of social educators (Interview 7, March 2020).

Similarly, another participant stated that:

My position was that of a social worker even though I carried out the role of educator, because I often had to replace people who had left the organization and I knew how it worked. Without changing my contract, I worked as an educator (Interview 4, July 2019).

Overall, the working conditions of these professionals had an impact on how they evaluated their experiences in anti-trafficking. Sometimes described in terms of “exploration”, these experiences appear to transcend what is allowed by the law. Challenging personal and professional expectations, and the needs of many participants in this research, precarity, overwork and taking on unforeseen responsibilities produce forms of systemic and institutional violence that are in direct contrast to the humanitarian principles and values to which the NGOs in which they are employed officially adhere to. What we have termed “stable precariousness” and outright exploitation—reported especially by social workers and social educators, in both permanent and precarious positions—also produces recurring change in the composition of work teams, affecting the continuity—and quality—of services offered to trafficked persons, something that, as we will see, various professionals recognize as just one of the challenges arising in the “protection” paths of many trafficked women.

3.2. Between “Protection” and Tensions, Conflicts and Institutional Violence

Moving on to consider more closely interactions among anti-trafficking professionals within the NGOs in which they are employed, these relationships are often problematized by the participants, while also stimulating critical reflection on the services that they offered and the need to promote good practices in their interventions. In regard to how this reflection emerges, work overload and competitiveness between social workers and social educators, as well as management staff, are at the heart of many conflicts, as is the realisation that certain aspects of the job are absurd. In the words of one social worker:

I had thirteen weekly contract hours, but of course in reality there were many more. It was a thirteen-hour contract with which I couldn't make ends meet, with a totally horrible schedule in which my boss took advantage and told me, “What

do you have left, three hours? Well, come here now because I need you to do, I don't know what" (Interview 24, May 2019).

Such working conditions can put relationships with fellow workers, and the management of organizations, under strain as people try to reconcile personal concerns with institutional demands. This is evident in the experience of the following participant:

There is not much understanding between the boss and some colleagues. There is not a good working environment. From the moment I started I had the feeling that there is a very strange atmosphere. People spoke in very low voices: when you enter a room, everyone immediately shuts up. There are many bad relationships between colleagues, especially among mediators. Some colleagues respond badly to you, they can offend you as if it were a normal thing. There is often a lot of pressure and if someone at the top finds out there has been a negative comment about the organization, they immediately come looking for you to find out what was said, who said it, etc. This seems to be the biggest concern of the organization: controlling all the time who says what, nothing else. There is a lot of pressure in a distressing atmosphere (Interview 5, February 2020).

The following interviews are particularly relevant. They suggest that expectations and, in some cases, the rigid disciplinary measures that characterize the process of assisting trafficked women generates further tension among professionals. This is particularly true of those who are in closest contact with assisted persons, some of whom are critical of some of the choices made by NGO management. However, the criticism expressed is not the subject of discussion within NGOs, something that often produces further conflicts. This is well explained by a participant who stated that:

It is supposed to be an example for the sheltered women. An example of what is expected of them as women and thus teaching them to clean, to dress correctly, to adapt to Spanish culture. There was a coordinator who did not work at the shelter but her function included deciding which victims should continue to stay in the project, i.e., in the shelter. The choice is usually based on a completely subjective criteria, in favour of "non-problematic" women who knew Spanish. All this can have an impact on relationships within the shelter and with other workers. Educators do not always agree with what is asked by superiors but no one wants to have problems with them. The role of educators is limited to what is asked from above. What we end up doing is ensuring that even the assisted women comply with what is asked from above (Interview 22, November 2019).

Forms of control and discipline that involve, in particular, sexuality, imposed on both professionals and assisted women, constitute a further source of tension within anti-trafficking NGOs. This is exemplified by the experience of a lesbian social worker who reported tensions related to her sexual orientation. She also points towards conflicts within some anti-trafficking organizations—especially but not exclusively faith-based organizations—related to choosing to support assisted women in interrupting unplanned pregnancy, even if regulated access to voluntary interruption of pregnancy has been provided in Spain since 2010 (see Organic Law 2/2010, of March 3). In the words of the following participant:

Assisted women are asked to engage in non-sexual behaviour. On two occasions we also had women who became pregnant and wanted to abort. It was done, but without the approval of the [religious order]. I interceded for the woman, and well, the coordinator took it personally. She told me that if I accompanied her to the hospital, she was going to personally ensure that I no longer worked in the organization, neither that one nor any of the rest of the agencies. Another time we had the case of a lesbian woman who had a Spanish partner and it was a very, very big conflict for the simple fact of being a lesbian. This accelerated her exit from the shelter. Sexuality is a taboo topic. Much more so if it is non-normative.

Even for professionals, saying that you are lesbian has consequences. There are organized workshops, for example, but as a lesbian, I was not allowed to give any (Interview 16, June 2019).

Several professionals also described strong conflicts that, at first glance, call into question conflicting ideas about selling sex. In particular, they reported pressure to register all sex workers as “victims of trafficking” or “victims of sexual exploitation”, justified by the fact that, according to the neo-abolitionist NGOs in which they work, a different option would not properly consider the experience of women in prostitution. In this regard, the following participant reported that:

There is a lot of pressure in the activities we carry out. Colleagues tell you: “Mark ‘sexual exploitation’ because if you report ‘prostitution’ the lawyer will come and ask the reason for you reporting ‘prostitution’”. And they ask for marking women as “victims of trafficking”, especially if they had debt. They told us, “If there is debt, mark trafficking” (Interview 5, February 2020).

The same professional added:

The NGO almost encourages you to fight with the other [pro-sex work] NGOs. This says that “the other [pro-sex work] NGOs are only going to distribute material, so they are promoting prostitution”. This told you that: “If you arrive at a place and there is another [pro-sex work] NGOs there, well, they cannot be there because this area is ours, because we have been here since 1900”. One of the managers criticized a professional who had worked there but who was no longer working there saying that: “when this girl went out with the mobile unit, she sometimes referred the women to other different [that is, pro-sex work] NGOs” (Interview 5, February 2020).

The operational indications that are being reported and apparently justified by neo-abolitionist views of prostitution reveal their neoliberal character, especially when we consider the broader guidelines that characterize interventions involving trafficked persons. Among other things, collaborative relationships with other anti-trafficking NGOs—both neo-abolitionist and pro-sex work—seem to be basically discouraged, especially in the work of referring “victims”:

The organization discourages you from referring women to other [anti-trafficking] entities and organizations. Once we advised a woman to contact the municipality but they told us that before speaking to the municipality’s social worker, the victim had to be registered with [organization’s name]. The real aim of the intervention was for the women to contact [organization’s name] so that there can be a record stating that “she came that day and was assisted”, that’s it. Because project evaluations are done in quantitative terms. Therefore, it is not so much the quality of the intervention that matters, but the quantity of people registered as assisted (Interview 24, May 2019).

To summarize, we can say that many professionals recognize the control and discipline that relates to the sexual choices of assisted women and can contribute to their leaving assistance paths. There is no shortage of such people, especially social workers and social educators, who wish to resist the expectations imposed from above in these paths. However, control and discipline extend to these professionals themselves, who are frequently limited in the scope of their action by the threat of losing their (precarious) job. The resulting stress adds to those produced by the working conditions that various professionals experience, often compromising relationships and collaborations with management and other colleagues. None of this creates ideal conditions for self-reflection within anti-trafficking NGOs about the interventions being implemented, challenging the process of improving their operation and making best use of the benefits that the assisted women and the workers can gain from them.

The complex clash of conservative morality with a neoliberal logic that has come to characterize interventions is particularly evident when it comes to the identification of “trafficking victims”. The number of identifications can have an impact on the funding of NGOs, which therefore puts pressure on workers to identify as many women as possible as “trafficking victims” as well as discourages collaboration with other anti-trafficking NGOs and institutions, all of whom are competing for funding aimed at “protection”. As a result, interventions end up focusing on the defence of the economic capital of the NGOs, a position that, once again, contrasts with the humanitarian values they outwardly declare. In describing this praxis, there are no doubts: “It is institutional violence. In the end you end up leaving there with anxiety attacks. I talk about this and my hair stands on end”. (Interview 8, November 2019)

3.3. *Anti-Trafficking Professionals and Assisted Women*

In this last section, we focus on relationships between individual professionals and assisted women. Again, participants point out the importance of their working conditions and suggest that a lack of quality can challenge the process of generating trust with assisted women and helping to improve the emotional and material stability of the latter. The following participant focused their attention firstly on the problem of continuous change in the composition of work teams as one of the most visible aspects of the precarity that characterizes the experiences of people in closest contact with assisted women:

The rotation of educators is a problem. They leave very soon, after an average of about three months. It happens that assisted victims are sick and tired of changing reference figures, reference educators, to whom at a certain moment in time they need to talk to about their history. They are fed up with always telling the same things to different people, generating a bond that will be broken after three months, and then seeing new educators arrive. They say, “Don’t take it personally, it’s just that we are sick and tired of opening up, of trusting, after what we have been through and, after three months, doing it again with new people” (Interview 7, March 2020).

Even before considering the impact of frequent change within the composition of work teams, analysis of the interviews raises the subject of tensions produced in the relationships between social workers and educators on the one hand and victims on the other by the implementation of control measures and rigid discipline on the latter. This may include strict care activities and the regulation of common spaces, justified by the need to provide a “cure” for “bad habits” associated with the practice of prostitution among women who have been discriminated against due to class and racial differences as well as the stigma of prostitution itself. This is well explained by the following interview:

[Sheltered women] get up between 7am and 7:30am and they have to clean the kitchen, living room, hallways, bathrooms, every day. Everything every day! Who cleans their house before going to work every day, all the rooms in the house at 7am? Nobody. But they have to do it! This happens to them because they come from the sex market and it is an almost classist perspective. If they do not want to have dinner, our superiors tell us: “Girls, even if she does not want to have dinner, you have to force her to have dinner because they are healthy habits, because of where they come from” (Interview 7, March 2020).

The following social workers added:

We cleaned the shelter more than our houses so that there would be no problems with the management. I remember cleaning the floor on my knees. These are the rules of the shelter, so it is complicated. Then also, they could not drink alcohol. I am not talking within the shelter. It is not allowed to drink anything outside either (Interview 22, November 2019).

Other practices, including the requisition of money, documents and personal possessions, contribute towards creating conflicts between assisted women and social workers and social educators, called to account for rigidly applying certain protocols. In some cases, tensions and conflicts are caused by what is described as a lack of clarity and transparency in the management of financial relationships between assisted women and organizations. In particular, one of the participants reported that:

The organization pays their fees as well as something the women need to pay. However, when the victims leave the shelter or find some employment or some type of economic income, they are charged for these expenses. Nobody explains it to them clearly, but when they are going to enter the world of work and have some kind of money, they have to pay. And then the problems begin (Interview 4, July 2019).

As the following interviewee confirms, social workers and social educators in direct contact with trafficked women are the professionals on whom fall the responsibilities of management, and decisions taken during their “protection” do not always seem to favour the reintegration of assisted women:

We stopped doing workshops. The women were very confrontational and that was horrible. There was a lack of resources, even of food, and we suffered from all of that. In the end, who stands up if there is no food? Well, you! (Interview 8, November 2019)

In some cases, tensions between professionals and assisted women seem to be promoted within organizations, contributing to an ability to exercise formal control and discipline on social workers and social educators operating in the shelters. One explained that:

And I am softening it for you. She was the woman the organization used to spy on the social workers. If we slept at night, what we did, how we intervened. And they yelled at us depending on what that woman and another Nigerian woman said (Interview 8, November 2019).

Even if this experience is not generalized to all of the participants, it is problematized by some of them. As we approach a conclusion, we can then say that both professionals’ duties defined from above by NGOs and the wish to question them puts a strain on relationships between professionals and the people they assist. This stress and confusion can, in itself, be seen as a form of institutionally reproduced violence perpetrated within the anti-trafficking apparatus, something that also seems to leave little space for its transformation into a process that supports and respects everyone involved.

4. Concluding Remarks

The main aim of this article has been to gain a better understanding of individual anti-trafficking professionals, their understanding of “protection” interventions and the extent to which they have opportunities to promote practices that can actually benefit trafficked people, counteracting certain forms of violence that can be produced by the anti-trafficking apparatus. This can be seen as part of an attempt to re-frame violence in the context of anti-trafficking, challenging a mainstream discourse focused on the patriarchal violence of transnational networks of criminals. We also want to contribute to debates on neoliberalism within the workplace, highlighting the importance of working conditions. We see this as an important concern, and in providing evidence on this issue, we hope that we are able to make a contribution to critical trafficking studies that other authors will find informative in relation to their own work.

The accounts of anti-trafficking professionals in the Autonomous Community of Madrid, in Spain, vividly show how the neoliberal outsourcing of “protection” to NGOs can contribute towards making anti-trafficking an apparatus in which violence materializes and reproduces. We are not referring exclusively to the violence perpetrated against “trafficking victims”, extensively documented by a rich critical trafficking scholarship, but

rather the violence perpetrated against anti-trafficking professionals themselves. Excessive workloads, disrespect of the definition of functions to be performed and a lack of access to stable positions that might contribute to the professionalization that serves to configure forms of systemic violence and institutional violence directed against many professionals (Ruggiero 2019). This violence limits the ability of various people to satisfy their basic needs and meet professional expectations. In addition to transcending what labour regulations allow, the concrete experience of these professionals violates the values and principles to which various anti-trafficking NGOs officially adhere in service of maintaining institutions' access to growing economic and symbolic capital.

The preceding discussion shows that in Spain, this violence affects social workers and social educators, that is, professionals on the front line in care and affective labour with trafficked persons. This proximity, together with the stress and conflict produced by precarity and insecurity on numerous fronts, makes this violence visible, giving people an awareness of their own marginality. It might then be argued that this becomes another instance of bodies being disciplined, extending to a regulation of social workers' and social educators' own sexuality and other life aspects, with their interactions with assisted women revealing this "subjective" dimension of their work (Žižek 2008). It also becomes apparent that the main beneficiaries of anti-trafficking are those in the higher professional positions in the institutional hierarchy and the institution itself. Ironically, this form of violence in the workplace is hidden and/or normalized by the, perhaps superficial, commitment to humanitarianism of some NGO, with other forms of micro-aggression limiting the possibilities for challenging this status quo.

The paradox that emerges from our study is that the professionals closest to the assisted women can end up being both complicit in administering forms of violence to those they are assisting and onto their own bodies, with the institution becoming a place in which multiple forms of violence are reproduced, seemingly ad infinitum. This leads us to deduce that these subjects are as both potential "perpetrators" of violence and "victims" of the neoliberal anti-trafficking apparatus.

Moving towards a final conclusion, in the future, we sincerely hope that broader-based studies of anti-trafficking professionals' working conditions can contribute towards further research on anti-trafficking, work and the impact of neoliberal values in the governance of NGOs. In the Spanish case, for example, it would be desirable to extend the work carried out here into other Autonomous Communities in the country, particularly since the involvement of NGOs in anti-trafficking activities has grown significantly in scale in the last few years. In contrast to the optimism of those who see allocating more financial resources as the means of professionalizing services and ultimately improving the quality of anti-trafficking assistance, the experiences of the social work and social educator professionals involved in anti-trafficking assistance in the Community of Madrid suggests paying closer attention to the labour conditions that these workers are exposed to within anti-trafficking.

Finally, one would assume that the delivery of services in the field of trafficking, usually described as violent and exploitative and evoking deep condemnation, implies operating with values and principles that are different. However, in respect to working conditions that might enable workers to contribute towards the delivery of the best quality services and best possible prospects for the personal and professional development of those they assist, we can see that this is not necessarily the case.

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Notes

- ¹ We occasionally use quotation marks to emphasise the fact that we are not taking for granted the meaning of certain terms and expressions.
- ² For readers not familiar with the Spanish context, it may be useful to know that that of Madrid is one of the Autonomous Communities into which Spain is politically and administratively organized, in accordance with the 1978 Constitution, with the aim of guaranteeing limited autonomy of the nationalities and regions that make up the country.
- ³ These are the following organizations: ACCEM; Association for the Prevention, Reintegration and Care of Prostituted Women (APRAMP); Auxiliaries of The Good Pastor-Villa Teresita; Cáritas Spain; Commission for the Investigation of Mistreatment of Women (CIMT); Commission of Spain for the Assistance to Refugees (CEAR); Concepción Arenal; Diaconía; Doctors of the World; Esperanza Project; *Fiet Gratia* NGO; Oblate Sisters; Spanish Red Cross; White Cross Foundation; Women in Conflict Zone (WCZ).
- ⁴ In greater detail, two participants have work experience in ACCEM, six in APRAMP, six in Commission for the Investigation of Malpractice in the Woman, one in Concepción Arenal, one in Doctors of the World, seven in the Esperanza Project and two in the Spanish Red Cross.
- ⁵ Industrial polygons are peripheral spaces in the urban environment that have a precise delimitation, derived from a specific planning action whose purpose is to concentrate productive activities in a specific space so that they can share common resources and services, avoiding the environmental and landscape impact that arises from the territorial dispersion of companies in the territory.

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