

## Protection and assistance of human trafficking victims in the autonomous region of Madrid

### Protección y asistencia a víctimas de trata en la comunidad autónoma de Madrid

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#### ABSTRACT

In Spain, part of the anti-trafficking system relies on programs for the detection and protection of victims of sex trafficking in prostitution contexts. In this research paper, we seek to critically analyse the practices and obstacles faced by professionals from social organizations that develop these social interventions aimed at human trafficking victims in Madrid, Spain. We explore their relations with some of the main approaches underlying the human trafficking protection system, such as the crime prosecution approach and the focus on sex trafficking. The analysis of 25 interviews with social intervention workers indicates that they consider essential to establish horizontal relationships and individualized treatment to attend the demands of women, mainly linked to their migration status. However, the efforts on the prosecution of crime, focus on sex trafficking and broader prostitution interpretations within the anti-trafficking system seem to enable experiences of greater vulnerability for those women who access the system and to promote discrimination for those women who do not adjust to the established protection processes. Our research points to the need to decouple the criminal process from the contexts of social intervention and calls for a critical interpretation of human trafficking within public policies that goes beyond the current approach.

**Keywords:** intervention agent, qualitative research, sex trafficking, victims' detection, social intervention

#### RESUMEN

En España, parte del sistema contra la trata consiste en programas de detección y protección de víctimas de trata sexual en contextos de prostitución. En esta investigación buscamos analizar críticamente las prácticas y obstáculos que enfrentan los profesionales de organizaciones sociales que desarrollan estas intervenciones sociales con víctimas de trata en Madrid, España. Exploramos sus relaciones con algunos de los principales enfoques que subyacen al sistema de protección contra la trata, como el foco en la persecución del delito y en la trata sexual. El análisis de 25 entrevistas a trabajadoras de la intervención social indica que consideran fundamental establecer relaciones horizontales e individualizadas para atender las demandas de las mujeres, principalmente vinculadas a su condición migratoria. Sin embargo, los esfuerzos en la persecución del delito, el enfoque en la trata sexual e interpretaciones más amplias sobre la prostitución en el sistema antitrata parecen permitir experiencias de mayor vulnerabilidad para aquellas mujeres que acceden al sistema y discriminación para aquellas que no se ajustan a los procesos de protección establecidos. Nuestra investigación apunta a la necesidad de desvincular el proceso penal de los contextos de intervención social y reclama una interpretación crítica de la trata en las políticas públicas que vaya más allá del enfoque actual.

**Palabras clave:** agentes de intervención, detección de víctimas, intervención social, investigación cualitativa, trata sexual

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The United Nations Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish human trafficking, also known as the Palermo Protocol, is the official regulation that establishes the most widespread definition of human trafficking (Bernstein, 2018). It is described as that act of recruitment, transfer, and reception of people through the use of coercion, violence or other means, with the intention of their subsequent exploitation in the sex industry, servitude, organ harvesting or the commission of crimes. This regulation establishes the main areas of action for the eradication of human trafficking: prosecution, crime prevention and victims' protection, requiring special attention for preventing the trafficking of women and children (United Nations, 2000).

Different national governments have prioritized human trafficking prosecution (Villacampa et al., 2022). In Spain, the Plan against Trafficking developed by the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality stated that "more active prosecution of traffickers" (MHSSE, 2015a, p. 6) was necessary, while also allocating 53% of the total budget of the Plan for crime prosecution. Regarding victims' protection, there is a difference between the official identification carried out by the State Security Forces and the informal detection and later assistance provided by social organizations. State Security Forces and Law Enforcement are the only agents entitled to officially, and formally, identify victims of human trafficking. Trafficking victims in an irregular administrative situation are offered a residence permit for a 90-day reflection period to reflect on their collaboration with the authorities in the prosecution of human trafficking crimes. This residence permit can be extended periodically if such collaboration occurs or also due to personal circumstances of the victims that prevent their return to their country of origin (Government of Spain, 2011). However, the Group of Experts for Action against Trafficking of the Council of Europe -GRETA- indicated that, in Spain, victims' identification relies majorly on the police report (GRETA, 2013) and that residence permits are guaranteed mainly through the collaboration with the State Security Forces (GRETA, 2013, 2018).

This collaboration with State Security Forces in the criminal prosecution of trafficking has been criticized because it could lead to the instrumentalization of victims' trafficking experience as a mean to prosecute trafficking crime. This articulates a system that hinders a women-centric approach because it displaces the importance of victims' decisions and wellbeing (Laporta & de las Heras, 2019; Wilson, 2019). This pathway for victims to collaborate with the State Security Forces -who also play a key role in deporting migrants in Spain (Villacampa et al., 2022)- is often confronted with their migration status and it promotes women identified as victims forced detention in shelters to assure their presence and protected testimony in court as witnesses (Walters, 2016). These measures that reinforce the crime prosecution seem also to include social communication control dynamics within the shelters to avoid any women contact with relatives or friends that could jeopardize the penal prosecution (Sierra-Rodríguez & Clemente, 2023).

This control over victims seems to promote "disempowering engagement with the staff", the increase of victims' stigma and hinders their posterior family relation (Cordisco et al., 2021, p. 159). Moreover, victims' identification guarantees the residence permit only in the country of identification so it could limit the possibilities of movement for migrant population (Miramond, 2020). All these limitations could lead to the victim's rejection of the institutional protection system and their invisibility if they are not able to report or collaborate with the State Security Forces due to their migration status, fear of increasing their family debt or their willingness to continue with their migration project (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2019). As a side effect, part of the excluded population from the human trafficking victims' identification processes regarding their migration status can also suffer criminalization as "irregular" migrants (Mendel & Sharapov, 2016).

The control dynamics and the requirement to collaborate with State Security Forces during the identification process are also combined with a strong focus on adult and young women trafficked for "sex exploitation purposes" (Villacampa et al., 2022). The focus seems to be based on the idea that "sexual exploitation" is "the cruelest" purpose of exploitation among all those and the one that majorly

affect migrant women (MHSSE, 2015a, p. 4). Previous antitrafficking Plan considered that “sexual exploitation” exists because prostitution exists (MHSSE, 2009, p. 15). An “end-demand” prostitution movement underlies these Plans, in which all kinds of prostitution are conceived from the radical feminist point of view as a way of violence towards all women and based on the patriarchal dominance of men over women (Hu, 2022).

In fact, although prostitution is not a crime in Spain, from 2022 Spanish government drives its social policies towards both trafficking victims and “women in prostitution” considering both situations as “unwanted by women” and to be solved while accessing a “proper” job that promotes access to rights (MHSSE, 2022). Indeed, the focus on sex trafficking and its linkage with prostitution derives in the fact that social organizations develop their informal detection of human trafficking victims mainly with women in prostitution contexts (MHSSE, 2015a, p. 4; Villacampa et al., 2022). The social interventions directly developed in those contexts with the population in situations of trafficking (Pittamiglio & Alcázar-Campos, 2019) and of prostitution (Ayuste et al., 2016) seems to follow similar strategies.

This focus on sex trafficking has received strong criticism within some academic studies because it reduces the visibility of other forms of exploitation (Sierra-Rodríguez et al., 2022) and produces a revictimized treatment towards the population of women in the prostitution contexts, who are systematically portrayed as “impoverished and incapable of attending to one’s own needs” (Kempadoo, 2015, p. 14). This image of women in prostitution contexts, and the treatment associated with it, also expels the possibility of considering women’s agency and consent towards prostitution or better said, sex work (Espinoza-Ibacache & Iñiguez-Rueda, 2020). According to the international literature, considering all women in these contexts of prostitution as victims of trafficking (Azize, 2004; Hu, 2022; Kempadoo, 2015) contributes to promote a major stigmatization of sex work and contributes to hide problems derived from the foreignness status or social class of these women. From this perspective, the antitrafficking system enables funding towards private or public forces that develop this control of migrant sex workers (Plambech, 2014) in a mechanism called “rescue industry” (Agustín, 2009). This system allows the redirection of their workforce, via sexual moralization, to other sectors where exploitation also exists such as service sector (Bernstein, 2018; Clemente, 2021; Musto, 2016).

Part of the research on trafficking in the Spanish context has pointed out some weak points in the assistance system, such as little coordination between the social agents involved in this process, the lack of specialized training in trafficking or few evaluations of the type of assistance that is developed with the victims (Martínez-Román & Rodríguez-Castro, 2017; Peixoto, 2012; Pittamiglio & Alcázar-Campos, 2019). On the other hand, there is literature within the national context that lines up with the aforementioned international studies and indicates greater criminalization and stigmatization of sex workers because of the implications of the anti-trafficking system (Ación-González, 2019; Riopedre, 2023). However, there are few studies that analyze the articulation of discourses focused on the prosecution of crime and sexual trafficking in social intervention with human trafficking victims, from a critical perspective that differentiates sex work and sex exploitation. For these reasons, the central research question of this paper is: What is the influence that approaches focused on the prosecution of crime and sex trafficking in the fight against human trafficking have on the social intervention developed by social organizations in the autonomous region of Madrid?

In this sense, this study aims at contributing to generate new information to address some of the gaps existing in the academic literature about the protection process on human trafficking victims in Spain as well as critically analyze the relation between the protection system for victims and some of the main approaches on the fight against human trafficking. For doing so, we seek to: a) describe what are the main practices and key issues identified and developed by professionals from social organizations in their social interventions aimed at human trafficking victims; b) identify what are the obstacles these professionals consider they face when they develop their social interventions and what are their

proposals for improvement to overcome these obstacles; c) critically analyze the relation between these obstacles and the main approaches on the human trafficking victims' protection system.

## **Método**

### **Design**

This paper presents a critical analysis on the practices and obstacles faced by professionals from social organizations that develop social interventions aimed at human trafficking victims in Madrid, Spain. We explore their relation with the main approaches underlying human trafficking protection system, specifically: criminal approach and sex trafficking focus approach. We have collected data through interviews with 25 professionals in the autonomous region of Madrid. Inspired by the Informed Grounded Theory and Intersectionality perspectives, we analyzed professionals' accounts identifying key issues and putting them later in relation with our previous knowledge regarding the main approaches underlying the protection system.

### **The interviewed agents of knowledge**

We interviewed 25 professionals from eight social organizations from the region of Madrid between 2018 and 2020. This region was selected due to the availability of specialized resources for trafficking victims in Spain (MHSSE, 2015b). The contacted organizations were: The Spanish Catholic Association of Migrants (ACCEM by its acronym in Spanish), Association for the Prevention and Reintegration of the Prostituted Women (APRAMP), Esperanza Project, Doctors of the World, Commission of Investigation of Mistreatment towards Women (CIMTM), Red Cross, Concepción Arenal and Spanish Commission of Refugees Support (CEAR). The criteria to contact these organizations were: a) their presence on the antitrafficking system from the beginning of the Plans regarding Human trafficking victims. This is the case of APRAMP, CEAR, ACCEM and Proyecto Esperanza (MHSSE, 2009, 2015a), and b) their presence regarding posterior Plans and calls for funding; this is the case of Doctors of the World, CIMTM, Concepción Arenal and Red Cross (MHSSE, 2015b, 2017).

The social organizations were formally contacted by telephone or email; 13 of the 25 professionals were interviewed thanks to this formal contact and they talk on behalf of the organizations they are working for. However, due to other work commitments of the organizations, the remaining 12 professionals were contacted through their own co-workers and the snowball sampling (Baeza, 2002), being these 12 interviews especially oriented to the difficulties they encounter in carrying out their social intervention work. We departed from the first contacts we established until reaching theoretical saturation, without trying to seek statistical representativeness and prioritizing the relevance of the exposed data and accounts (Hernández, 2014).

We are aware that focusing especially on the difficulties of the intervention may have contributed to the higher representation of professionals critical with the anti-trafficking system. However, we believe that it is an equally necessary approach in qualitative studies as we do not seek to quantify the obstacles but to comprehend the critics concerning human trafficking protection system regarding professionals' point of view.

Participants are 23 women and two men aged between 25 and 60 years old. The interviewees have work experience as social workers or mediators in different roles and stages of the protection process, including detection of victims and residential care programs. To protect confidentiality, we omitted other details regarding to the interviewees.

### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to conducting the interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, the participants signed an informed consent document collecting the most relevant information on data collection, analysis and data processing. They were also offered the possibility to withdraw their consent at any time.

The nature of the work of these professionals, the risks to which they are exposed, the delicate employment situation of some of them and the number of social organizations working with people in a situation of trafficking in Madrid led us to anonymize their names in the manuscript, which was explicitly requested by some of them to avoid potential harm derived from their participation in the study. Regarding gender, as men represent a small percentage in this research and this fact could identify some of the interviewed workers, we have decided to hide gender information regarding workers too.

### Information collection instrument and technique

We developed semi-structured interviews using a guideline divided into four thematic blocks including semi-open questions related to: a) the social action implemented; b) the actors involved providing assistance; c) the obstacles they face in the development of their work concerning the specifics penal and sex trafficking approach; d) different perceptions and assessments of these actors on social intervention. All the blocks included a semi-open question about how the protocols for social intervention against trafficking could be improved. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 h and a half.

Regarding the interview process, we constantly assessed our position as researchers with respect to interviewees, something also reflected in the data analysis. We recognized these professionals as knowledge agents and we tried to generate inclusive spaces in the research process. For instance, interviewees chose times and spaces for the interviews and were informed that they could choose not to answer any questions. We also gave freedom to talk about topics they considered relevant, and we thoughtfully reviewed how and from where we related to them (Kassam et al., 2020).

**Table 1**  
*Process of open categories: categories and subcategories*

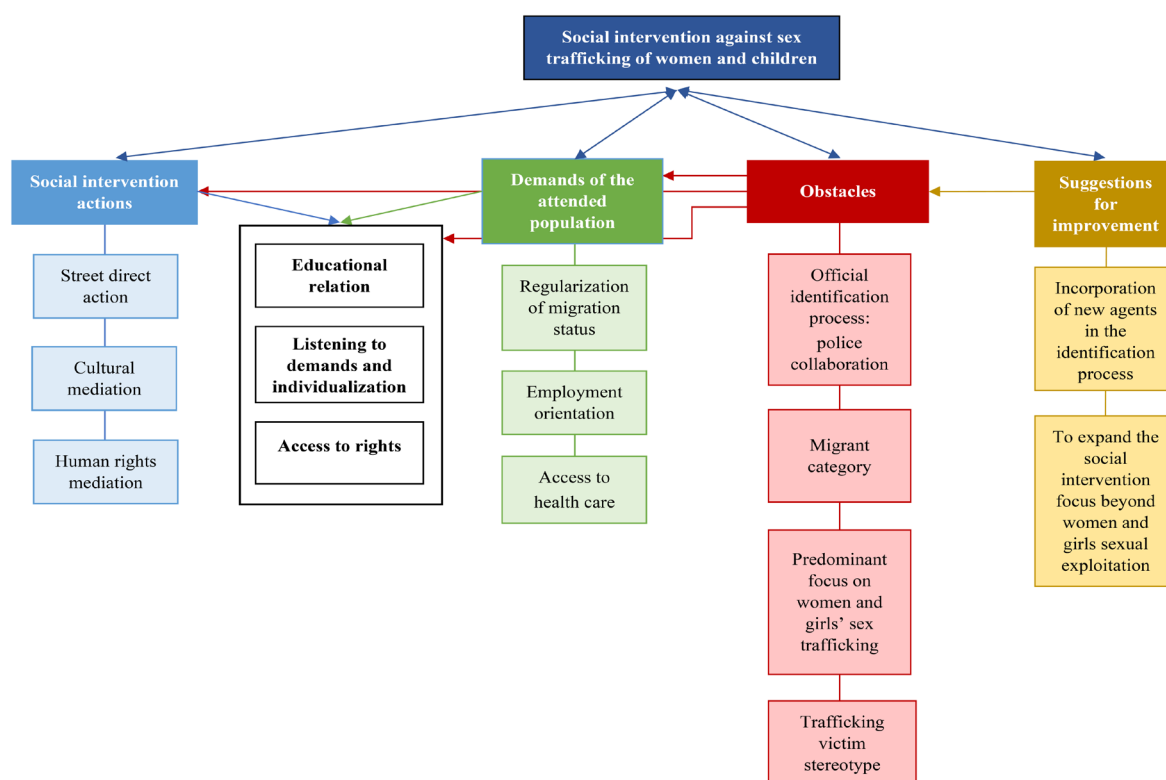
Category	Subcategory
Organization typology	Public Private
Population cared by the organisation	Adult and underage women Women affected by all types of trafficking Population affected by all types of trafficking
Socio-educational action practices	Street direct action Human right mediation Cultural mediation
Demands of the population attended	Improved employment Regularisation of the migratory situation Access to health care system
Factors impeding socio-educational actions	Processes of racialisation: racism Processes of formal identification and police collaboration Predominant focus on women and girls' sexual exploitation Existence of a symbolic image of trafficking victims
Assessment and suggestions for improvement	Incorporation of new agents To expand the scope of exploitation and population
Other agents involved in the fight against trafficking	General Department of Foreign Services and Borders, UCRIF Prostitution consumers Neighborhood Relatives of persons involved

Subsequently, the research team performed a relevance analysis within the narratives to carry out the categories filtering through the axial categorization process, contrasting and discussing any discrepancies between researchers' criteria. Through this process, we related the subcategories included in "social

intervention actions" with the category of "demands of the attended population", because these strategies arise from the specific verbalization of the attended population or the intention of the professionals to satisfy them. In the same way, the categories of factors that hinder social action were related to the assessments and proposals for improvement.

In addition, the process of gradual refinement of the categories emphasized the role played by private social organizations, especially when dealing with the phenomenon of trafficking and sex trafficking of women and young women. For this reason, we focus the rest of the analysis on these organizations and this type of exploitation and not on public entities or on trafficking for other purposes (e.g., labor). The Causal Matrix of the investigation is shown below (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**  
*Causal matrix*



We developed the data collection and analysis process from an intersectional feminism perspective and the consideration that there are four dimensions of power (structural, symbolic, disciplinary and interpersonal) that affect women's subordination (Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016). To this effect, we attended to the interpersonal dimension as we analyze the daily routine of social intervention regarding these programs and potential subordination experiences. We also attended to the structural level of power during the analyses, focusing on the influence of the intersection between the axes of migration status and -gender affecting the work of social intervention and antitrafficking social policies. We also paid special attention to the symbolic dimension of power and the disciplinary influence that the image of the trafficking victim has on the treatment offered to women in these contexts and on their access to rights. Besides, our previous experience as social educators and service providers led us to incorporate the intersectional perspective for methodological development. Specifically, Intersectionality has allowed us to consider reflexivity, complexity, variability in research and its orientation toward Social Justice (Kassam et al., 2020).

## Results and discussion

### Main practices and key aspects of the developed social intervention actions

This section includes the main practices of the social intervention actions developed by the interviewed professionals when they work on the street with the targeted population: direct action, mediation of rights, and cultural mediation. These categories emerged from the analysis of professionals' interviews, especially when they explain their job and tasks.

#### *Direct action, mediation to rights and cultural mediation*

Professionals describe how they face their first encounters with their potential addresses when they develop direct actions:

You must do activities and go to prostitution contexts to inform people about rights; to inform them so there is a first approach. By talking to people, you can make certain situations emerge. (Worker 1)<sup>1</sup>

We do it by dispensing preventive material, condoms, and information on social and health care. Those are elements used to establish a bond, the first contact. (Worker 16)

The information given is the information of the space, the organization facilities, so that they can attend. Above all, what is also done is support VIP and visits to health centers for sexually transmitted infections testing. (Worker 2)

Social organization approaches "prostitution" contexts during their first contacts with women in line with the national agenda (MHSSE, 2009, 2015b, 2022). First contact to detect human trafficking victims is established through material that women may need to carry out their work, such as condoms and preventive material. Professionals seem to address prostitution contexts linking sex trafficking with the sex industry and the sex workers existing there, what could be related to a major criminalization for the sex market (Ación-González, 2019; Villacampa et al., 2022). Moreover, this practice to foster initial contact with the population there seems to be based on the idea that women's demands or needs regarding the practice of this job are related to the pregnancy and STIs prevention what could promote more stigma towards sex workers.

However, these materials seem to be the entrance point to talk to women about health care system, so, in some experiences, it leads to inform them about sexual and reproductive rights such as Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy (VIP) and access to health system in general. These are reproductive rights that seem to be already jeopardized regarding the irregular migration status of some these women or because of "intimate" gender violence as recent studies have shown (Massó & Triviño, 2020). Even though, sexual health is not the only mediation of rights that professionals try with women in these contexts. Other interviewees explained how they try to work on issues demanded by women themselves: "[The demand is] above all, about documentation and healthcare, in an overwhelming way. But, well, we also have demands for learning Spanish and some legal assistance in relation to extradition orders". (Worker 17, clarification added).

Women's explicit demands are linked to the regularization of their migration status ("documentation") and access to healthcare system. Their irregular administrative situation expels these women from the possibility of being hired in other jobs and promotes obstacles regarding their access to health public system. So, in line with previous work (Ayuste et al., 2016; Pittamiglio & Alcázar-Campos, 2019), one of the main demands of women in these contexts are their administrative regularization to access other kind of rights such as the right to health care system or job market. Since targeted population often comes from territories with languages and culture patterns that differ from Spanish, professionals consider the incorporation of the cultural mediator figure as essential to provide information and facilitate access to rights for this population: "The work with these women comes from, above all, the

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<sup>1</sup> We use a worker number to protect participants' identities.

need to communicate. Something very basic which is possible, for different reasons, with other nationalities, but seems to be the main challenge in people of certain nationalities” (Worker 22).

As can be deduced from this account, cultural mediation emerges from a reflection on their professional practice, trying to place the attended women at its core. Specifically, the introduction of the figures dedicated to cultural mediation arises from a professional reflection aimed at improving social intervention actions: they consider that paying attention to their demands facilitates communication and bonding with the attended women, human relations between culturally different groups and their access to rights. The interviewed professionals try to place the demands and interests of women themselves at the core of the intervention. Professionals try to deploy a practice and a horizontal educational relationship during their intervention, where listening becomes important, displaying a desire for paving the way to emancipation. A women-centric approach that in other territories seems to promote women’s satisfaction regarding protection and assistance process (Wilson, 2019). However, as these same professionals point out, their work is made difficult by different aspects derived, among other reasons, from the current legislation regulating human trafficking victims’ protection, the perception of sex trafficking and the ideas concerning what is a human trafficking victim.

### **Obstacles in the development of social intervention actions: identification process of human trafficking victims, focus on sex trafficking and image of human trafficking victims**

This section includes information about different aspects that represent an obstacle to the access to rights of women present in these contexts. These limiting aspects include: a) the process of assistance for trafficking victims and police collaboration; b) the predominant focus on the sex trafficking of adult and young women; c) and, finally, difficulties derived from their undocumented migrant condition, and the image construction of a trafficking victim.

#### ***The process of identifying trafficking victims and police collaboration***

One of the interviewed professionals explains the operation of the informal detection process carried out by social organizations and its differences regarding the State Security Forces official identification process:

It is true that, in the end, they [State Security Forces] focused a lot on the fact that they could not do anything if there was no complaint from the woman. So, in the end, the step of accompanying her to the police station was when the woman was very clear that she was going to file a complaint, because if not, well, they couldn't help us much more with that. They did focus a lot on the fact that they needed that to transmit information to them and give them information, so it was quite complicated in that sense. (Worker 18, clarification added)

This professional explains that victim identification process with the State Security Forces mostly relies on the woman’s possibility of reporting to the police and collaborating with the criminal investigation. These identification processes seem to focus, to a greater extent, on prosecuting the crime of trafficking rather than identifying these women as victims to offer a better response to their needs. Although a more intensive prosecution of trafficking crime has been required from the legal and the institutional perspectives (Carracedo, 2011; MHSSE, 2015), this “criminal approach” system has been criticized because of its failure in reducing trafficking (Dandurand, 2024) and because it subordinates the importance of victim’s needs and demands to the requirements of the criminal prosecution (Laporta & de las Heras, 2019; Miranda-Ruche & Villacampa, 2021; Villacampa et al., 2022; Wilson, 2019), involving a disempowering treatment to women (Cordisco et al., 2021).

Another of the interviewed professionals explains the basic requirements for women’s collaboration with the State Security Forces: “They understand collaboration is what serves them to dismantle a criminal organization, but you are making a woman responsible for having to reach that extreme of cooperation when possibly her collaboration is limited by what she knows” (Worker 16). As this professional explains, women are required about useful information regarding crime prosecution, so it



is not only information, but new information or important information regarding the advances of the penal processes. The fact that the system just values the collaboration of those who offer such “useful information” limits the option to obtain the official credentials of trafficking victims for those other women who aims at collaborating, but do not know those specific required “useful” details, thus excluding part of the affected population. As the professionals explain below, this operation especially affects migrant women due to their administrative situation: “They will always encourage them to collaborate with the police in a way in which the issue of residence, documentation, deportation will come out in the conversation they have with them” (Worker 5), and “Law enforcement authorities in Spain identifying this [trafficking situation], are the same authorities who can deport them, it's crazy”. (Worker 2; clarification added).

These pressures for collaborating with the police seem to be related to the fact that their identification process as victims can also be intertwined with the control of irregular migratory flows (Plambech, 2014). In fact, in Spain this identification role is exclusively carried out by the State Security Forces, who play an important role in “deporting” migrant people in Spain (Villacampa, et al., 2022). In fact, for migrant sex workers this pressure regarding their migration status may force them to identify themselves as victims during the official identification process to avoid a mayor criminalization (Mendel & Sharapov, 2016; Riopedre, 2023; Walters, 2016). An identification that limits their residence permit to the country of identification (Miramond, 2020). Another professional explains the potential consequences when a woman does not report to the police:

So, they are all sexual exploitation victims who are going to report the crime organization exploiting them. Otherwise, they don't have access to the services. The requirement is filing a complaint because that way, the association and the police make sure that you [the victim] file a complaint and in exchange you get the residence papers. Apart from the work and tasks involved, basically it is about obtaining residence documentation, work, and training in exchange for ensuring that you are going to report the mafia... (Worker 6, clarifications added)

This professional explains that the shelter for victims of trafficking in which she works is specific for those women who report to the police. Through this operation, the organization ensures covering women's demand for administrative regularization. However, this measure concerning protection is particularly problematic because human trafficking victims in Spain are supposed to have protection and assistance process guaranteed, independently of their role within the crime prosecution (Government of Spain, 2011). In the case of migrant people in an irregular administrative situation, not providing useful information or not willing to collaborate in the crime prosecution seems to play a key role in the allocation of the official status of victim or in the permanence of an unprotected status, limiting women's access to rights. Therefore, the criminal process may subordinate the needs and the protection rights of potential victims. This operation has also been criticized because the criminal approach on human trafficking leads to the control of women during penal prosecution. For instance, they can't communicate with others during this period, even they can't travel or move to be at disposal for the process, actions that lead to a disempowerment process and the forced confinement of these women in protection shelters (Cordisco et al., 2021; Walters, 2016).

In this regard, interviewees contribute with improvement suggestions:

First, that they [State Security Forces] don't force them to report from the first moment. Then, that they could access the documentation to be able to work. Because of course, if you don't have the European certificate to be able to work or the NIE<sup>2</sup>... (Worker 21)

Concerning the requirement for the victims to report and collaborate with the State Security Forces during the identification process, some professionals claim for the current legislation to be accomplished

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2 Foreign Identity Number.

and to not force women in these processes to report. They suggest as well that other regularization processes beyond the temporal permission derived from women's collaboration are needed.

Other professionals go further and suggest deeper changes of the official identification process:

I believe it would be necessary to act from another logic and develop different mechanisms. It is not about including professionals from other fields in a mechanism that belongs to the State Security Forces but about breaking the current logic, the current dynamics. Creating other organisms. Having the identification competence of the State Security Forces removed. Otherwise, the current logic will not change. (Worker 16)

Some of the interviewed professionals propose a change in approach in which social agents can operate. These professionals defend that the identification should be carried out by the social organizations working with the trafficked population to prioritize the specific situation and well-being of the affected people. Consequently, they think women would be exposed to less pressure and distress during their protection processes, by separating the beginning of their trajectories in the protection system and their permanence in them from their collaboration with the State Security Forces. Interviewees consider that identification is a procedure that must respect the situation, times, needs and priorities of each person in a trafficking situation. However, part of the critical literature regarding human trafficking argues that trafficking victim's identification within migration contexts, no matter who develops it, works controlling and distributing migrants in victims, smugglers, and economic migrants, and intentionally distributes either protective or punitive measures instead, although there might be exploitation experiences associated to all those categories (Van der Leun & Van Schijndel, 2016). In this sense, and in relation to the distribution processes of victims and migrants, it is argued that the existence of the mere image of the victim makes possible these controls of the migrant population and it allows discrimination against the population that does not fit with it. The mythical iconic image of trafficking victim has been analyzed deeply and has to do with an innocent woman forced to prostitution (Doezema, 2010; Kempadoo, 2015).

However, there are professionals who outline some of the exploitation experiences of the women's assisted and expose how those experiences challenge this prototypic victim's image:

Many come to work as caregivers or domestic workers in family homes and are exploited, others go to textile factories in Barcelona or Andalusia, and are making clothes until they decide to leave that kind of labor exploitation for "sexual exploitation" (...) They don't fit the usual victim profile. (Worker 15)

Although sexual trafficking is seen by Spanish institutions as the majority and "cruellest that affects women" (MHSSE, 2009, p.9) the professional's testimony indicates that there are violence and exploitations in other sectors as well and that many women seem to choose "sexual exploitation" as a mechanism that improves their situation. This testimony not only points to the need to broaden the focus of detection of trafficking victims (Sierra-Rodríguez et al., 2022), but it also points to women's choice and therefore, women's agency in choosing prostitution as a less precarious option. As part of the literature has pointed, sex work plays for a survival option for women (Acién-González, 2019). However, the fact that the professional points out the choice of "sexual exploitation" refers to the gender approach to sexual work as violence and the consideration of all women in these contexts as victims regardless of the verbalization or demonstration of their autonomy concerning sex work (Azize, 2004; Hu, 2022).

Another of the professionals explains to us the impact of this gender approach to sexual work as violence on the intervention carried out:

With that topic [radical abolitionist feminism] there is a lot of pressure, and you are almost conditioned to view "everything as sexual exploitation". (...) I see there is more pressure with the issue of marking [detecting them] as victims of sexual exploitation. (Worker 3, clarification added)

The abolitionist reading of prostitution as violence by some organizations pressures professionals to apply this logic also in the daily life of social intervention, a practice that, in addition to victimizing women

when they are not, increases the percentages of real victims of trafficking, a logic that reinforces the existing discourse on sexual exploitation as more widespread violence (GRETA, 2018; Sierra-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Villacampa et al., 2022) and in this regard, maintains the so called “rescue industry” and its financing (Agustín, 2009).

This approach also seems to have specific impacts on attended women:

There is an excess of condescendence because if you go to the doctor and say that she is a trafficking victim, but she has not reported it, the looks are like that [paternalistic]. If you say she practices prostitution, or she is willing to say it, the looks are stigmatizing. You can't really say anything... (Worker 22; clarification added).

The professional explains to us that if they are considered victims of trafficking, they experience looks of condescension, however, if the woman shows autonomy and recognizes the exercise of sex work, she experiences stigma. This professional's testimony points out the disciplinary nature of the image of a trafficking victim, that is, specific behavior is expected from women related to submission. Something that does not fit with many of the women assisted, not even in cases in which they suffer experiences of violence. Furthermore, the fact of not fitting the profile, when verbalizing the practice of prostitution, provokes punishment and stigmatizing looks. In this sense, our results reinforce the idea that the existence of the myth about trafficking reinforces control over women, specifically for migrant women in these contexts (Doezema, 2010).

Therefore, although professionals from social organizations maintain a broader approach during their work and try to address the individualized demands of women, this system does not satisfy the needs or demands of the women served in general in these contexts. The focus on sexual trafficking, which understands protection from sexual violence as women's main need, seems to remove their main demands focused on their immigration regularization and economic resources (Bernstein, 2018). For those who want to report to the police any violence situation the fact that they are required with specific information push them away from the system as well, especially those who present migratory issues (Mendel & Sharapov, 2016), limiting their access to rights. This approach also implies a greater stigmatization of sex work, by reducing it to sex trafficking, fostering that migrant sex workers must represent themselves as victims during the official identification process with the State Security Forces to avoid punitive measures (Plambech, 2014; Rodríguez et al., 2020).

## Conclusions

In the short term, these results invite us to reflect on a change of focus in the process of identification and assistance of the population affected by trafficking. Victims' identification process should consist on an administrative process that guarantees rights, focused on women's choices, without giving priority, in this case, to crime prosecution. In addition, this system doesn't seem to be useful regarding the fight against sex violence because fear of deportation could drive women away from institutions in these kinds of situations.

There is an urgent need of decouple the systematic link between sex work and sex trafficking in the long term, as this interpretation of human trafficking could be disrupting for its general lecture. Specifically, this is urgent because as our results point, migrant sex workers could suffer from more criminalization and stigma regarding antitrafficking systems. This is particularly important within the Spanish context where the link between prostitution and sex trafficking has been reinforced in recent social policies.

Interviewing the professionals that carry social interventions has allowed us to explore how their practices are influenced by wider approaches on the protection to human trafficking victims. However, these professional, even though coming from different organizations may respond to specific rationalities or agendas. As a future line of research, this study also highlights the need to include other perspectives and knowledge agents in the research about victims' protection, such as the attended

women by these projects or the people affected by other trafficking purposes. Analyzing their stories would allow us to shake the homogeneous image of trafficking victims and deepen the assessment of the protection system. In this regard, it would be interesting to conduct studies as well that deepen in victim's life after antitrafficking protection process and analyze if their demands concerning status migration and job market have changed in some extent.

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#### Credit

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