

**Athens Institute for Education and Research  
ATINER**



**ATINER's Conference Paper Series  
SOC2015-1505**

**Characteristics of the Victims of  
Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation**

**Jorge Uroz  
Lecturer and Researcher  
Comillas Pontifical University  
Spain**

**Carmen Meneses  
Lecturer and Researcher  
Comillas Pontifical University  
Spain**

An Introduction to  
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. This paper has been peer reviewed by at least two academic members of ATINER.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

**Uroz,J. and Meneses, C. (2015). "Characteristics of the Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation", Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: SOC2015-1505.**

Athens Institute for Education and Research  
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece  
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209 Email: info@atiner.gr  
URL: [www.atiner.gr](http://www.atiner.gr)  
URL Conference Papers Series: [www.atiner.gr/papers.htm](http://www.atiner.gr/papers.htm)  
Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research. All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the source is fully acknowledged.  
ISSN: **2241-2891**  
07/07/2015

## **Characteristics of the Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation<sup>1</sup>**

**Jorge Uroz**  
**Lecturer and Researcher**  
**Comillas Pontifical University**  
**Spain**

**Carmen Meneses**  
**Lecturer and Researcher**  
**Comillas Pontifical University**  
**Spain**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to describe the psychosocial characteristics of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in Spain and forms of catchment, deceit and coercion from their countries of origin to Spain. 52 open questionnaires to NGOs working with victims of trafficking in Spain were collected. The results show that: 1) Most people who were trafficked are women, and that a significant section of them came into Spain and in Europe as minors. 2) an important sector of women coming from Latin America, by existing ties with spanish culture and spanish language. Some of these women knew that they will come to Spain to work as prostitutes, but they were tricked in the conditions they will have. 3) Another group comes from Eastern Europe, especially Romania; they were very young women coming deceived by a love relationship until they reached Spain and then they were distributed in different brothels in the country. 4) Other women came from sub-Saharan Africa, with different routes of entry in Spain. These women had the worst conditions during all the way arrival until Spain, with aggressions and continuing violations. 5) The last group come from Asia, especially China, it was a difficult group to detect and identify and were in the most hidden of prostitution sectors. All these women had been tricked, coerced and battered to have sex against their will, which it was a very serious violation of human rights and an attack on the dignity and integrity of these people.

**Keywords:** trafficking for sexual exploitation, human right, gender, prostitution, victims

---

<sup>1</sup>This study is part of the National R+D+I Project, “Making visible VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING: acting against Trafficking in women for sexual exploitation” subsidized by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, Reference: CSO2014-55209, This study aims to determine the needs of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, describing the whole process from the moment of their captivity in order to more appropriately mark out the path of their rescue and recovery.

## **Introduction**

Human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, specifically of women and girls, is perhaps one of the most terrible violations of human rights taking place in our world. Although we might think it is a new phenomenon, we can already find references at the end of the 19th century to what was called the "White Slave Trade" which referred to the phenomenon of capturing and transporting white women to force them into prostitution against their will (Gozdziak and Collet, 2005). That is to say, the trafficking of women for the purposes of sexual exploitation is an old phenomenon that has reappeared in a new guise, adapted to the social and legal context of the societies in which we now live.

It is very difficult to accurately determine the magnitude of the problem. It is estimated that around 27 million people in the world are victims of trafficking (Bernat and Winkeller, 2010). According to the Ombudsman's report, some 14,370 people were detected to be at risk of trafficking in Spain in 2011, and the Public Prosecutor's Office indicated that 1548 people were identified as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in Spain in 2012. This difference between the number of potential and detected victims is due to the fact that one of the greatest problems concerning the victims of trafficking is actually identifying them.

Despite it being very difficult to quantify, it is predicted that there will be an increase in the coming years since the preventive interventions being made are not sufficient to eradicate the trafficking.

Trafficking occurs in the context of the global economy, with a significant increase in poverty in many countries of the world, a generalized international labour market and with the feminization of the migration processes (McDonald and Timoshkina, 2004). In addition, sexual services are not usually regulated in the countries, which allows for a greater degree of exploitation of migrant women. To these global movements of people, capital and businesses, we must add the international growth of the sex industry, which has resulted in an increase in international crime networks involved in sexual exploitation (Kelly and Regan, 2000). The smuggling of persons, an area in which we may find situations of trafficking, is a less risky and less punishable activity than the smuggling of weapons or drugs for organized crime, and therefore it involves a low cost and a high profit, especially in the case of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Trafficking of women is now one of the most lucrative businesses along with weapons or drug smuggling, with the States having invested much more effort and resources in combating the latter social phenomena.

## **What We Mean by Victims of Trafficking**

The definition of *Human trafficking* was established in the so-called Palermo Protocol (2000), the United Nations protocol to prevent, suppress and

punish trafficking of people, especially women and children. A common terminology to describe this phenomenon was established in that protocol for the first time. So Trafficking is the term used to describe “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person in control of another person, for the purposes of exploitation. Exploitation includes, at least, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (UN, 2004:44-45).

Trafficking must be distinguished from the *Smuggling of immigrants* described in the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (2000). The *Smuggling of immigrants* is the procurement of the illegal entry of a person into a State of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit.

There are three elements that we can take into account to distinguish a Trafficking situation from a Smuggling situation. The first factor to be taken into account is the consent of the victim. In the case of Smuggling, the people consent to say smuggling, despite the fact that it is carried out under dangerous circumstances. However, the victims of Trafficking either never gave their consent or such consent has no value because the victims are subject to coercion or deception by the traffickers. The second factor relates to the transnational nature. While, in the case of the smuggling, victims are necessarily transferred from one State to another, in the case of Trafficking, it does not have to be like that as the victims may come from other States or be national victims who are moved from one place to another within the same State. Finally, the purpose of Trafficking is always the exploitation of the victim, who is exploited as a source of continuous income for the traffickers, whereas smuggling ceases once the person reaches the destination country.

There are genuine difficulties in being able to distinguish one social situation from another, hence why it is so hard to identify victims of trafficking. The legal distinction between Smuggling or Trafficking is very precise, but the social reality usually makes it much more complex and difficult to determine this difference. For example, many Latin American women may be transferred to a European country aware of the fact, from the moment they leave their country, that they will serve as prostitutes when they arrive in their destination country. However, once they arrive, the conditions under which they must practice this prostitution are much harsher than those they were told about. The changes may affect anything from the amount of debt they must repay to the conditions under which they must serve as prostitutes, not to mention that the coercion and sexual exploitation may start at a later date. We could very emphatically say that these women were deceived when they were captured in their countries of origin. Yet, the simple fact that they knew from the start that they were going to serve as prostitutes generates a social image

that makes them appear almost responsible or guilty for the situation they subsequently find themselves in. Not even the judicial systems responsible for defending the rights of possible victims are spared from stigmatization. In this case, many would not consider this a situation of Trafficking, when in reality it is.

Therefore, we must be aware that Trafficking, Smuggling and exploitation are social situations that may occur jointly and simultaneously, or overlap at different times. The difficulties in defining and delineating this social phenomenon, due to its overlap with other social phenomena, is one of the first obstacles to eradicating it (Munro, 2006).

For many years, the efforts in the fight against Trafficking were focused on tackling the mafias and networks, on those who committed the crime, without giving much attention to the situation of the victims, who on many occasions were in situations of risk and suffering an absolute violation of their human rights. Therefore, since the Palermo Protocol, the approach applied to any intervention with Trafficking victims has been a *Human Rights approach* (Gallagher, 2011), focused above all on protecting the victims' rights, ensuring that the victim is assisted and protected against the traffickers.

As we have said, we are dealing with a social phenomenon that is on the rise, both in Spain and in Europe, and so we ask: Who are these people who are the victims of Trafficking? What are their characteristics? What routes emerge from their capture to their exploitation? These and other questions were included in the investigation on Trafficking in Spain, which we answer briefly below. But first, we will summarize how we obtained these answers.

## Methods

Investigating a social phenomenon that is an illegal activity and in which the victims have been raped, assaulted and traumatized is not easy. Therefore, it is difficult to apply traditional data collection techniques, especially when the information is obtained directly from the victims. Two types of investigative techniques have been used for two different types of recipients.

Firstly, a questionnaire was sent to all Spanish agencies that work with Trafficking victims throughout the country (approximately 60 agencies), that are present in one or more Spanish provinces. They were all sent a questionnaire with open questions about the needs they had identified in the victims during their work with them (detection, identification, assessment of needs, intervention, difficulties and obstacles, evaluation and proposals for action). 52 questionnaires were obtained and were introduced in the Nvivo v.10 software programme for a qualitative analysis, given that the answers were fully open, and not predetermined.

Secondly, information was collected from 22 women who were victims of Trafficking, aged between 17 and 35 years, and who came from Latin American countries, Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan countries. Two types of investigative techniques were used to compile their needs: individual

interviews and group interviews. As they are victims who have lived in a situation of slavery and have therefore experienced trauma in their lives, the considerations described by the WHO for these circumstances have been applied (Zimmerman and Watts, 2003) and, following the ethical recommendations, the welfare of the victims has been prioritized over the investigation. Willingness to participate, the guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality, together with the information offered about the objectives of study, were the basic instruments used for inviting them to participate in the study. Contact with the women was made through NGOs working with victims of Human Trafficking for sexual exploitation in four areas of the country (Andalusia, Catalonia, Asturias and Balearic Islands). Subsequently, an interpretative categorical analysis was made from the conversations obtained, guided by the study objectives and the emerging issues, again using the Nvivo computer programme software.

### **Who Are the Victims of Trafficking**

In the nineties and the first decade of the 21st century, there were many women from Eastern European countries, Russia and the Communist Bloc, heading towards to the rest of Southern, Northern and Western Europe, as well as the United States and Canada. Thus, the Soviet Republics, the Ukraine and Russia in particular, replaced Thailand and the Philippines as the epicentre of the global market in trafficking women (McDonald and Timoshkina, 2004). On the other hand, we can find countries in which criminal networks already existed, smuggling weapons or drugs, or established networks of beggars that converted to smuggling persons (Marcu, 2008). Furthermore, because of its cultural ties with Latin America, Spain in particular is a focal point for the trafficking of Latin American women. Finally, in recent years, the migratory flow from Africa to Europe has been growing. We cannot forget that the Sub-Saharan countries are among the countries with the lowest levels of human development in the world (UNDP, 2014), in particular Nigeria, a country with a high level of extreme poverty that is becoming a major source of trafficked women for Spain and Europe.

The victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are mostly women, of ages ranging between 15 and 40 years of age, with a number of characteristics common to all of them, and other specific or individual features. Of the first, we can highlight: a situation of personal and social vulnerability; a lack of educational and professional training; they come from families with limited or subsistence economies; they are very young mothers or women who are responsible for providing for the rest of the family; women who have experienced domestic violence from their partner or family; and who take it upon themselves to migrate in order to improve the living conditions of their family. Of the second, we could emphasize their origin, cultural system and how they arrived in Spain.

Thus, we may classify them into four groups with distinct characteristics:

1) Women from Eastern Europe, particularly Romania, due to their conditions of poverty (Marcu, 2008). In many cases, it is the very families of these women who are involved in the trafficking crime. They usually enter the country by land transport, in car or bus. Once in Spain they became aware they had been tricked. It might be the captor that exploits the victim, or the victim may have been sold to another trafficker for about 3000 Euros. Generally, upon arrival, they will go to a prepared apartment where they find out they have been misled, at which moment they would be raped, abused and beaten into submission to be sent on to hostess bars or brothels. These places may be managed by Romanians, Spanish or both, who would force a woman to engage in prostitution through the application of continuous violence. However, the largest group was of those women or adolescents that had fallen in love with a young member of the group of Traffickers, who deceived them with the idea and plan of coming to Spain to work together in the hospitality or other sector. They are the so-called *Boy Lovers*. This supposed boyfriend who brought her was also her pimp and the pimp of other Romanian women. As there is a sentimental and emotional relationship, it is more difficult for the women to report them to the authorities; because they are emotionally attached to the trafficker. Most of the women did not know the local language or were unaware of their rights in Spain, finding themselves in a situation of great social and personal vulnerability. However, depending on their skills and abilities, they could communicate in Spanish. Women from the European Union found the recovery process easier. One of the issues that some NGOs highlighted was the women's high level of naivety and ignorance about everything, especially about the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

2) Women from Latin America, especially Brazil, the Dominican Republic or Paraguay, and specifically Guarani women. Most cases involved both sexual exploitation and the smuggling of migrants, given that many of them knew they were coming to Spain to engage in prostitution, except in the case of the Guarani or Brazilian women, who were unaware of their destination. These women were deceived regarding the conditions under which they would practise prostitution in Spain. The debt they had to pay to their traffickers was approximately 6000 euros at least, because sometimes the latter considerably increased the initial debt.

3) Sub-Saharan women, especially from Nigeria. They were captured in different ways, but all arrived unaware they would be forced to engage in prostitution. The traffickers were usually members of the community where the women lived and knew their family, a key factor behind their subsequent extortion and the effectiveness of the threats made to the victims to force them into prostitution once in Spain. There were different routes for the women's journeys from Nigeria to Spain, but almost all of them usually passed through Morocco in the final stage, where they were boarded onto *pateras* (small boats) to cross the Strait into Spain. It was the safest route, free from armed conflicts. A very small group of women could make the journey by plane, passing



through Istanbul, through Greece, or on a direct flight to a European city, from which they then travelled on to Spain. Those who travelled by land transport were treated like slaves during the journey, attending to the domestic and sexual needs of the traffickers. It might be a form of training, in order to continue with this slavery once in Spain. The figure of a man they called *Husban* was important, as he was responsible for their safety all the way from Nigeria to Morocco (García de Diego, 2015). Once in Morocco, many of them were raped until they become pregnant. The networks and mafias of traffickers were keen for them to have children for two main reasons: the first was because this made it easier for the women to enter and stay in Spain, due to the way the system protects pregnant women and minors; the second reason applied once a woman arrived in Spain, where the traffickers would use her child to blackmail and threaten her into prostitution. If she tried to report them or refused to continue with the prostitution, the traffickers would not hesitate to abuse the child in order to force her to change her behaviour (this investigation team has verified this aspect while interviewing some victims to whom we had access, and we have disclosed this elsewhere (Meneses and Uroz, 2014). The debt these women owe to the network of traffickers for bringing them to Spain ranged from between 40,000 and 80,000 euros, a debt they only found out about once they arrived in Spain. In general, these women tended to be very reserved, hiding this very painful process they had experienced, drawing their strength from cultural and religious aspects. It was the group of women with the worst social situations was forced to work mainly in the street.

4) And a final group of Asian women, of whom we know very little, mainly of Chinese origin. It was very difficult to detect and identify this group, which occupied hidden sectors of prostitution. In some areas of Spain, they were destined to engage in prostitution with Asian customers, which made them even more difficult to detect. We have little information, except in those places where their presence was greater and some kind of legal or police investigation had been opened up.

We have revealed the principal characteristics of the trafficked women with regard to their origin and culture. These two aspects influenced the Trafficking process, the forms of capture, and the type of sexual exploitation imposed on these women once they were in Spain. However, there was another profile of trafficked women that had nothing to do with their culture or origin, but rather with their age. We are referring to the young girls who were trafficked.

The latest Global Report on trafficking in Persons from the UN, which analyses the trafficking and abuse of people worldwide between 2010 and 2012, reveals that, of the estimated 40,000 cases, one in three is a child, and that number continues rising compared to past reports (UNODC, 2014). We cannot say that the trafficking of girls is widespread in Spain, although it is clearly under-represented in official figures. Certain features make them attractive to the mafias: on the one hand, they make much more vulnerable and

manageable victims; on the other, being so young, there was more time for their exploitation and to profit from them; and finally, the younger they were, the more attractive they were for customers. The girls trafficked in our country were mainly Romanian and Nigerian. All of them came from poor or broken families. In the case of the Romanians, we found a group of girls whose family was involved in their exploitation, and another group of teenagers who were seduced by supposed boyfriends, as we have commented on before, to then be trafficked and exploited by them. In the case of the Nigerian women, most had been deceived with the promise of a better situation and a more promising future in Europe. The exploitation of these teenagers occurred in more secluded places in order to evade police inspections. The biggest problem we can point to is the enormous difficulty of the Spanish government agencies in detecting this type of cases: if it was complex to identify the adults, it is much more complex to identify the girls.

## **Conclusions**

Our results have revealed a number of characteristics of the women and girls who are being trafficked, influencing the way in which they were captured and introduced into Spain, the type of sexual exploitation and the ways in which they were kept without asking for help and, of course, the various actions that should be implemented as part of their subsequent recovery process once they are rescued.

Among the characteristics of the victims, we can point to their different countries of origin, and their age. We are aware that we need to delve deeper into the circumstances of these women and how their trafficking networks operate. We must make great advances in the processes for identifying the victims, in the different resources available to them once they have been detected, in the guarantees we should offer them during legal proceedings, in order to protect them from the Traffickers and, most importantly, the speed with which we should intervene given the violation of Human Rights that make the experienced events so traumatic. If we cannot help the victims recover as soon as possible, it is very possible that the trauma and damage produced in them will be very difficult to eradicate, or will be irreversible, regardless of how many interventions we arrange.

## **References**

- Bernat F.P. and Winkeller H.C. 2010. Human sex trafficking: the global becomes local. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 20:186-192.
- Defensor del Pueblo. 2012. *La trata de seres humanos en España: Víctimas invisibles*. Madrid. Defensor del Pueblo.
- Fiscalía General del Estado. 2013. *Diligencias de seguimiento de la Trata de Seres Humanos en España en el año 2013*. Madrid

- Gallagher, A. T. (2011). Improving the Effectiveness of the International Law of Human Trafficking: A Vision for the Future of the US Trafficking in Persons Reports. *Human Rights Review*, vol.12, n° 3: 381–400.
- Diego, MJ. 2015. *Jóvenes inmigrantes subsaharianas y trata en Andalucía: Intervención profesional desde el Trabajo social internacional*. Tesis Doctoral. Universidad de Granada. Departamento de Trabajo Social y Servicios Sociales
- Gozdziak, E. M., and E. Collett. 2005. Research on Human Trafficking in North America: A Review of Literature. *International Migration* 43(1/2): 99–128.
- Kelly, L. and Regan, L. (2000) *Stopping Traffic: Exploring the Extent of, and Responses to, Trafficking in Women for Sexual Exploitation in the UK*. Police Research Series Paper 125, London, Home Office.
- McDonald L and Timoshkima N, 2004. Examining services needs of trafficked women from the former Eastern bloc: the Canadians Case. *Journal of Social Work Research and Evaluation*. 5(2):169-192.
- Meneses C., and J. Uroz, 2014. *¿Víctimas o culpables? La Trata con fines de explotación sexual. Voces desde el interior de la esclavitud*. III Jornadas Internacionales de Sociología de la AMS. 12 y 13 noviembre del 2014. Madrid. Asociación Madrileña de Sociología.
- Munro, V. (2006). Stopping traffic? A comparative study of responses to the trafficking in women for prostitution. *British Journal of Criminology* 46, 318–333.
- UNODC, 2004: *Convención de las Naciones Unidas contra la delincuencia organizada transnacional y sus protocolos*. 44-45. <http://www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-s.pdf> (fecha descarga, marzo 2014)
- UNODC, 2014: *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014*. ONU. New York
- PNDU. (2014). *Informe de desarrollo humano 2014. Sostener el progreso humano: Reducir vulnerabilidades y construir resiliencia*. Nueva York. Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo.