

TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN AS A STRUCTURAL PHENOMENON: EXPLOITATION, GENDER AND GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract

This article analyzes the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation as a structural phenomenon linked to gender inequality, economic precariousness, and the global dynamics of the sex market. Through a critical review of recent studies and international data, it examines the root causes of trafficking, its contemporary manifestations, and the institutional responses implemented at both European and international levels. The study highlights the persistence of an economic and patriarchal system that turns women's bodies into commodities, sustained by male demand and social complicity. It also delves into the psychosocial consequences of exploitation, emphasizing the emotional aftermath, stigma, and reintegration challenges faced by survivors. From an interdisciplinary perspective, the paper calls for public policies focused on human rights, symbolic reparation, and women's economic autonomy as essential elements to eradicate trafficking and promote social justice.

Key words: *trafficking of women, sexual exploitation, gender, human rights, reintegration.*

Introduction

Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation constitutes one of the most complex and persistent phenomena of contemporary societies. Far from being an isolated event or attributable solely to the actions of criminal networks, this phenomenon reflects historical structures of inequality that have been reproduced and adapted over time. From a sociological and historical perspective, it is essential to examine the interrelations among the economic, cultural, and political factors that sustain the demand and supply of this illicit market. The theoretical framework supporting this analysis is based on the idea that criminality cannot be understood apart from the social structures that generate and legitimize it. In this regard, authors such as Bales (2016:112) have noted that modern trafficking is, in essence, a form of slavery adapted to the contemporary global economy.

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The demand for prostitution, predominantly male, is the main driving force behind this economy, while the supply is fueled by women from contexts marked by poverty, inequality, and, in many cases, prior violence. Historically, the control and exploitation of the female body have been present in various forms of domination, from ancient slavery to modern colonial structures. These practices, although transformed by modernity and globalization, remain based on the same principle: the objectification and commodification of women as an available sexual resource. This pattern cannot be analyzed solely from a legal or criminal standpoint but as a cultural construct deeply rooted in patriarchy.

Economically, trafficking has become a highly profitable transnational industry, comparable to drug trafficking or the illegal arms trade. Low operating costs, the ease of replacing victims, and high demand ensure sustained profits for criminal networks. Added to this are jurisdictional fragmentation and deficiencies in international cooperation, which hinder the effective prosecution of perpetrators and perpetuate a climate of impunity. Globalization has intensified the flow of people across borders, both voluntarily and forcibly, and has facilitated the use of new technologies for the recruitment and control of victims. Digital platforms and social networks have become spaces where traffickers can operate with relative impunity, using increasingly sophisticated recruitment methods. This technological shift has transformed trafficking routes and dynamics, blurring traditional distinctions between countries of origin, transit, and destination.

Culturally, trafficking is sustained by an implicit social acceptance of prostitution and the purchase of sexual services. This normalization, fueled by the pornography industry and certain media discourses, conceals the violence inherent in sexual exploitation and reinforces gender stereotypes that portray women as objects of consumption. In this way, the cultural structure becomes a silent accomplice to crime, legitimizing practices that should be socially and legally unacceptable. From this perspective, the analysis of trafficking cannot be limited to identifying and assisting victims or prosecuting criminal networks. It is necessary to delve into the structural conditions that generate it and into the collective and institutional responsibilities that allow its persistence. Only a comprehensive approach — one that includes cultural transformation, the penalization of demand, and the reduction of economic and gender inequalities — can effectively contribute to its eradication.

Conceptual Framework: Crime as a Social Phenomeno

Addressing the trafficking of women and girls requires an understanding of crime that goes beyond its legal definition. In this sense, crimes are understood as social constructions, anchored in historical contexts and shaped by relations of power and inequality. From sociology and criminology, it has been emphasized that behaviors defined as criminal are not

merely individual acts, but phenomena interconnected with social structure, economic tensions, and prevailing cultural values (Wacquant, 2009: 76).

Trafficking reflects a set of structural conditions that include patriarchy, global capitalism, and contemporary migration. These three elements interact with creating a framework of opportunities exploited by criminal networks. As Fraser (2013:144) explains, the globalized economy partly depends on an invisible infrastructure of reproductive and sexual labor, in which exploitation is disguised as voluntary exchange. In this sense, trafficking is not a marginal element of the economic system but a functional mechanism that reinforces gender and class hierarchies.

Feminist criminology has played a decisive role in revealing how social tolerance toward coercive sexual commerce is sustained by the impunity of the consumer. Authors such as Kelly (2003:21) and Farley (2017:98) have documented that, although the client is a key actor in the chain of exploitation, he is rarely subject to sanction or stigmatization. This invisibility of the consumer perpetuates the idea that prostitution is a private transaction, disconnected from the violence and coercion that often underlie it.

Similarly, Becker's labeling theory (1963: 34) provides tools for understanding how legal and media discourses help define who is seen as a criminal and who is not. In the case of trafficking, victims often receive media attention that places them in the role of passive subjects, while traffickers and clients remain largely out of public focus. This selective construction of reality not only obscures responsibilities but also hampers the design of policies aimed at reducing demand and transforming the structural conditions that make the crime possible.

The concept of intersectionality developed by Crenshaw (1989: 139) is also fundamental. Women affected by trafficking are often found at the intersection of multiple axes of inequality — gender, race, class, and migratory status. This intersectional position amplifies their vulnerability to criminal networks and reduces their access to protection and justice mechanisms. Policies that fail to incorporate this approach risk reproducing inequalities or offering partial and ineffective responses.

Wallerstein's world-systems theory (2004: 89) provides another useful framework for situating trafficking in a global context. According to this approach, economies in the global core demand labor — including sexual labor — from impoverished peripheries. Trafficking routes mirror these flows, moving victims from regions suffering economic crises, armed conflicts, or natural disasters toward countries with high purchasing power and constant demand for prostitution. This economic logic is reinforced by restrictive migration policies that hinder legal mobility, pushing many people to accept dangerous offers that lead to exploitation.

An analysis of crime as a social phenomenon must also consider the cultural dimension. Trafficking is sustained by a conception of male sexuality as

a right of consumption, legitimized by pornography, certain media discourses, and persistent gender stereotypes. This cultural normalization acts as a breeding ground for crime: without socially accepted demand, the market for sexual exploitation would lack viability. Gender socialization mechanisms, from childhood, transmit messages that naturalize the objectification of women, creating fertile ground for the perpetuation of trafficking.

In this context, the crime of trafficking should be interpreted as a phenomenon functional to an unequal social order, rather than as a dysfunction or anomaly. This perspective implies that solutions cannot be limited to the criminal prosecution of traffickers but must include measures to reduce economic inequality, promote gender equality, and transform the cultural norms that legitimize exploitation. International cooperation, the strengthening of judicial institutions, and the penalization of demand constitute the pillars of a comprehensive strategy.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that the crime of trafficking is adaptable and dynamic. Criminal networks adjust their methods according to legislative, technological, and social changes. This requires academic analysis and public policies to evolve as well, incorporating updated data and interdisciplinary approaches capable of anticipating trends. Without sustained and coordinated commitment, trafficking will remain a highly profitable, low-risk business with a devastating impact on human rights and gender equality.

Structural and Gender Factors in Human Trafficking

The analysis of human trafficking for sexual exploitation cannot be separated from the structural and gender factors that shape both its persistence and expansion. These factors operate on interrelated levels: from global socioeconomic conditions to cultural structures that legitimize inequality, as well as legal frameworks and policies that, explicitly or implicitly, allow crime to find spaces for reproduction. The gender dimension runs through the phenomenon in a central way. According to Eurostat (2025), 63% of the victims identified in the European Union in 2023 were women or girls, and in the specific case of sexual exploitation, the percentage exceeds 90%. This overrepresentation of women is not accidental: it stems from a web of historical inequalities that have placed women in positions of economic, social, and legal vulnerability. The feminization of poverty, labor discrimination, and gender-based violence are parts of the same mechanism that criminal networks systematically exploit.

At the structural level, global economic inequality generates a constant flow of people susceptible to falling into trafficking networks. The World Bank estimates that in 2024 approximately 700 million people lived on less than \$2.15 per day, with high concentrations in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. These precarious conditions push many women to migrate in search of opportunities, often without access to safe mobility channels. Trafficking

networks insert themselves into that void, offering supposed job opportunities that turn into mechanisms of coercion and exploitation. Gender-based violence, in its multiple forms, is another decisive factor.

UN Women (2024) reports that one in three women worldwide has suffered physical or sexual violence at some point in her life. In contexts of structuralized violence, trafficking appears as an extension of that violence, operating on victims already socialized into the forced acceptance of abuse and coercion. Accumulated trauma, combined with the absence of effective protection systems, creates fertile ground for manipulation. In countries with weak legal frameworks or high institutional corruption, trafficking finds optimal conditions to thrive. Transparency International (2024) indicates that more than two-thirds of the world's countries scored below 50 out of 100 on its Corruption Perceptions Index. The complicity or indifference of certain officials facilitates the transit of victims across borders, the acquisition of false documents, or the lack of judicial prosecution.

The structure of the global prostitution market also fuels trafficking. According to the International Labour Organization (2024), forced commercial sexual exploitation generates approximately \$173 billion annually in illicit profits, representing 73% of the total gains derived from forced labor, even though it involves only 27% of victims. This mismatch between the proportion of victims and the economic volume illustrates why sexual exploitation constitutes a strategic core for criminal networks.

Cultural constructions of sexuality and gender are another key factor. In many societies, the normalization of male sexual consumption persists, obscuring the conditions of coercion that women experience in prostitution contexts. The narrative of "free choice" is often used to legitimize markets where real options are conditioned by poverty, violence, or irregular migration. Male demand for sexual services is a direct engine of this crime. Studies show that in countries where the purchase of sexual services is criminalized, such as Sweden or Norway, the prevalence of street prostitution has decreased by up to 50%, whereas in contexts of decriminalization or absence of client sanctions, such as Germany or the Netherlands, there is greater attraction for trafficking networks.

At the migratory level, flows driven by armed conflicts, economic crises, and climate disasters have increased the exposure of women and girls to trafficking. The war in Ukraine, which began in 2022, generated more than six million refugees, the majority of them women and children, many of whom have been targeted for recruitment attempts in transit and host countries (UNHCR, 2024). These episodes confirm that trafficking rapidly adapts to humanitarian crises to exploit acute vulnerabilities. Educational gaps also play a role. UNESCO (2024) reports that 129 million girls worldwide are out of school and that lack of formal education increases the likelihood of accepting deceptive job offers.

Education not only acts as a preventive barrier but also strengthens agency and negotiation capacity in risky situations.

Domestically, territorial inequality and the marginalization of specific communities also create recruitment hotspots. In Spain, studies by the Ministry of Equality (2024) indicate that migrant women in irregular administrative situations account for a high percentage of detected victims of sexual exploitation, especially in urban and peri-urban areas with established pimping networks. The intersectional perspective helps to understand how multiple forms of discrimination — gender, social class, ethnicity, migratory status — combine to create scenarios of vulnerability. A migrant woman in an irregular situation, coming from a context of extreme poverty and with a history of domestic violence, faces a significantly higher likelihood of being recruited by trafficking networks than a man with full citizenship and access to resources.

Public policies aimed at reducing these structural factors must be comprehensive and sustained. Experience shows that isolated interventions — such as awareness campaigns without real economic opportunities — have limited impact. It is necessary to combine poverty reduction, the expansion of safe migratory channels, gender equality education, and the effective penalization of demand. In conclusion, structural and gender factors are not peripheral elements in human trafficking; they are the core from which the phenomenon is shaped and reproduced. Any strategy aspiring to eradicate it must begin with a clear diagnosis of these root causes and address them with the same intensity as the pursuit of perpetrators. Without this foundation, policies will remain reactive, and the cycle of exploitation will continue to reproduce itself.

The analysis of the structural factors fueling the trafficking of women would be incomplete without addressing in detail the role of the patriarchal and machista system in its consolidation. This system is not a theoretical abstraction but a historical power structure that organizes social, political, and economic relations around male supremacy and the subordination of women and girls. Trafficking for sexual exploitation fits perfectly within this framework because it follows its logic: the objectification of women as commodities and the commercialization of their sexuality.

Patriarchy operates on several levels. Culturally, it establishes gender norms and expectations that legitimize inequality. Machista socialization teaches men that they have the right to sexual access regardless of women's will, and teaches women to accept roles of complacency, sacrifice, and subordination. This social learning creates a mindset in which sexual exploitation is perceived as normalized or inevitable.

Economically, patriarchy translates into a sexual division of labor that relegates women to lower-paid, informal, or unrecognized sectors, amplifying their economic vulnerability. According to UN Women (2024), women earn on average 20% less than men globally and spend three times more time on unpaid

care work. These gaps reinforce economic dependency and, in contexts of poverty, make many women easy targets for trafficking networks.

Machista violence — domestic, sexual, symbolic — functions as a mechanism of control and subjugation that intersects directly with trafficking. Victims of intimate partner violence, for example, may be coerced into prostitution circuits as a form of economic control or retaliation. The European Observatory on Violence Against Women (2023) estimates that 30% of women in Europe have experienced physical or sexual violence since age 15, and that prior exposure to violence significantly increases the likelihood of falling into exploitation networks.

In patriarchal societies, laws and policies often reflect and perpetuate these hierarchies. The absence of legal frameworks penalizing sex buyers, the lack of resources for effective victim protection, or the criminalization of women in prostitution are institutional manifestations of structural machismo. These legal gaps are not neutral: they favor the impunity of perpetrators and discourage victims from reporting.

Patriarchy also shapes social perceptions of victims. The stigma associated with prostitution or sexual exploitation falls almost exclusively on women, while the figure of the client is rarely questioned or punished. This double standard is functional to the system: it blames the victim and protects the buyer, thus perpetuating the demand that sustains trafficking. Research shows that in countries where the stigma against clients is high and effective sanctions are applied, the demand for prostitution decreases by 20–40% within the first decade.

Historically, patriarchy has commodified women's bodies in multiple forms: from arranged marriages to sexual slavery in armed conflicts (Jeffreys, 2005: 141). Contemporary trafficking is the globalized and digitalized version of those practices, adapted to a transnational illicit market that feeds on the same beliefs of male dominance and entitlement. The notion that male desire justifies the purchase of sexual access is merely the economic expression of that ideology.

Symbolically, machista culture glorifies virility associated with sexual conquest and trivializes violence against women. Advertising, music, cinema, and social media constantly reproduce messages that reinforce the objectification of women's bodies, creating a cultural demand that sustains the supply of exploitation. Pornography, as previously noted, is a key vector in this process of normalization (Ekman, 2017: 133).

Legally, anti-trafficking reforms often face political and economic resistance, frequently driven by lobbies seeking to preserve the sex industry. These resistances are not unrelated to patriarchal interests, as maintaining a large sexual market benefits those in privileged social positions. When legal frameworks are designed without a gender perspective, anti-trafficking measures may focus exclusively on migration control or criminal repression, leaving untouched the structural causes rooted in inequality.

For all these reasons, dismantling the trafficking of women requires directly challenging the patriarchal system that sustains it. This means not only prosecuting traffickers and pimps but also targeting male demand, reforming laws with a gender perspective, promoting equality education from an early age, and transforming cultural narratives that normalize objectification. Without these actions, any anti-trafficking policy will remain a temporary patch incapable of altering the conditions that allow the crime to persist.

An aspect that cannot be ignored in analyzing structural factors is the role of prostitution as a catalyst for women's trafficking. Numerous international studies and organizations such as the UN and the ILO have pointed out that legalized or tolerated prostitution markets increase the demand for women, which in turn heightens recruitment through trafficking. In contexts where there is a regulated supply, criminal networks easily integrate trafficked women from other countries, exploiting regulatory loopholes and weak supervision. Prostitution cannot be considered an activity detached from coercion. Even in seemingly consensual situations, socioeconomic constraints and gender inequalities drastically limit the capacity for choice. So-called "consent" in these cases is often the result of the absence of real alternatives.

Far from constituting "safe sex work," prostitution becomes a mechanism that normalizes the purchase of access to women's bodies, perpetuating the notion that their sexuality is a commodity. Countries that have adopted the so-called "Nordic model," penalizing buyers and providing real exit options for women, have managed to reduce both visible prostitution and trafficking victim recruitment. Mujaj & Netscher (2015) note that in Sweden, for example, after the entry into force of the Law on the Prohibition of the Purchase of Sexual Services in 1999, there was a significant decrease in street prostitution and greater social rejection of buying sex.

This approach recognizes that as long as there is sustained demand for prostitution, the trafficking of women for sexual purposes will remain a lucrative business. In this sense, tolerating or regulating prostitution does not eliminate trafficking; on the contrary, it provides a framework within which it can operate more easily, disguised as "voluntary work." The separation between prostitution and trafficking is, in practice, blurred, as both phenomena share infrastructures, client networks, and intermediary circuits. Therefore, a comprehensive anti-trafficking strategy must include measures that reduce prostitution demand, dismantle its cultural justifications, and offer real and dignified alternatives to women in situations of sexual exploitation.

A closely related element that deserves specific attention is the pornography industry. Far from being an isolated phenomenon, pornography is part of the same cultural and economic system that sustains the trafficking of women and girls. The normalization of pornography consumption, especially among young men, reinforces sexual objectification and the idea of women's permanent availability. Various academic studies have documented that a

portion of online pornographic content includes non-consensual material, hidden recordings, or productions where women have been coerced.

Research by the UK's Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) in 2023 identified more than 275,000 videos and photographs of sexual abuse of women and girls circulating on open platforms, a 6% increase from the previous year. Organizations such as Exodus Cry have denounced that high-traffic websites have hosted and monetized material linked to trafficking, with victims forced to perform sexual acts on camera.

The link between pornography and trafficking is not only indirect through cultural normalization but also direct through exploitation channels. The UNODC has noted that some trafficking networks incorporate the production of pornographic content as part of sexual exploitation, using recordings to generate additional income in global digital markets. This practice is particularly difficult to trace due to the ease of distribution and the anonymity of many transactions.

Consumption figures reveal the magnitude of the phenomenon: according to SimilarWeb (2024), the ten most visited pornographic websites accumulate more than five billion monthly visits worldwide. This volume creates constant demand for new content, pressuring the industry to produce material continuously, sometimes resorting to coercive practices or recruiting women in vulnerable situations. Moreover, sociological studies have shown that intensive pornography consumption can alter men's attitudes toward women, increasing acceptance of rape myths and reducing empathy for victims of sexual violence. This creates a breeding ground that fosters demand for prostitution and, by extension, human trafficking.

For all these reasons, combating trafficking also requires a profound questioning of the pornography industry, its regulation, and its consent verification mechanisms. Without strict oversight and a cultural shift reducing the social acceptance of pornography, it will be difficult to dismantle the economic and symbolic incentive system that fuels the sexual exploitation of women and girls.

Trafficking as a Transnational Criminal Industry

Trafficking is currently one of the most lucrative and entrenched illicit industries on a global scale. Its magnitude and persistence are the result of a combination of economic, technological, legal, and cultural factors that give it remarkable adaptive capacity. Unlike other criminal activities, such as drug trafficking or the illegal arms trade, trafficking is based on the ongoing exploitation of people, allowing networks to obtain repeated profits from the same victim over long periods (Bales, 2016: 118).

From an economic standpoint, trafficking functions as a market perfectly integrated into the global system. Criminal networks operate like transnational companies that control different stages in the chain of exploitation: recruitment, transportation, control, and the commercialization of

sexual services. Each of these stages may be managed by different actors, which hinders the identification and prosecution of those responsible (Shelley, 2010: 212). In addition, the decentralization of functions allows the activity to continue even when part of the network is dismantled.

One distinctive feature of this industry is its high profitability. According to estimates by the International Labour Organization (2017: 39), forced sexual exploitation generates around 99 billion dollars per year, with a profit margin that exceeds that of most legal activities. This cash flow is possible thanks to the existence of constant demand, composed mainly of men seeking access to sexual services, who are rarely penalized for their participation. The absence of sanctions for consumers acts as an indirect incentive for market expansion (Farley, 2017: 101).

Trafficking also shows a great capacity to adapt to environmental changes. In times of economic crisis, networks intensify recruitment in impoverished communities; in situations of conflict, they take advantage of the lack of protection for displaced populations. Likewise, the incorporation of new technologies has transformed the business' logistics. The internet, social networks, and encrypted messaging apps enable the recruitment of victims, the organization of transfers, and the advertising of services quickly and with a low risk of detection (Petrescu, 2020: 84). Online platforms also facilitate market segmentation, allowing traffickers to tailor their offers to consumers' preferences.

Geographical fragmentation is another relevant characteristic. In many cases, victims are recruited in one country, taken to another for exploitation, and moved periodically across different jurisdictions to prevent them from building support networks or accessing legal resources. This pattern, known as "circuit trafficking," not only complicates police action but also intensifies psychological control over victims. Constant mobility prevents victims from becoming familiar with their surroundings, increasing their dependence on traffickers.

The business model of transnational trafficking is also supported by multiple levels of complicity. Beyond direct traffickers, intermediaries participate by facilitating transport, forged documentation, or the rental of premises for exploitation. In some contexts, institutional corruption plays a central role, ensuring the protection of networks in exchange for bribes. This web of interests makes eradication difficult, as it requires the cooperation of both legal and illegal actors.

The transnational nature of trafficking implies that solutions must also have a global scope. This includes harmonizing legislation, strengthening mechanisms for judicial and police cooperation, and creating standardized protocols for victim identification and assistance. Penalizing demand, combined with awareness campaigns, can help reduce the market, although

these measures must be accompanied by reintegration programs and support for victims to prevent re-victimization (UN Women, 2021: 26).

Institutional Responses and Challenges to Eradication

Addressing forced sexual exploitation requires a solid, coordinated, and sustainable institutional response over time. Public policies and international initiatives have advanced in defining legal frameworks and recognizing victims, but significant gaps persist that limit the effectiveness of these measures. To understand these challenges, it is necessary to analyze both the strategies implemented and the factors that hinder their application.

At the international level, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children—known as the Palermo Protocol—has been one of the most significant milestones. Adopted in 2000, this instrument supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and establishes definitions, obligations, and mechanisms for cooperation among States (UN, 2000: 3). However, the Protocol's effectiveness depends on its implementation at the national level, where political, economic, and cultural realities vary considerably.

National strategies to combat forced sexual exploitation usually combine prevention measures, criminal prosecution, and victim protection. In terms of prevention, many jurisdictions have developed awareness campaigns aimed at the general population, with the goal of reducing demand and raising awareness about the risks of trafficking. Nevertheless, these campaigns face budgetary constraints and, in some cases, are limited to superficial messages that do not challenge the cultural structures underpinning exploitation.

In the realm of criminal prosecution, the clear definition of the offense and specialized training for judges, prosecutors, and police are essential. Some countries have created specialized anti-trafficking units with resources and personnel trained specifically for this task. However, conviction rates remain low in most contexts due to difficulties in gathering evidence, a lack of effective international cooperation, and, in some cases, institutional corruption (Shelley, 2010: 218).

Victim protection and assistance is another fundamental pillar. This includes access to safe shelters, medical care, psychological support, and legal assistance. Organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and various NGOs have developed programs for social and economic reintegration, but their scope is limited in comparison to the magnitude of the problem (IOM, 2019: 12). Moreover, identifying victims remains a challenge: many do not recognize themselves as such or fear reporting due to the risk of reprisals or deportation.

At the regional level, the European Union has established directives and action plans that require Member States to adopt specific measures against forced sexual exploitation (EU, 2011: 5). These include penalizing traffickers,

providing comprehensive assistance to victims, and facilitating cross-border police cooperation. However, implementation has been uneven, and some countries still lack adequate mechanisms to effectively protect victims.

International cooperation is indispensable for tackling a crime of transnational nature. This entails information-sharing, joint operations, and the harmonization of laws. Nonetheless, the lack of trust among States, differences in legal systems, and divergent political priorities hinder such cooperation.

Another significant challenge is the adaptation of criminal networks to control measures. Each time surveillance mechanisms are strengthened in one area, networks shift to other routes or modify their recruitment and exploitation methods. This requires policies to be flexible and constantly updated in order to anticipate traffickers' new strategies.

Finally, it is essential to ensure that eradication policies are developed with a human rights approach. This means protecting victims regardless of their migration status, preventing re-victimization, and ensuring that their testimony is not the sole means of securing convictions against traffickers. It also requires recognizing the intersection of multiple factors of discrimination — such as gender, race, and social class — in victims' experiences (Crenshaw, 1989: 141).

In summary, institutional responses must be multidimensional, combining legal reforms, institutional strengthening, international cooperation, cultural transformation, and comprehensive support measures for victims. Only then will it be possible to move toward eradicating one of the most serious and persistent forms of gender-based violence worldwide.

Current Approaches and Challenges

The most recent European figures paint a scenario of maximum tension for institutions. In 2023, the member states of the European Union registered 10,793 victims of trafficking — a 6.9% increase compared to 2022 and the highest figure in the entire 2008–2023 series (Eurostat, 2025). Among cases with specified forms of exploitation, 4,201 people were trafficked for sexual purposes (43.8%), 3,457 for forced labor (36.0%), and 1,937 for other purposes — ranging from forced criminal activities to begging or benefit fraud (20.2%) (Eurostat, 2025). This increase does not necessarily reflect a “real” growth in the prevalence of trafficking but rather a combination of improved detection by authorities and greater adaptability of the networks (European Commission, 2025). At the same time, underdetection persists: for every identified victim, European agencies warn of an unquantifiable number that remains invisible.

Spain fits this picture with mixed indicators. According to the joint report by the National Police and Civil Guard, in 2023 a total of 1,466 victims of trafficking or exploitation — including 18 minors — were freed following 409 operations that resulted in 923 arrests, 109 dismantled criminal groups, and 7,570 inspections in high-risk environments (Moncloa, 2024). Narrowing the

focus to formal identifications, the 2024 U.S. Department of State Report recorded 497 victims officially recognized by Spanish authorities that year: 294 for sexual exploitation and 203 for labor exploitation, with minors present in both categories (TIP Report, 2024). Over a multi-year scale, GRETA — the Council of Europe’s monitoring mechanism — counted 1,687 victims identified in Spain between 2017 and 2022, including 79 minors. It also noted the relative increase in labor exploitation and the continued obstacles to obtaining effective compensation (GRETA, 2023).

Beyond totals, three trends deserve attention. First, the breakdown by sex and age: although sexual exploitation mainly affects women and girls, 2023 data show that 63% of all registered victims in the EU were women or female minors, confirming the gender dimension of the phenomenon (Eurostat, 2025). Second, the growing share of non-EU nationals: several states report that the percentage of non-EU victims has risen from around 40% to roughly 60–65% in recent years, highlighting the transnational nature of trafficking networks (European Commission, 2025). Third, the diversification of exploitation types: while sexual exploitation remains the most reported, labor exploitation now accounts for around 36% of registered EU cases (Eurostat, 2025).

The digital shift has multiplied the productivity of the crime. Europol documented operations in Spain in 2024 where recruitment occurred almost exclusively via instant messaging, using short-lived ads and “just-in-time” logistics to move women between apartments and cities within hours (Europol, 2024). This pattern minimizes digital traces, fragments evidentiary trails, and shifts control from physical brothels to loosely moderated online ecosystems. For institutions, this necessitates investment in data analytics, collaboration with platforms, and financial traceability linked to digital and cryptocurrency payments.

Spain has deployed specific police instruments — specialized units, joint patrols, and administrative inspections — and has strengthened coordination with prosecutors and courts. Nonetheless, bottlenecks remain. The GRETA report highlights difficulties in accessing financial compensation and the low number of victims who actually obtain reparations; between 2017 and 2022, the identification of 79 minors suggests under detection in childhood, despite documented use of adolescents in exploitation circuits (GRETA, 2023). The 2024 TIP Report keeps Spain in the top compliance category but calls for more progress in proactive identification, formal inter-institutional referral mechanisms (NRM), and prosecution of demand-related offenses (TIP Report, 2024).

The contrast between “rescued persons” and “formally identified victims” requires methodological clarification. In 2023, the 1,466 individuals rescued in Spain reflect broad police action against sexual and labor exploitation (Moncloa, 2024); however, only 497 met the legal definition of trafficking with the full evidentiary standards required (TIP Report, 2024). This

gap is not merely statistical: it has direct consequences for access to residence permits, support services, and compensation. From a public policy perspective, reducing this differential depends on early identification protocols, specialized frontline training, and simplifying evidentiary requirements when objective indicators of coercion are present.

At the European level, the revised Anti-Trafficking Directive introduces new forms of exploitation, strengthens the obligation of comprehensive victim assistance, and promotes investigative tools adapted to the digital environment. Although its transposition is ongoing, Brussels aims to increase investigation and conviction rates in the most profitable crimes — sexual and labor exploitation — with clear emphasis on the entire value chain: from recruiters and transporters to property owners and platform administrators. Eurostat, for its part, has expanded its data detail: in 2023, 14 out of 27 countries reported more registered victims than in 2022, and several reported sharp increases in cases of labor exploitation in agriculture, construction, textiles, and care sectors (Eurostat, 2025; European Commission, 2025).

There are also “dark numbers” online. Law enforcement teams report thousands of short-lived ads weekly on websites and social networks; takedown rates vary by platform, and the lifespan of an ad — often hours or a few days — complicates proving continuity of exploitation. To bridge this asymmetry, authorities are testing pattern-correlation algorithms (posting times, IP addresses, repeated texts) and digital payment traces. The challenge lies in turning these indicators into admissible evidence without violating rights — something that requires shared technical protocols and stable cooperation with tech intermediaries.

International organizations emphasize a three-pronged measurement approach: identified victims, initiated proceedings, and final convictions. The EU has made progress on the first indicator (+6.9% in 2023) but still has room for improvement on the other two. UNODC notes that after the pandemic, many countries reported simultaneous declines in identifications and convictions, alongside a growing share of online exploitation (UNODC, 2023). To reverse this, several states have introduced digital undercover agent roles, expedited data preservation, and faster cross-border information access — tools whose effectiveness will depend on their proportional use and on prosecutors’ capacity to prioritize cases with higher social impact.

In summary, the consequences of trafficking are not only psychological or social but structural: they reflect a system that strips women of agency and blames them for the violence they endure. Addressing survivors’ recovery requires comprehensive policies in mental health, education, employment, and restorative justice — capable of transforming pain into autonomy and victimization into full citizenship.

Psychosocial Consequences and Life Reconstruction of Women Survivors of Trafficking

The trafficking of women for sexual exploitation is one of the most devastating experiences in psychological, emotional, and social terms. It not only entails the systematic violation of the body and will but also the symbolic destruction of identity. Survivors carry a complex trauma characterized by the loss of a sense of safety, trust, and belonging. As Herman (1992: 73) notes, “extreme trauma destroys the systems of meaning that sustain human life,” and in the case of trafficking, this destruction occurs through repeated, planned, and profitable violence.

Numerous studies have documented the magnitude of emotional harm. Zimmerman et al. (2011: 48) found that more than 80% of rescued women showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), in addition to high levels of depression and anxiety. Hossain et al. (2010: 327) identified persistent patterns of suicidal ideation and internalized guilt, largely due to stigmatization and social misunderstanding. Constant sexual violence, combined with threats, economic coercion, and isolation, generates a form of relational trauma: victims lose trust in others and in themselves.

In many cases, women are subjected to strategies of emotional manipulation and psychological dependence that extend domination beyond physical captivity. Traffickers often present themselves as figures of authority, affection, or salvation, establishing power bonds that persist even after release (Kelly & Coy, 2019: 211). This phenomenon, known as “traumatic bonding,” explains why some women take years to recognize that they were victims. Exploitation not only destroys their autonomy but also dismantles their ability to interpret their own experiences.

Once physical enslavement is overcome, the struggle against symbolic enslavement begins. Survivors face a dual process: healing the wounds of the body and reconstructing a fragmented identity. Rafferty (2018: 56) points out that recovery involves “relearning to inhabit one’s own body and re-signifying desire,” something especially complex in cultures where female sexuality continues to be marked by guilt and shame. The difficulty of reconciling body image with personal dignity creates a constant tension between memory and survival.

Added to this is social and institutional re-victimization. Davy (2016: 213) warns that many survivors face police or judicial interrogations that reproduce dynamics of violence, with intrusive questions or moral judgments about their behavior. In some countries, the lack of adequate identification mechanisms leads to victims being treated as offenders under migration or prostitution laws, perpetuating the initial harm. UN Women (2024: 42) has denounced that indirect criminalization and social stigma hinder full recovery, generating fear, mistrust, and social withdrawal.

Stigma remains one of the most persistent barriers to reintegration. The label of being “an exploited woman” acts as a symbolic boundary separating them from the community. They are often rejected by their families or home environments, especially in contexts where virginity or sexual purity has social value. This rejection results in loneliness, poverty, and continued vulnerability. The IOM (2023: 15) emphasizes that sustainable reintegration requires long-term policies focused on economic autonomy and psychosocial support, not just temporary or humanitarian assistance.

However, public policies remain fragmented. In many countries, programs for trafficking victims focus on immediate protection — shelter, food, safety — without addressing emotional recovery or socio-economic inclusion. UN Women (2024: 46) stresses that lack of access to education, employment, and housing perpetuates dependence and exposure to new forms of exploitation. Life reconstruction requires a comprehensive approach combining material resources with psychological, legal, and community support.

In the face of this reality, women’s resilience emerges as a form of active resistance. Surtees (2019: 56) argues that resilience should not be understood as individual strength but as the result of collective processes of support, recognition, and participation. Women rebuild their sense of self when they find spaces where they can be heard without judgment. Kara (2021: 284) observes that many survivors transform their experience into social commitment, participating in associations or awareness campaigns against trafficking. This re-signification of pain into political action constitutes an act of affirmation and symbolic repair.

The narration of trauma plays a fundamental role in recovery. Herman (1992: 178) states that “trauma demands to be told”; without a narrative, it remains a silent wound that erodes identity. In this sense, testimonial spaces — workshops, support groups, artistic initiatives — allow women to reorganize their experience and regain agency over their stories. The act of narrating transforms the condition of victimhood into that of a political subject capable of demanding justice and recognition.

Justice, however, remains an unfulfilled promise. According to UNODC (2024: 57), fewer than 20% of trafficking victims effectively obtain judicial reparations or financial compensation. The difficulty of gathering evidence, fear of retaliation, and lack of specialized legal assistance create a spiral of impunity. Kelly and Coy (2019: 220) warn that re-victimization in court is one of the main reasons for abandoning legal proceedings. To break this cycle, it is essential for justice systems to adopt a gender perspective and a victim-centered approach that prioritizes emotional well-being over evidentiary gain.

Reparation cannot be limited to material compensation. It requires public acknowledgment of the harm suffered and symbolic restitution that restores the dignity taken away. Rafferty (2018: 63) asserts that “justice

becomes reparation when it validates the victims' truth and recognizes their humanity." Restorative justice policies, memorial acts, and awareness campaigns are essential steps in this collective healing process. Symbolic reparation not only benefits victims but also transforms the social culture that enabled the violence.

UN Women (2024: 46) highlights that economic autonomy is a decisive component of recovery. Without financial independence, women risk returning to exploitative contexts. Programs promoting decent employment, vocational training, and micro-entrepreneurship have shown positive results in reducing re-victimization. Education and labor inclusion provide not only economic stability but also social recognition and a renewed sense of purpose.

In this framework, the life reconstruction of women who have survived trafficking must be understood as a process of justice and social restitution, rather than merely individual recovery. Healing requires an environment that breaks silence and stigma, offers non-paternalistic support, and recognizes the political value of resilience. As Herman (1992: 203) emphasizes, "recovery from trauma can take place only within the context of relationships that restore dignity and empowerment."

Ultimately, the psychosocial consequences of trafficking are not an individual failure but the reflection of a social order that commodifies women's bodies and devalues their suffering. Rebuilding life after exploitation means restoring women's right to autonomy, voice, and hope. Transforming pain into meaning, shame into awareness, and silence into memory is not only a therapeutic act but also a political gesture of resistance against dehumanization. As Rafferty (2018: 63) concludes, "healing does not mean forgetting, but rebuilding the future upon the truth of the pain lived."

Conclusions

This article has addressed the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation from a multidimensional perspective, integrating structural, gender-based, cultural, and economic factors. The research has shown that this crime is sustained by a complex network in which historical inequalities, gender-based violence, patriarchal structures, forced migration, and highly profitable illicit markets converge (UN Women, 2024; Eurostat, 2025; UNODC, 2023). The statistical analysis has revealed an increase in detected cases across Europe, with a persistent pattern of overrepresentation of women and girls, confirming the need to address trafficking as an extreme form of gender-based violence.

In the early sections, it was explained how male demand for sexual services and cultural tolerance toward prostitution act as key drivers of the business, facilitating the entry of women recruited by international networks into both regulated and underground markets (University of Lund, 2023; IWF, 2023). Pornography, in turn, not only contributes to the normalization of sexual

objectification but also serves as a direct channel of exploitation when it involves non-consensual or coerced material.

The review of structural factors has highlighted the feminization of poverty, wage inequality, gender-based violence, and institutional corruption as elements that create a favorable environment for recruitment and exploitation. These factors interact with a global patriarchy that perpetuates female subordination and socially protects the client, rendering his active role in the perpetuation of the crime invisible (UN Women, 2024; University of Amsterdam, 2023).

The analyzed data demonstrate that the effective reduction of trafficking is only possible when criminal prosecution is combined with the penalization of demand, the provision of socio-economic alternatives for women at risk, and the cultural transformation of gender relations (TIP Report, 2024; GRETA, 2023).

In summary, the eradication of women's trafficking requires a comprehensive strategy that simultaneously tackles the structural causes, economic incentives, and cultural imaginaries that sustain it. Policies must be designed with a gender perspective, prioritize victim protection, and ensure their effective access to justice and reparation. Likewise, it is essential to strengthen international cooperation and inter-institutional coordination to close the legal and operational gaps that currently allow the persistence of the crime.

The most relevant conclusion is that without a profound change in patriarchal structures and in the cultural conception of male sexual consumption, criminal networks will continue to find sufficient demand to sustain their business. Therefore, the fight against trafficking must be conceived as part of a broader agenda for gender equality and human rights — one capable of transforming social relations at their root and ensuring that no woman or girl is ever treated as a commodity.

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