

A systematic review of family and social relationships: implications for sex trafficking recruitment and victimisation

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Sex trafficking is a current, severe and intense global phenomenon. Many studies have made substantial efforts to map the routes and relations between countries of origin, transit, destination, and the methods of recruitment and retention. With a focus on the role of social relationships, for this article, we conducted a literature review using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) to provide further scientific evidence of the elements and processes that push victims – primarily women and girls – into sex trafficking. The findings show that family, intimate relationships, friendships and acquaintances play a critical role in the pre-entry period before sex trafficking. Among these, family violence, abandonment and abuse emerge as severe risk factors, as well as the role of fraudulent intimate relationships. We also include additional social and individual risk factors that, together with the role of family and social relationships, have impacts on potential victims, increasing the likelihood of sex trafficking.

Key words

family violence • life trajectories • prevention • sex trafficking • social relationships

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Introduction

Research on the factors and causes of sex trafficking of women and girls has notably increased in the last ten years. Studies from different countries and cultural contexts have contributed to raising the knowledge on the incidence, prevalence, consequences

and push-and-pull factors of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation (Nodzinski et al, 2020). Articles that have mapped this literature stress the need to extend further and deeper into the causes and ways to prevent sex trafficking in its earliest stages.

This article maps the contributions indicated by the scientific literature, particularly focusing on the role that family relations and other close relationships, together with additional risk factors, play in recruitment and later sex trafficking victimisation. Social relationships in sex trafficking are a dimension that is increasingly having relevance in both research and preventive programmes. Recent studies indicate that women who fall into sex trafficking often do so through their social relationships with people who may take advantage of their vulnerable situations (Vindhya and Dev, 2011). We seek evidence on the processes pushing victims into sex trafficking, the pre-entry existence of negative social ties, and additional social risk factors. Previous studies have divided the complex process of sex trafficking victimisation into three phases. The first phase, on which we focus, is the pre-entry period when negative experiences generate psychological and circumstantial vulnerabilities that can precipitate victims' entry into the sex trade (Wilson and Butler, 2014: 495).

We build on the concept of Trafficking for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation as stated in the Palermo Protocol (UN Human Rights, 2000), keeping in mind that this approach is included in the legislation of most countries. The Palermo Protocol defines sex trafficking as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons through the threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or a position of vulnerability.

We framed the present article based on the following research projects: 'Life trajectories that move a person away or bring a person closer to the trafficking processes of sexual exploitation' (Puigvert, 2012–15) and 'END-TRAFFICKING: Changes and social innovations to prevent and reduce the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation' (Puigvert, 2014–17). Both projects included broad qualitative fieldwork, mainly in Spain and in other countries, and entailed analysis of changes and innovations that occur in civil society, together with interpersonal relationships and contextual factors that influence the sex trafficking of women and young girls. First, we explain the methodology used to map the existing literature. Second, we present the role of social relationships—including family, friendship and intimate bonds—in the processes of recruitment and exploitation of victims for sex trafficking purposes. Third, we include additional risk factors, which are present in the victims' context and may influence social relationships, and put women and girls at higher risk for sex trafficking. Finally, we discuss implications for practice, policy and research to promote successful and free life trajectories away from sex trafficking.

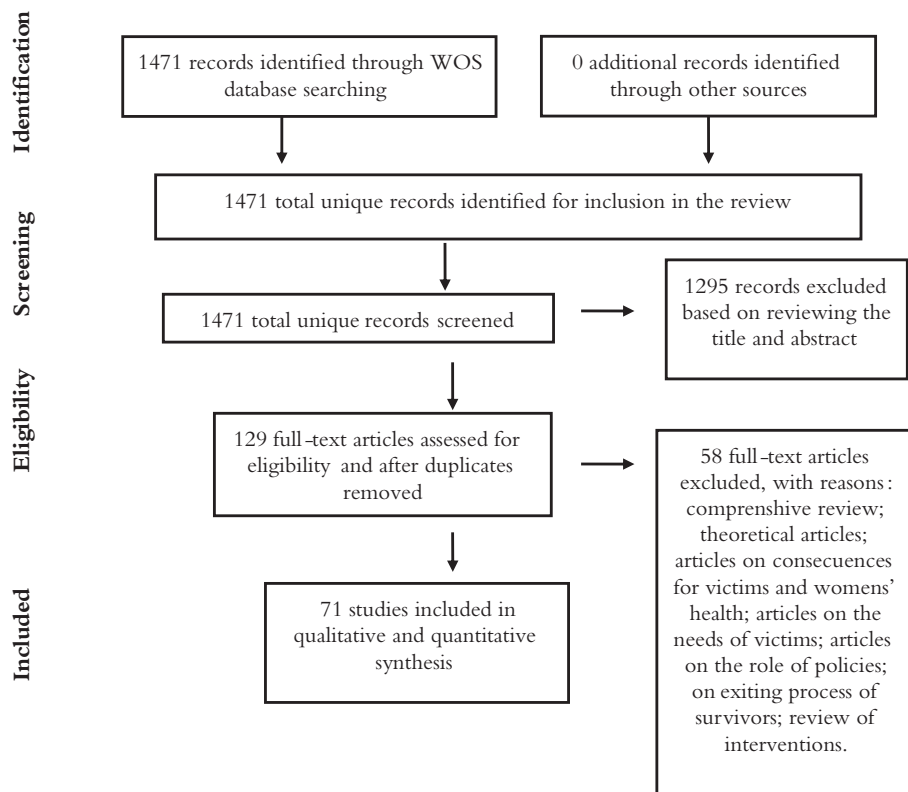
Methods

We aimed to seek evidence on the role that family connections and other relationships, especially intimate ones and friendship, together with coexisting social and individual risk factors, play in the recruitment and later sex trafficking victimisation of victims. To do so, we conducted a comprehensive search of international literature in the Web of Science (WOS) Core Collection according to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al, 2009). For the search, we chose the period between 2000 and 2020 because we wanted to

review international scientific studies published since the promulgation of the Palermo Protocol; most countries in the world have ratified its definition of sex trafficking. We performed the search with different Boolean combinations of the following keywords: 'sex trafficking' AND 'family'; 'sex trafficking' AND 'friend'; 'sex trafficking' AND 'acquaintances'; 'sex trafficking' AND 'intimate partner'; 'sex trafficking' AND 'pimping'; 'sexual exploitation' AND 'gender violence'; 'sex trafficking' AND 'risk factors'; 'sex trafficking' AND 'recruitment'; 'sex trafficking' AND 'entry'; 'sexual exploitation' AND 'risk factors'; and 'minor sex trafficking'. We obtained 1,471 articles from the search. The first screening consisted of reviewing the articles and abstracts. Next, we reviewed the full text of the selected articles. The flow diagram (Figure 1) shows the review process and the number of studies identified in WOS, the number of studies screened and excluded, the number of full-text articles assessed for eligibility, and the number of studies finally included.

Of the articles identified, we selected those most relevant to the research given their contributions of evidence to understanding the recruitment process of sex trafficking, focusing on the role of social relationships. Regarding the eligibility criteria of studies, we centred on studies that looked at the role of social relationships, including family ties, intimate partner and romantic relationships, peer-group bonds or friendships, and coexisting social and individual risk factors during the pre-entry period of sex trafficking. We selected articles with empirical quantitative or qualitative data. We decided not to restrict any country in the search because we were interested in

Figure 1



different local and international contexts. Most of the studies that offered data on the influence of social relationships on sex trafficking victimisation were focused on the US. Nevertheless, we found articles on this issue from Europe, Asia, Africa and South America, thus offering a global vision of the complexity and prevalence of this problem.

We established the following main exclusion criteria: literature review articles; theoretical articles; studies on court proceedings; studies on the exiting process, recovery experience or reintegration of sex trafficking survivors; psychosocial or therapeutic care for victims; practice implications for interventions; patient-provider relationships; attitudes or beliefs about sex trafficking; attitudes and knowledge of social service providers; studies on sex work, labour trafficking, or other forms of trafficking not directly connected to sex trafficking; and studies on the consequences of sex trafficking victimisation, on mental health diagnosis, on survivors' emotional needs, and on the historical evolution of policies or political or financial issues regarding human trafficking.

Results

Role of social relationships in sex trafficking victimisation: family, intimate relationships and friendship

Familial sex trafficking and violence

Family networks are critical in the recruitment process (Molland, 2012; Corbett, 2018). A study conducted in Nepal (Simkhada, 2008) showed that 35.7 per cent of sexual exploiters and traffickers were relatives such as uncles, cousins, or stepparents. Other research in Vietnam indicated that sex trafficking victims were primarily recruited through family and kinship networks (Molland, 2010). Another study conducted in Nigeria with 1,456 young women between 15 and 24 years of age revealed that 37 per cent of women indicated that close relatives, friendships, and, to a lesser extent, unknown individuals, traditional medicine practitioners, church members and friends of the mother fraudulently offered them assistance to migrate abroad to help the family's economic situation through sexual exploitation (Okonofua et al, 2004). In Central America, Izcara Palacios (2019) identified girls as young as ten introduced to sexual exploitation by their parents after previous episodes of sexual abuse in the family, as well as families that live economically from the sexual exploitation of a minor and that are sexually exploiting younger daughters as the older ones grow up and become less profitable. Izcara Palacios (2019) also found cases of Central American underage immigrant girls being sexually exploited in the US through deception. In Greece, the lack of adequate child welfare protection systems for unaccompanied migrant children increases their exposure to sexual abuse and exploitation (Digidiki and Bhabha, 2018).

Regarding recruitment for sex trafficking, recruiters frequently deceive families, promising a better future for their daughters (Hodge, 2008). In most cases, they defend their purchase with arguments about the utility of the money for the family, and typically offer fraudulent promises of employment with the complicity of the victims' network of friends and family members (Simkhada, 2008). Family can also play an active role in the trafficking process; whether due to ignorance or complicity, the family can sell or force young women and girls to migrate to earn an income or have

a job where they may end trapped in human trafficking and sexual exploitation. In this vein, evidence has been found of the way the position of trust that families have is abused through promising fake job offers or intimate relationships to sell victims to sex trafficking networks (Pandey, 2014). In this regard, research conducted in Nigeria suggests that some families might know what may happen to their daughters if they migrate to Europe, and these families may accept the idea of forced prostitution as an alternative to extreme poverty (Aghatise, 2004). Some migrant women captured by trafficking networks at the beginning of their migration route did not question or ask about the living conditions in the destination country or about the migratory route because they relied on family and friends (Molland, 2010). In Albania, traffickers, frequently known and trusted by families, often approach low-income families with false promises of a better life for their children as a means to negotiate their purchase for eventually having them sex-trafficked to other countries, mostly to Greece (Gjermeni et al, 2008). In this respect, Deb et al (2010) examined how Indian parents forcefully sell their daughters to trafficking networks in the relentless and coercive context of a lack of alternatives and social opportunities.

In a pilot study conducted in the US, Sprang and Cole (2018) focused on familial sex trafficking and demonstrated that all the sample cases, 31 child welfare-involved children, included a family member as the trafficker. In Florida in the US, a review of 63 records of juvenile sex trafficking victims found cases of family-facilitated sex trafficking in which at least 12 female relative traffickers were the biological mothers of the female victims. In numerous cases, there was more than one relative involved, primarily an uncle or a cousin as the trafficker. In 32 per cent of cases, the girls were exploited at home; in 21 per cent of cases, the girls were exploited outside the home in the streets, and in 10 per cent of cases, traffickers exploited the girls in residences used as brothels where the victims lived (Reid et al, 2015). Perkins and Ruiz (2016), who carried out a study in a rural US state, indicated that youth trafficked in rural areas are trafficked by family members more frequently than in urban ones, and are commonly recruited by boyfriends or female friends.

Other studies have highlighted the connection between one's family being involved in the sex trade and the likelihood of eventually being exploited. Women and youth are more likely to fall into sex trafficking when they have family members involved in human trafficking activities or tend to interact with members of sex trafficking networks (Pierce, 2012; Fedina et al, 2019a; Izcarra Palacios, 2019; Mostajabian et al, 2019; Reed et al, 2019). On the other hand, research conducted in India showed that families, particularly victims of sex trafficking who are mothers, are aware of their children's risks and fight for a better future through education (Dalla et al, 2018).

Family insecure attachment has been suggested as a risk factor for sex trafficking of juveniles, of which offenders take advantage (Hargreaves-Cormany and Patterson, 2016). Moreover, family dysfunction, an inadequate family environment, parental substance abuse, teen pregnancy, social isolation, abandonment, child maltreatment, adverse childhood experiences, and internalising health risk behaviours are conditions present in the pre-entry period in the commercial sexual exploitation of children and youth (Wilson and Butler, 2014; Hounmenou, 2016; Corbett, 2018; Rocha-Jimenez et al, 2018; Sprang and Cole, 2018; Izcarra Palacios, 2019; Reid et al, 2019).

Family violence, abandonment and abuse have also been acknowledged as pre-entry circumstances in victims' life trajectories (Nodzinski et al, 2020). Abandonment or running away from family due to domestic violence in the home have been identified

by diverse authors (Williams, 2015; Fedina et al, 2019b). Homeless adolescents in the US who have run away from their homes, or homeless youth exiting foster care, are significantly associated with a higher likelihood of sex trafficking victimisation if they have also suffered child maltreatment or were involved in the child welfare system (Landers et al, 2017; O'Brien et al, 2017; Latzman et al, 2018; Panlilio et al, 2018; Fedina et al, 2019b; Greeson et al, 2019). Additionally, LGBTQ homeless youth with a history of running away due to family rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity are at risk (Moore et al, 2020).

Violence and abuse have been pinpointed as risk factors (Hershberger et al, 2018). Authors (Deb et al, 2010; Pierce, 2012) have found women who have been abused, exploited, or suffered violence at the hands of their families or peer groups to be victims of sex trafficking. In addition, research links a history of sexual or emotional abuse in infancy and subsequent sexual exploitation (Reid et al, 2015; Varma et al, 2015; Landers et al, 2017; Greeson et al, 2019). Further, sexual harassment and sexual violence perpetrated by acquaintances, and the lack of support given to victims by their families and communities, push victims to leave their communities due to humiliation and shame, thus increasing their vulnerability to sex trafficking (Karandikar et al, 2011).

Influence of intimate relationships

Within the dimension of social relationships and family research, growing evidence underscores the influence of intimate relationships in sex trafficking. In the process of recruitment and the entry of women into trafficking networks for sexual exploitation, intimate ties seem to play a critical role. In this vein, researchers have suggested the need to assess risk factors beyond individual and familial levels among runaway youth victims of commercial sexual exploitation, since older dating partners are uniquely associated with this victimisation (Fedina et al, 2019b). Other studies have identified intimate partners such as boyfriends, fiancés, husbands, or fathers of women's children as abusers and exploiters of sex trafficking victims through force or coercion, including isolation, physical abuse and sexual abuse (Kogler et al, 2020).

One of the first investigations on trafficking for the purpose of international and domestic sexual exploitation carried out in the US discovered that 20 per cent of international victims and 28 per cent of Americans were involved in intimate relationships with partners who commercially sexually exploited them. The victims reported that their husbands or boyfriends acted as traffickers and were physically, sexually and emotionally violent and abusive (Raymond et al), 2001. However, the study did not provide further information on the two thirds of victims who did not identify husbands or boyfriends as the culprit. The mixed-methods study, conducted by Hickley and Roe-Sepowitz (2016) with 478 adult women on their experiences of sex trafficking victimisation in a large southwestern city in the US, found that some victims were frequently coerced into the sex trade by a romantic partner. In 2019, statistical data from 22,326 survivors of human trafficking in the US detected by the National Human Trafficking Hotline showed that at least 1,067 sex trafficking victims had been recruited through intimate partner or marriage proposition tactics (Polaris Project, 2019).

Traffickers use coercive and romantic deception recruitment strategies to move victims and induce them to involuntarily migrate, thereby increasing their vulnerability to the sex trade. For instance, traffickers involved in deceptive romantic relationships

with victims may invite them to go to another city or to meet their family, and then introduce them to sex trafficking (Rocha-Jimenez et al, 2018). Other studies have also documented international sex trafficking cases through arranged and forced marriages (Hounmenou, 2016; Huang, 2017; Bartels et al, 2018). Forced child marriages have been suggested as a form of child trafficking (Warria, 2017). The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2020) has documented the interlinkages between trafficking and marriage. A study conducted in the US with 29 Mexican immigrant female survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV) found that they had suffered different types of partner violence, including sex trafficking, and some of them had been stolen brides forced into prostitution (Kyriakakis et al, 2012). Regarding marital status and sex trafficking, being deserted by one's husband (Acharya, 2009) or becoming widowed (Karandikar et al, 2011) have been identified as risk factors in the context of poverty and a lack of opportunities.

Some of the key elements that emerged in several studies are relationship patterns and the dynamics of traffickers, with victims recruited through intimate relationships. By taking advantage of potential victims' vulnerabilities, traffickers initiate fraudulent intimate relationships to control and prevent victims from escaping, threatening them with violence and emotional abuse (Pierce 2012). Victims are initially persuaded, manipulated, entrapped, and consequently sexually exploited through this romantic fraud strategy and performance. A study in the US on the secondary case files of 38 domestic minors sexually trafficked by their romantic partners between 2012 and 2017 found that traffickers frequently exercise sexual and psychological violence to control victims. Victims perceived traffickers as romantic partners or boyfriends before being sexually exploited (Twis et al, 2020a). Traffickers used the illusion of romance to groom victims and facilitate their recruitment, then escalated violence and manipulation.

Nevertheless, some of the girls in the study perceived these feelings of romance as real. The authors of the study suggest that these cases resembled the dynamics of teen dating violence. Additionally, many girls felt entrapped and threatened, and traffickers described some of them as gang members or linked to other organised crimes, even threatening victims to hurt their families as a way to steal their freedom even more. These victims were trafficked by partners linked to extended families involved in the sex trade (Twis et al, 2020a). In another study, Reid (2014) analysed victims' feelings and perceptions of traffickers. In a review of 43 cases of sexually exploited girls, the researcher found that some girls reported feeling in love with their traffickers. Even one of the victims refused to testify against her trafficker, arguing that she felt she was in love with him. Some victims described traffickers as 'sweet' or said the traffickers took them 'out on dates' when they were asked about what the trafficker did to make them feel captivated (Reid, 2014: 8). Mehlam-Orozco (2017) analysed traffickers' identities through stories from convicted offenders. The author found that traffickers project themselves as 'honest heroes' and 'lovers' to exercise coercive control, fabricating feelings of love so that victims perceive their involvement in the sex trade as voluntary.

Several articles refer to this particular strategy of recruitment and to this type of trafficker, who grooms victims through deceptive romantic strategies with different labels such as the 'the Loverboy Method', the 'Romeo Pimp' or the 'finesse pimp'. Other studies refer to traffickers as 'gorilla pimps' when their tactics rely on violence (Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz, 2016; Duncan and DeHart, 2019). However, recent studies

have stressed the need to refer to these traffickers as what they are – traffickers – because most labels emerge from the language traffickers use themselves. Additionally, the standardised use of terms such as ‘loverboys’ or ‘Romeo pimps’, together with the glamorisation of ‘pimps’ and trafficking, hinders the social rejection of traffickers (Merodio et al, 2020). This might be an essential preventive issue since traffickers who recruit victims through intimate ties tend to glamorise and normalise engaging in the sex trade to manipulate victims (Reid, 2014). For instance, some victims argue that people they knew and boyfriends glamorised prostitution as a previous step of entrapping victims (Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz, 2016).

In most of the situations described in the studies mentioned above, victims suffer not only sexual exploitation, but also domestic violence and abuse from the trafficker that entrapped them through a falsified romantic relationship (Verhoeve et al, 2015). Marital abuse and sex trafficking take the form of gender-based violence and sexual abuse (Acharya, 2009; Karandikar et al, 2011; Salazar and Vega, 2017). In addition, there may be similarities between the coercive and manipulative mechanisms exerted by traffickers towards victims recruited through intimate relationships and domestic violence dynamics (Raymond and Hughes, 2001). In these cases, sexual exploitation, IPV and domestic violence may overlap (Koezler et al, 2020).

Role of friendship and the peer group

Friendship and peer groups have also been identified within the scientific literature as playing a relevant role in sex trafficking, although this is a new issue in research on the sex trafficking of minors (Twis et al, 2020b). According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 29 per cent of traffickers were friends of the victims (Di Tommaso et al, 2009). In India, Vindhya and Dev (2011) studied the cases of 78 sex trafficking victims recruited mostly by a neighbour or a friend from their places of origin who then moved victims to other cities. Other studies indicate that some victims are recruited by peers who are also victims of trafficking (Aghatise, 2004). A study in Tanzania points to the implications of daily experiences of sexual violence and gendered social norms in the community in girls’ later sexual exploitation. Participants in the study revealed facing constant sexual pressure and threats from men and their male peers on their way to school or almost any place in their neighbourhood, in the context of financial insecurity and poverty (McCleary-Sills et al, 2013).

Another study with archival case notes of 66 minors sexually trafficked by friends in the US showed that in most cases, traffickers met victims through mutual friends, followed by introduction through social media platforms facilitated by friends, and in the other two cases, the victim met the trafficker at school or at a party (Twis et al, 2020b). In Nevada, a qualitative study with 26 survivors of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) showed that relationships with friends were the most common type of relationship that influenced CSEC involvement among children who experienced abuse at home and escaped by running away. These survivors entered the sex trade due to peer pressure and role models. However, some of them said they did not have friends outside the sex trade environment, and one participant, prior to sexual exploitation, had suffered bullying and social isolation; traffickers took advantage of her lack of friends to recruit her (Reed et al, 2019).

Within investigations that analyse recruitment cases for trafficking in which friendship relations are involved, they shed light on female friends' and female traffickers' roles. Some studies suggest that female traffickers base their recruitment strategy on pretending to be friends with potential victims, thus luring them with gifts, beauty treatments or drugs to control them materially and psychologically. Additionally, female traffickers take advantage of their gender, pretending to be more reliable and harmless to potential victims and their relatives because they are also women (Hornor, 2015; Roe-Sepowitz et al, 2015). Researchers point to the ability of female traffickers to forge ties with women and girls (Chohaney, 2016). A study conducted in Finland with 11 cases of human trafficking found that young women were also convicted of trafficking in human beings. These female traffickers exploited their peers, young Finnish women or underage girls. As the author suggests, these cases were never friendship relationships based on equality (Viuhko, 2017). Another study found that traffickers can use female traffickers to increase their control over victims. These female traffickers can even be victims of the same trafficker and be involved in the sex trade for a long time. These profiles are described by victims as 'bottoms' or 'bottom bitches' (Twis et al, 2020b).

Consistently, studies show that family, intimate relationships, friendship and other social ties have an essential role in the period of pre-entry to sex trafficking. The lack of interpersonal and support relationships has been pointed out as a vulnerability factor to sex trafficking (Chisolm-Straker et al, 2018). For instance, social isolation among homeless youth may increase their vulnerability. In contrast, findings from a study conducted in New Jersey with 344 participants showed that having a supportive adult reduces the odds of being trafficked among homeless youth (Chisolm-Straker et al, 2018).

Social and individual risk factors coexist with factors related to social relationships

Family bonds and other social ties take place in social, political and economic contexts that greatly influence sex trafficking recruitment. Research has identified risk and push factors linked to socioeconomic structural conditions, a lack of resources, economic insecurity, poverty, deficits in human rights, failures in infancy protection, a lack of access to education, insufficiency in the protection of women and gender inequality (Karandikar et al, 2011; Vindhya and Dev, 2011; Bartels et al, 2018; Schwarz et al, 2019; Nodzinski et al, 2020). Specific situations, such as natural disasters or armed conflict, social and political instability, oppressive regimes and corruption (Acharya, 2010) generate vulnerability contexts.

Previous studies have also revealed risk factors linked to individuals' everyday social and personal life experiences. One significant factor is education. Although some findings indicate that women with high school (25 per cent) and university education (6 per cent) are among the victims of sex trafficking (DiTommaso et al, 2009) – which suggests that it can happen to anyone – substantially more evidence indicates that educational inequalities affecting women in different parts of the world are factors that increase the risk for sex trafficking (Crawford and Kaufman, 2008). Identified sex-trafficked girls are typically illiterate or semiliterate and/or have never learned to count and/or have not completed high school studies (Simkhada, 2008; Deb et al,

2010; Karandikar, 2011; Karandikar et al, 2011; Pierce, 2012). Additionally, school dropout and negative educational experiences may increase victims' vulnerability (Schwarz et al, 2019). In this sense, educational exclusion and segregation may be necessary as risk factors for becoming victims of sex trafficking. Unemployment is another risk element (Acharya, 2009). However, Di Tommaso et al (2009) found that most victims (65.8 per cent) had work experience before migrating and falling into sex trafficking, without specifying whether the employment conditions were precarious or the type of work.

Regarding victims' ages, the scientific literature suggests that being a young woman is one of the risk factors for being sex trafficked. Different investigations indicate recruitment ages between 9 and 19 (Crawford and Kaufman, 2008; Varma et al, 2015). Moreover, Acharya (2010) reported that approximately 72 per cent of the studied women in sexual exploitation situations were under 24. However, there is limited research on young boys being victims of sex trafficking, and they remain an understudied population (Moore et al, 2020).

Belonging to a minority ethnic group also becomes a factor of vulnerability (Acharya, 2009). For example, in Bulgaria, forced child marriage among Roma girls is the most common form of sexual abuse and exploitation (D'Arcy and Brodie, 2015). Roma children from low-income families in Albania are also at greater risk of international sex trafficking (Gjermeni et al, 2008). In the US, studies conducted in Minnesota and Alaska showed the high vulnerability of American Indian women and adolescent girls for sex trafficking (Pierce, 2012).

Women and girls with disabilities endure intersectional inequalities and social discrimination. Despite the limited research on this topic, children with physical or cognitive disabilities are particularly exposed to abuse and trafficking for sexual exploitation (Reid, 2014; Franchino-Olsen et al, 2020).

Drug dependency is also highlighted as a push factor for sex trafficking. Chemical dependence (Pierce, 2012) and consumption of psychotropic substances are also risk factors (Reid et al, 2015). Further, recruiters and traffickers profit from the vulnerability of female addicts by using drugs as a method of recruitment, coercion and control during sexual exploitation (Reid, 2014).

These social and individual risk factors are often interrelated and cause potential victims to suffer from multiple vulnerabilities, increasing their risk of sex trafficking. In addition, strong evidence implies that recruiters often search for women with more exposed and vulnerable profiles, assuming that these women tend to be easier to control (Reed et al, 2019).

Conclusions

Sex trafficking is a many-sided problem. Throughout the article, many risk factors that bring women and adolescents closer to sex trafficking have been identified. Traditionally, most investigations on sex trafficking have focused on structural and social conditions as global and deeper problems (Hodge, 2008; Acharya, 2009; Di Tommaso et al, 2009). Several articles identify how different vulnerabilities increase the risk for sex trafficking, including poverty, deficits in human rights, a lack of educational opportunities, unemployment, age, minority ethnicity, disabilities, drug dependency, child welfare involving children, and homelessness (Acharya, 2009;

Karandikar et al, 2011; Pierce, 2012; Varma et al, 2015; Bartels et al, 2018; Fedina et al, 2019b; Schwarz et al, 2019; Franchino-Olsen et al, 2020; Nodzanski et al, 2020).

Without diminishing the necessity of addressing the conditions related to victims and their social context that predispose them to vulnerabilities associated with being sex-trafficked (Cecchet and Thoburn, 2014), the comprehensive search of international literature conducted in this article has contributed to gathering evidence on how family, intimate and peer relationships are a significant component of the sex trafficking equation (Viuhko, 2017; Corbett, 2018; Rocha-Jimenez et al, 2018; Sprang and Cole, 2018; Izcará Palacios, 2019; Reed et al, 2019; Twis et al, 2020b). Although their involvement might not outweigh other non-family individuals and other social, cultural and structural factors, the data gathered reveal its critical role in the pre-entry period to sex trafficking and recruitment (Karandikar et al, 2011). In this respect, it is critical to acknowledge – contrary to the normative narrative in public discourse – that sex trafficking is not only perpetrated by organised criminal networks, but also occurs in families and intimate relationships, which are cases that can go unnoticed by law enforcement, child protective services, healthcare and social service providers. Hence, familial sex trafficking and violence prevention are crucial, together with better detection of risk-family contexts and potential cases of sex-trafficked children in family networks, as they remain among the most vulnerable and invisible population.

Recommendations for future research

Previous studies have addressed the extensiveness of risk factors in sex trafficking recruitment and victimisation. However, more research is needed to understand how family ties, intimate relationships, friendship or other social bonds influence them, increasing or reducing the risk of sex trafficking. More information is especially needed on the impact of social relationships on the pathways of those most at risk, such as children in the child welfare system, homeless youth, or minors who suffer abuse and maltreatment. The link among those experiencing violence, abandonment, abuse, and later sex trafficking victimisation requires further investigation, given other circumstances and significant conditions related to the social relationship contexts of victims. Additionally, research should examine understudied populations, such as young male victims of sex trafficking (Moore et al, 2020), LGBTQ populations, and whether recruitment strategies developed by traffickers or others in close contact with potential victims are different depending on victims' profiles. This is also important regarding victims' ages and the influence of social relationships. Identifying whether these might vary by age would be beneficial for developing accurate preventive strategies. Social relationships in which gender is intertwined require further multidimensional research, together with the role of female traffickers.

The intersection between sex trafficking, dating violence and IPV needs to be further examined, building on the evidence provided in recent studies (Reid, 2014; Hickle and Roe-Sepowitz, 2016; Kogler et al, 2020; Twis et al, 2020a).

In this regard, together with the living conditions and difficulties faced by victims, it is necessary to deeply acknowledge the recruitment strategies, as well as the socialisation elements and the importance of social interactions present in victims' life trajectories in the pre-entry period to recruitment, which may influence their entrance into sex trafficking.

Last, in light of the increasing evidence of the influence of negative relationships on sex trafficking, for a more transformative dimension, further analysis should consider what alternative and protective social interactions may prevent negative experiences and compensate for the impact of other toxic relationships that can precipitate victims' sex trafficking at an early stage. The experiences of potential victims who could have been at high risk of sex trafficking victimisation, but who escaped or avoided it thanks to protective social relationships with family members or others close to them, reveal a path away from sex trafficking. Their life trajectories can illuminate further protective factors that may reduce and prevent risk factors, hence breaking the chain of sex trafficking.

Funding

This work was supported by the Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality under Grant [15/22] and by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness under the Grant [FEM2013-46670-R].

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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