

# Life after trafficking

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# **Valorisation**

## **Background**

This thesis answers the question of what determines successful recovery and (re) integration of women trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, and how influencing factors interplay, in the short and long run. The analysis is based on qualitative research conducted in Southeastern Europe (Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia) and Western Europe (Netherlands and Italy).

Much of research on the topic of (re) integration of trafficking victims has focused on the immediate aftermath of being identified as a victim of trafficking. Many of the (re) integration services which are offered to victims address immediate needs, although some programmes follow victims for several years. However, recovery and (re) integration is a long term process, which for some survivors may entail lifelong efforts. What this thesis addresses, is the (re) integration process in its entirety, and determines what some of the long term needs of victims may be, as well as what outcomes ensure the sustainability of a more successful (re) integration process. In addition, this thesis tries to escape the mostly polemic discussions around the issue of sex work, and instead, through empirical evidence looks at the influence attitudes toward sex work as well as existing stigma toward the issue may have on the overall (re) integration process of trafficking victims.

## **Relevance and innovativeness**

There are a number of ways in which this thesis has made a contribution to research in the field of human trafficking.

## **Methodological**

When research on human trafficking attempts to address any issue which concerns the survivors, efforts are usually made to capture the views of the target group. In this process, there are possibly two consequences. Firstly, involving human trafficking victims in research on the topic may in some way re-trigger past experiences, and thus, there is always the danger that victims

may be re-traumatised. This is precisely why many organisations that offer (re) integration services have introduced strict policies where they do not make their beneficiaries accessible to researchers. Secondly, in the attempts to capture the views of survivors, researchers often miss another highly significant group which may be a source of valuable information, namely services providers. It is precisely this group that has been captured in this research. Service providers, some of whom have been doing their job for many years, have information on the (re) integration process of multiple beneficiaries. Additionally, they also have information on the (re) integration process over time. Capturing the needs of survivors many years after having been identified as trafficked is particularly difficult. Victims usually do not want to speak or remember the traumatic experience of the past, and some of them have cut all communication with any actor from that part of their life, including the organisations which offered (re) integration services. Individual survivors who do remain in touch with service providers, are often reluctant to speak to researchers. Thus, through speaking to service providers, this thesis has identified some of the needs of victims several years after they have exited official (re) integration programmes.

## **Geographical**

Research on (re) integration of persons trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation usually focuses on the return of women in their country of birth. Women either express the wish that they would like to go back home, or have no choice as they do not have legal right and documentation to stay in the country to which they were trafficked. However, there is always a group that does remain in the country in which they were identified. Little is known of the recovery and (re) integration processes of this group. In addition to looking at (re) integration processes of women that did return to their country of birth, this research has also looked at the recovery and (re) integration of women that have remained in the country in which they have been identified - in this case the Netherlands and Italy. The differences between origin and destination countries were found to be particularly stark in regard to the way criminal proceedings against the trafficker are conducted, and the treatment of the victim throughout this process (Chapter 6). Thus, whereas criminal proceedings against traffickers in origin countries are long, over many years, often re-traumatise, and almost never offer financial compensation, in the Netherlands, trials are significantly faster, at times when the victim is too vulnerable do not request her testimony and almost always entail financial compensation for the survivor. On the issue of stigmatisation of sex work and

by extension of victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, this research has found similarities, rather than differences between origin and destination countries, meaning these two groups are stigmatised in both the country of their birth, as well as in the country in which they were identified (Chapter 7).

## **Conceptual**

The main concept which has been addressed throughout this thesis is that of (re) integration, and how the process of recovery fits within that context, for victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation (in particular in Chapter 4). Thus, this thesis has found that we cannot speak of definitive success of the (re) integration process, but a continuum of success along different dimensions, which were also identified and discussed (within the recovery process, economic, social and institutional dimensions). Even further, it has determined what gives sustainability to the process of (re) integration in the long run, which is the building and re-building of healthy relationships, and formation of a new family. This is not seen as a loss of independence, but as having the autonomy to make decisions which ultimately satisfy the need to belong, and contribute to the long process of recovery and (re) integration. Thus, a key distinction is made between the concepts of autonomy and independence. Namely, autonomy is what is seen as desirable, the ability to make one's own decisions. As long as the survivor is free to practice her autonomy in every area of her life, is no longer in a situation of exploitation, independence is seen as largely not relevant.

## **Empirical**

(Chapters 4, 5) One of the main findings of this research is that the ability of forming healthy relationships, personal in which the survivor can practice her autonomy, and relationships with service providers, built on trust, are the most significant factors that could contribute toward successful long term (re) integration of trafficking victims. As noted, significance of the newly formed family, following a trafficking experience is identified as an important factor influencing the success and sustainability of the (re) integration process. Of course, for this to be achieved, and for the survivor to have the ability to reestablish healthy relationships, other factors are also important, especially in the short term, upon being identified as a victim of trafficking. Thus, therapy is crucial, as well as being given clear, open and honest information from service providers on immediate steps that would follow after being

identified as a victim of trafficking. Such exchanges would work toward reestablishing trust that the victim has lost in social relations.

(Chapter 6) When looking at the dynamics of the prosecution of the trafficker, it was found that trials often last a long time, and may require the victim testifying numerous times, which often causes re-traumatisation. Thus, although conviction of the trafficker may satisfy needs for justice and safety of some victims of trafficking, it is in situations where the prosecution and trial are swift that this is most pronounced. This thesis has also found that there are significant variations amongst countries as to the possibility of financial compensation of victims. Thus, countries such as the Netherlands have made the option of pursuing financial compensation for survivors easily attainable. In addition, most persons recognised as victims of trafficking, whose trafficker is successfully prosecuted, are granted financial compensation. This is not the case in most origin countries studied in the context of this research.

(Chapter 7) Finally, when looking at the approach to sex work in the context of anti-trafficking, this thesis finds ongoing stigmatisation, not only of sex workers, by both service providers and victims of trafficking, but also reports of stigmatisation of trafficking victims. Stigmatisation is due to the association of trafficking victims, with the issue of sex work, and also because of the lack of understanding of the differences between sex work and sex trafficking. Such stigmatisation has negative consequences for the (re) integration process of survivors.

### **Target audience**

Much of the funds allocated to (re) integration services for trafficking victims and much of the type of (re) integration services available at the moment focus on the immediate aftermath of being identified as a trafficking victim. In addition, a lot of attention is being placed on the perceived need of particularly economic independence of trafficking victims. What this thesis has shown however, is that what seems to offer longevity to the potential success of the recovery and (re) integration process is the ability of survivors to form healthy relationships based on trust. In particular formation of new families, as well as sustaining a relationship with a service provider who has earned the trust of the survivor. Thus, much more attention should be given to these areas of the (re) integration process. In addition, it has been determined that victims are often in the danger of being traumatised again

throughout the criminal proceedings against the trafficker, with little possibility of subsequent financial compensation for the survivor. Finally, it has been determined that stigmatising attitudes toward sex workers persist in current anti-trafficking organisations, attitudes which are often reflected also by trafficking victims. These may extend to the group of trafficked persons themselves, and thus negatively influence the recovery and (re) integration process. With this in mind, there are several groups in addition to academia, that would be the target audience of this thesis.

Primarily, the target of this thesis are all anti-trafficking organisations (national and international, governmental and non-governmental) who seek to offer recovery and (re) integration services to trafficking victims. The strong recommendation to these groups, in particular in Europe, would be to place significantly more attention to programmes that would assist victims in re-building their feelings of trust toward others. As well as programmes that would focus on the establishment of new, healthy relationships. At the moment, the decision about openness of victims about their past experience to newly formed relationships is largely left up to the victim. However, some victims may want more assistance and guidance in regard to this issue, in particular if this is something that is addressed and worked through in therapy sessions, and survivors are assured that they are not to blame for what has happened to them. In addition, anti-trafficking organisations need to give significantly more attention to training of their own staff, and in general sensitivity training of all individuals who may in any way come in contact with trafficking survivors. It has been found that stigmatising attitudes toward sex work extend toward the issue of sex trafficking as well, and thus influence the recovery and (re) integration process in a negative way. Thus, this is an issue that needs to be addressed within these organisations.

Finally, this thesis seeks to reach the judicial branch in origin countries in particular. The current length of criminal proceedings against traffickers are simply unacceptable. In addition, stigmatisation and maltreatment of victims exists in the context of these trials as well, which in addition to the re-telling and re-living of their experiences, further contributes to their re-victimisation. Sensitivity training of all members of the judicial branch who may come in contact with trafficking victims, is greatly needed in this area.

## **Outreach**

With the completion of the writing of this thesis, several outreach activities have already been undertaken, and will be undertaken in the upcoming period, to ensure that the research does reach the target audiences identified. This thesis has produced a total of six articles, two of which (Chapter 2, Chapter 6) have already been published. The remaining are also being prepared for submission to peer-review journals, and will subsequently be published. Of particular academic value is Chapter 3 which discusses the many methodological challenges that arise when studying a topic such as human trafficking, specifically trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

In addition, this thesis will be disseminated to all service providers who have participated in this research. As already noted these are individuals who work in anti-trafficking organisations, government bodies, shelters as well as police officials. Each of these actors has significant opportunity and possibility to implement the recommendations proposed by this research, and to take into consideration the results, in order to inform their future work.

Finally, a list of additional relevant actors in the field of anti-trafficking has been drafted, from all the countries that were involved in this research, but who did not participate in it. The thesis will also be disseminated to the identified individuals and organisations that may further be able to take into consideration the results of this research and implement the recommendations in the area of anti-trafficking.