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“From depression, to an overdose of crack, to trying to kill myself”: Post-trafficking Mexican women survivors’ challenges and NGO’s strategies in rehabilitation

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Abstract

Sexual trafficking in Mexico continues to be a significant crisis raising multiple challenges for women who exit this oppressive network. This study examines two sides of post trafficking: the interrelated needs and challenges these survivors face when they return or escape from a trafficking situation, and how NGOs strategize. A significant aspect of the study focuses on employment: the transition from sexual exploitation to securing legitimate employment and acquiring an independent life and how NGO staff work to support them. Drawing on survivor testimonies along with interviews (both published and two conducted for this project), the study delineates that they have numerous needs and face layers of challenges for reintegration. The study considers how NGOs strategize to meet complex needs for re-entry— for finding new kinds of work after forced sexual labor. Furthermore, the study also examines the long-term impacts on survivors, investigating the aftermath of their traumatic experiences and how these effects can influence their ability to recover. Hence, this study contributes to understanding this important later phase of perpetual rape and violation of human dignity. Inadequate legal structures, cultural factors and stigmatization, psychological trauma and vulnerability are some of the obstacles survivors face with few resources –besides a network of NGOs– available for their recovery.

Key words: Mexico, Sex trafficking, Reintegration, rehabilitation, non-governmental, human trafficking

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Introduction

50% of the victims detected in the world were trafficked for sexual exploitation, the majority of them women and girls (UNODC, 2022). Human trafficking for sexual exploitation represents not only a severe form of gender violence but also one of the most abhorrent violations of human rights. It poses significant challenges for both governments and the international community besides its individual victims. It is the third most lucrative criminal sector (following the trafficking of drugs and weapons) with yearly profits estimated by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and to be at least $35 billion (UNODC 2022). Countries in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa detect primarily men, trafficked for forced labor, and boys for forced criminal activity (UNODC 2022). While countries in North, Central America, and the Caribbean typically detect women and girls as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (UNODC 2022). According to UNODC data from 2022, Mexico is among the top 25 nations in the world with the greatest rate of this crime. Among the findings there was a rise in victims—from 1,316 to 2,202—based on official data from the Mexican government (UNODC 2022). According to the organization, there has been a notable increase of 32.8% in the various forms of human trafficking related to sexual exploitation (UNODC 2022). There were 982 cases reported in 2020 and an increase of 1,305 cases reported in 2021 (UNODC 2022). The trafficking of minors, individuals under the age 18, specifically aims to reap economic benefits from the forced sexual services. This type of human trafficking, which targets children and teenagers, is a long-standing social problem that is becoming more and more alarming on an international level.

In examining trafficking, we naturally wonder about several basic questions: how many people get trafficked? Of which gender, which age, what ethnicity? Where are they trafficked to? For how long? Who are the "customers" who keep the business running? In Mexico, as in other countries, the clandestine nature of human trafficking complicates efforts to measure its full extent. Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is an extreme form of violence against women. Female victims of human trafficking are

three times more likely to suffer from severe violence than those who are male (UNODC 2022). This is linked to aspects of the society, including the non-criminal, ordinary parts; the presence of societal norms, beliefs, and prejudices. For example, the normalization of violence against women, this kind of perspective makes people less sensitive to the situation of women who are trafficked and less likely to offer help and assist. Those "ordinary" ideologies foster social problems that impact trafficking survivors: gender discrimination and the perceived roles and values of women; unequal rights like corruption within the law enforcements; and power imbalances from economic disparities making victims of low socioeconomic backgrounds more vulnerable. The extremely dismaying truth is that, in many parts of Mexico, — particularly those with high rates of poverty–- the exploitation of children usually begins in households where girls are sexually exploited for financial gain (CNDH, 2019). Despite the magnitude of the problem and the significant evidence, the trafficking of minors for sexual exploitation went unnoticed for too long: no attempts were made to eradicate it until relatively recently.

There are nuances to defining the term trafficking. In 2000, the United Nations established a comprehensive definition of the problem at an international level. According to the UN *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, or "Palermo Protocol:" (Article 3a) "Trafficking in persons" is defined as the recruitment, transfer, harboring, or receiving of individuals through the use of threats, use of force or other forms like: coercion, abduction, fraud, abuse of authority, or by benefiting financially to control over another individual with the intention of exploiting them (OHCHR, 2014). Exploitation includes any sort of sexual exploitation or similar services. The Palermo Protocol's notion is centered on exploitation rather than evaluating the consent of the victim (Cicero-Domínguez, 2005). It is important to understand that no victim deserving or undeserving of trafficking should be questioned about their consent.

In the specific case of initiatives to eradicate and protect minors and young women from being trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, it is important to recognize that this issue is a matter of

public concern in Mexico as well as internationally. Not only has the legal framework advanced significantly, but some protocols, care models, and training programs have also been designed more effectively (CNDH, 2021). Nonetheless, there is still a societal obligation to the victims since there are still gaps in the establishment of comprehensive public policies and rehabilitation programs intended to address the needs of those who are survivors of this type of human trafficking. Recognizing the important progress made in Mexico and globally in terms of public awareness and legislative developments are still desperately needed. These regulations have to be especially designed to address the special requirements of survivors, filling in the gaps in their rehabilitation and support that currently prevail.

Reevaluating the recovery process is necessary in order to address the severe trauma that victims of sexual exploitation face. Hence, short-term rehabilitation is not possible due to the extent of trauma experienced by victims of sexual exploitation (CNDH, 2021). Because of this, there has been an ongoing struggle to provide treatment, support, and long-term social reintegration protocols. This is partially due to: the lack of funds for NGOs, the stigmatization of victims in society, the survivors' psychological repercussions, and inadequate advocacy (Shigakane, 2007). These are some of the reasons why it is frequently not the greatest idea—and in many circumstances, even dangerous—for the women and young girls to return to their family and social circle immediately after exiting the network of human sex trafficking (Orozco, 2023). Yet, there are not enough resources and adequate tools provided for survivors to start their process of reintegration.

This study will examine the essential needs and challenges these women face when they return or escape from a trafficking situation through the lenses of survivors and through the lenses of professional workers. A significant aspect of my study concentrates on employment — specifically, the transition from sexual exploitation to securing legitimate employment and the broader landscape of work for these survivors. This comprehensive study aims to shed light on the systemic and individual factors affecting the reintegration of trafficking survivors into society, with a particular focus on empowering them through

work and the support available to them. The survivor needs are interrelated, and NGOs strategize their work to serve that web of needs – while also to improve society more generally.

Method

In this study, I will employ a qualitative methodology, using in-depth interviews and testimonies from Mexican survivors of sexual exploitation, alongside insights gathered from professionals working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dedicated to supporting survivors. The first voice will be the testimonies of six survivors. Two of the testimonies were recorded on video and posted on Tik Tok in 2022 under the account of the foundation the United Commission Against Trafficking (Comision Unidos vs Trata). One testimony was conducted by Jessica Fernandez Garcia who has a YouTube channel called Beyond Pink (Mas alla del rosa), it was posted on YouTube in 2023. Two other testimonies were drawn from a documentary film called Human Merchandise (Mercancia Humana) conducted by Rafael Romo with CNN investigation; it was also posted on YouTube in 2018. The other survivor's interview was conducted by me during the process of writing my thesis. The interview was held through zoom with no face recording, only voice memo. It is important to mention that this testimony was going to be divided in two sessions, one untangling the trafficking process and the second one would focus on the aftermath after escaping and recovery (See Appendix B). However, even though the survivor was eager to give her testimony, the second session was not able to take place and chose not to participate anymore. This underlines how important it is to give survivors autonomy over the time and manner in which they share their memories, recognizing that this is an extremely personal choice. This approach ensures that participants are empowered in the research process and may contribute to a valuable and open exploration of their experiences. The selection of the survivors' testimonies was the decision of the women themselves to come forward and share their testimony. All of the known survivors are in some way connected to an NGO program. None of the survivors will talk and will be willing to have interviews if they have not "recovered" or if they are not protected by some sort of program. By using this approach, the study gives participants more agency and encourages an insightful and open conversation about their experiences.

In order to have access to the case material, I reached out to an NGO, Path to Home Foundation (Fundación Camino a Casa, FCC) during the time of writing my thesis. I conducted a recorded interview with a professional worker, Rosi Orozco, who is the Founder of Path to Home Foundation to have the viewpoint of professionals that treat the survivors on a daily basis. The main topics discussed were the survivors' needs post trafficking, the work itself of the NGO, and the reintegration of survivors to community (See Appendix A).

The study focused on Mexico due to the ongoing widespread occurrence of human trafficking and the recognition of specific hotspots within the country where this problem is especially intense. This project involves listening to and transcribing the interviews and noting down key quotations. With the creation of a self-made database, it will allow me to observe commonalities and distinctions among diverse survivor experiences, and identify the themes and complexities involved in the process of seeking employment. These techniques are capable of capturing the human experiences, feelings, and context that quantitative data frequently fails to present. According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2018, 8), “qualitative approaches are needed to capture the complexities of people’s lives and experiences.” Through qualitative investigations we learn about the complex dynamics of trafficking networks and discover the many difficulties victims confront.

Data Limitations

This approach requires taking into account a number of plausible but unnamed elements impacting the phenomenon. These involve the actual level of crime, the efficiency of law enforcement, and other important factors. The direct identification of victims of sex trafficking has become extremely difficult by the persistent presence of organized crime groups that may use the same routes and locations for migrant transit, as well as by the constant influx of individuals into this area and a shortage of efficient prosecution resources. While examining the trafficking issues associated with the U.S. and Mexico, and the

governmental responses to them, it's essential to incorporate reports from the U.S. Department of State. These reports provide insightful information about the types and extent of human trafficking, as well as the efficacy of government initiatives. Furthermore, even if the Mexican and American governments' collaboration in law enforcement has significantly improved recently, there is still a significant disparity in the sharing of particular kinds of information. Sharing data about criminal deportees is a particular area where this disparity is most apparent. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for a thorough investigation of the human trafficking phenomenon and the efficacy of the strategies implemented to combat it.

Review of Literature

The majority of academic work on trafficking is done in legal disciplines, in conjunction with social science research based in human rights. Prabha Kotiswaran (2021), a law professor in King's College (London) explores anti-trafficking laws and policies in the UK and India. In the journal *Feminist Legal Studies*, she discusses how the anti-trafficking international legal framework itself fortifies, rather than defuses, cultures of sex work *exceptionalism*. Here, 'exceptionalism' is when groups seeking to abolish sex work (neo-abolitionists) define any kind of sex work as a deplorable violation of human dignity. Neo-abolitions also conflate trafficking and sexual exploitation with sex work. The article explains the emergence of prostitution to recent conceptual shifts of "modern slavery" and "forced labor". Kotiswaran's analyses how anti-sex work and anti-trafficking legislation foster the idea that sex work is an exception to human trafficking. She asserts that the global movement of sex workers, which opposes the notion of sex work exceptionalism and strives to address the significant issues within anti-trafficking rhetoric, lacks a clear, cohesive, detailed and interconnected framework. The scholar explains that the turning point of sex work exceptionalism occurred from 2000 and 2009, and then as labor trafficking received more attention it developed the opposing conceptual frameworks of "modern slavery" and "forced labor," both of which were the focus of national and international laws. Through a different method, Angela Miles (2003) interviews

Janice Raymond, a women's studies professor and activist of the International Coalition Against Trafficking in Women. Raymond advocates for decriminalizing women in prostitution while penalizing the customers. She does not recognize prostitution as work, rather she conceptualizes a term called "state-sponsored prostitution" which is a form of sexual terrorism posing as sexual and economic freedom for women. Raymond disputes that supporters of abolition argue that prostitution is the issue, and that no woman should have to become a prostitute in order to survive. Plus, she highlights that recognizing the fact that certain women can be forced into sexual slavery because many men want, need, or desire prostitution's sex is equivalent to legitimizing the sex industry through regulation. Both articles argue that legalizing, decriminalizing, or regulating the sex industry does not improve the position of prostitution-related women. It simply enhances the sex industry. Kotiswaran and Raymond finally emphasize that it is crucial to achieve the right kind of reform with advocacy, specifically to decriminalize the women. Both authors agree that they don't want any legal sanctions against the women; instead of maintaining women in the sex industry, where they have no meaningful future, Kotiswaran and Raymond propose that it's necessary to help enable alternatives to prostitution and offer them different tools.

Building on this discourse on human trafficking and its regulatory frameworks is David R. Hodge and Cynthia A. Lietz (2007)'s article, *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*. Both authors, whose fields focus on social work, claim that little has been written in the social work literature regarding social justice and advocacy for vulnerable groups. In reviewing the literature on the trafficking of young women and children for prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation, they found that the most influential definition for human trafficking derives from the United Nations 2000 trafficking protocol. They highlighted the fact that after the implementation of the protocol, there was a shift of policies, and interventions emphasizing victims rather than to traffickers. Hodge and Lietz observed that before the 1990s, the belief prevailed that sex trafficking was largely confined to Asia. Recently, sex trafficking has been globalized and it occurs in more than one geographic region. By examining a United Nation's report, the authors argue that destination countries are typically wealthy states with substantial sex industries,

legalized prostitution, or widespread approval of it (United States, Germany, the Netherlands). Hodge and Lietz, analyzed different studies to identify four general modes of recruitment strategies in trafficking (add endnote on the 4 strategies).

Other writings about human trafficking also come from the studies of migration and border crossing. In the Northwestern Journal of International Human Rights, Salvador A. Cicero-Dominguez (2005), a professional in the disciplinary field of law and migration, addresses the issue of human trafficking diagnosing its connection with the smuggling of migrants in the U.S.- Mexico border. He outlines the impacts of cross-border trafficking on the relationship between the United States and Mexico and details how current state policies respond to issues like the deportation of former criminals from the U.S. related to the phenomena. Salvador A. Cicero-Dominguez examines the effectiveness of Mexico's legislative approach and questions if the country's legal structure is adequate in combating human trafficking. He explores about ten different policies in place along the border between the United States and Mexico, focusing on practices such as the deportation of previous offenders from the United States, and evaluates their impact on the dynamics of human trafficking and migrant smuggling. Further, he contends that current statistical data on trafficking within Mexico is both inadequate and outdated, highlighting a critical gap in understanding the true scope of the issue. For that reason, Cicero-Dominguez examined reports from the United States government, concluding that the Mexican government does not fully comply with the minimum standard for the elimination of trafficking. Cicero-Dominguez disputes the idea that law enforcement is not enough to resolve the root of this problem. He proposes that to accurately address this phenomenon, both countries should invest in dialogue, honest communication and cooperation with each other's policies.

The next major study on human trafficking examines the care and assistance after sexual exploitation. Two researchers in the human rights field, Rachel Shigekane et. al (2007), and Marleine M. Monroig (2020) analyze case studies of trafficking and the experiences of refugees after being rescued or

having escaped. In the Human Rights Quarterly, Shigekane elaborates on the challenges that survivors face when trying to integrate into new communities; what type of assistance they require, who can help them, and how communities respond to reports of trafficking and to the survivors themselves. Along with this issue, Monrioig conducted seven semi structured interviews between March and April 2022 for her dissertation focusing on the experiences of mental health providers that work with survivors of human trafficking. Shigekane critiques the principles of the “Trafficking Act", outlining that it only focuses on the prosecution of traffickers, instead of having a victim centered approach. Examining eight cases of trafficking and forced labor, Shigekane highlights the survivors' outcomes, psychological trauma and the lack of skills for independent living. With this information, she confirms her argument on the importance of models for rehabilitation and community integration. In the same manner, Monroig identified similar themes like work environment and program experiences, issues addressed in sessions, coping with challenges, etc. Shigekane and Monroig both identify multiple service organizations, trafficking specific organizations, and refugee-based organizations as positive examples to help survivors reintegrate into communities including an analysis of the community’s response to trafficking (Human Rights Center, U.C. Berkeley and Free the Slaves, Center for the Advancement of Human Rights at Florida State University).

While many studies like those above emerge from human rights, others take a criminology angle on trafficking. In the journal *Global Crime 22*, Arun Humar Achyra and Jeniffer Bryson Clark (2021) investigate and analyze the relationship between trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation and forced migration brought on by narco-violence in Mexico. Achyra, founder and activist of Mexican Centre for Migration and Human Trafficking Studies, and Clark, based in women studies, carried out qualitative fieldwork in Mexico. From interviewing 22 sex trafficking victims, they concluded that narco-violence in Mexico has created forced displacement among the communities. When poor women are displaced to new environments, the lack of familiar or communal networks makes them more susceptible to trafficking. According to Achyra and Bryson Clark, the vulnerability is what enables the traffickers to coerce young girls and women with an end of sexual or labor exploitation. Finally, they the authors find that trafficked

women experience high levels of violence such as physical and sexual assault, verbal threats and abuse and psychological abuse.

The scholarship on human trafficking has comprehensively investigated the phenomenon and the experiences of those who are trafficked. Yet, there is a prominent gap in research when it comes to the aftereffects on survivors and the specific challenges they face post-trafficking. While some studies do explore how survivors reintegrate into society, they frequently just touch on the surface, focusing on the general consequences of survival. A comprehensive review of the employment environment and the survivors' path to independent living and obtaining a respectable job is notably absent. This study gap underlines the need for a more concentrated examination of how victims of human trafficking get back into society and establish financial security.

Background

"Trata de personas"

In order to understand this social phenomenon, specifically in Mexico, it's important to know the term "trata de personas". The recognized term in Mexico, makes reference to human trafficking, despite its direct translation "treatment of people". This expression conveys a variety of illicit actions related to the recruitment, transportation, or use of force, coercion, or other methods for obtaining individuals with the intention of exploiting them.

Following the signing of the Convention in 2000, the Mexican government ratified in 2003 and it has been actively aligning its own legislative framework with international norms to combat human trafficking (Ciciero-Dominguez 2005, 308). Furthermore, Mexico's legal response regarding human trafficking is recognized in the Federal Penal Code (Código Penal Federal), under the name of *"Trata de*

Personas y Lenocinio" (Trafficking in People and Sexual Pandering or "Pimping"). They state the following:

> The crime of sexual pandering is committed by:
>
> I.- Any person that habitually or accidentally exploits the body of another through carnal commerce, sustains himself from this commerce or profits in any way from it;
>
> II.- Whomever introduces or solicits a person so that with another may engage in sexual commerce with their body or facilitates the means for engaging in prostitution;
>
> III.- Any person that directs, administers or sustains directly or indirectly any prostitutes, meeting houses or places to concur exclusively with the intent of exploiting prostitution or obtains any benefit with its products (Cámara de Diputados 2023, 66).

These legislative measures, which seek to provide specific legal guidelines for prosecuting perpetrators and protecting victims, represent Mexico's serious approach to combating sexual exploitation and human trafficking. In the fight against these significant human rights violations, the legislation underlines the government's intention to comply with international standards and commitments.

Trafficking flows

Turning to the issue of trafficking flows, it is essential to understand the dynamics and routes of human trafficking. Sexual exploitation is the most commonly identified form of human trafficking, representing 79% of total cases, followed by forced labor (18%) (UNODC, 2009). Human trafficking is a phenomenon that is frequently obscured by the more notorious problem of foreign victims being moved across international borders. The exploitation of people within their own country, or domestic trafficking, was reported by 32 countries (UNODC 2009, 45-57). However, it is important to consider that the cross-border flows do not automatically indicate long distances. A lot of the cross-border trafficking actions occur between countries of the same region, such as Mexico and the USA in North America. The UNODC reported that victims from East Asia were detected in more than 20 countries in regions like Europe, the

Americas, the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa (2009, 45-57). This means that human trafficking has grown to a global scale, whether it be domestic, international, regional, or transcontinental, it emphasizes how complicated and extensive the problem is.

Examining the interactive web of the Americas, human trafficking reveals a pattern with the majority of the individuals being from the Caribbean and Latin American nations, where approximately 40% of the victims are identified in the United States, coming from Central America (UNODC 2009, 132-136). In the years of 2007 and 2008, most trafficking flows were intra-regional, primarily within countries like Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua (2009, 132-136). Furthermore, the victims from the South American human trafficking flow are mostly found in North America (2009, 132-136).

In 2020, the majority of victims in North America, Central America and the Caribbean, were girls and women ranging from 14 to 18 years of age (2022, 27). More victims were detected in 2020 in North America than in the past couple of years; both foreigners and more domestic trafficking victims (2022, 100). The only significant shift in victim origins in 2020 was a rise in the proportion of victims found in northern Central America, which in 2018 made up only about 3% of all victims found in North America but increased to 11% in 2020 (UNODC 2022, 100). Other migration patterns to North America do not illustrate a significant change over time. In Central America and the Caribbean in 2020, there were fewer victims of trafficking in people with a foreign citizenship than in the past; a majority of the incidents that were found were domestic trafficking (UNODC 2022, 100). In the context of these evolving trends Mexico's case holds significant importance due to both its geographic location connecting the southern region to the northern region, as well as the high density of cases that happen within the country.

Trafficking in Mexico

Mexico has been considered a country of origin, transit, and destination for victims of sex trafficking (CNDH, 2022). The country is among the top destinations for child sexual tourism and is a

producer and distributor of child pornography. In Mexico, at least 600,000 sexual crimes are committed each year against girls, boys, and adolescents, where four out of ten victims are girls under the age of 15 (Fundación Camino a Casa 10, 2023). The nationality of the majority of the victims are Mexican (93%) and the other 7% are of other nationalities (CNDH 2022, 69). Mexican victims are usually from Chiapas, Chihuahua, and Nuevo León (54%), compared to the victims that are identified from Baja California Sur, Campeche, Mexico City, Colima, State of Mexico, Morelos, Nayarit, Querétaro, and Yucatán (CNDH 2022, 70).

The primary victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are those individuals in vulnerable situations, where socioeconomic factors (such as social inequity, poverty, lack of opportunities, natural disasters, socio political violence, and domestic violence) are combined with cultural factors such as the patriarchal system and power imbalances (Salazar et al 2021, 26). The exploitation of minors often begins within Mexican households, in various regions of the country, particularly in those with high poverty rates, where the sexual exploitation of girls becomes the means of obtaining economic resources (CNDH, 2019).

Traffickers see the opportunity to lure, seduce, trap, and manipulate victims in states of vulnerability. The strategies used by traffickers are manipulative and predatory; they lure their victims with fake promises of safety, work, and even affection. Once trapped, these people are caught in the cycle of exploitation that human traffickers perpetuate for the purpose of profit, finding themselves in a world far from what they had imagined (Romo, 2018). Most traffickers come from families that have been involved in this trade for years. In such environments, children may see the dehumanization of human beings in these kinds of situations, where the exploitation of people for sex is not viewed as a serious violation of human rights, but rather as a business activity (Orozco 2023).

The structure and level of organization between the types of traffickers varies remarkably. Compared to non-organized crime traffickers, criminal organizations are able to traffic more people for longer periods of time while employing more severe and violent methods (UNODC 2022, 49-51). In

general, they operate with more people across a greater number of locations than less structured and organized traffickers. Within the organized criminal groups, the Governance *type* uses security control in a community or region by means of fear and violence, with the possibility of involvement in other illicit markets (UNODC 2022, 49-51). Another group within organized criminals are the business-like trafficking networks, which typically function as distinct parties in commercial transactions or even as agents of legitimate employment agencies (UNODC 2022, 49-51). The results of the technical skills in criminal organizations involved in human trafficking are based on a three-tiered system that classifies traffickers based on the complexity of their commercial operations. The minimum level of trafficking is characterized by one or two traffickers working in one or two locations. At the "medium" level, there are three to seven traffickers working at three or four different sites. And at the “high” level, there is a network of over seven traffickers operating in various locations (UNODC 2022, 49-51).

In Mexico, most of the sexual exploitation takes place in closed surroundings. It occurs in unofficial brothels (57%), hotels (24%), and apartments provided by the traffickers (11%). Chiapas, the Puebla-Tlaxcala corridor, Mexico City, and Veracruz are the area’s most prominently recognized as hotspots for human trafficking in 2021 (Salazar et al., 2021, 26). It indicates that these are the main locations where victims are brought for the sole purpose of being sexually exploited. Aside from these states, there are multiple regions of recruitment, transit, and realization of trafficking (exploitation) within the nation. The north of the region involves Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo León, Sonora, Sinaloa y Tamaulipas. This zone is one of the most complex and dynamic regions within Mexico since it borders the United States, where 6 of the 9 states share the same border. There is a significant migratory flow from south to north across the United States. The stringent U.S. immigration policies aimed at decreasing migrant entry into the country often result in increased deportations and intensified scrutiny. For instance, during Trump's administration, the average annual number of deportations was around 240,000 individuals (Salazar et al 2021, 30-31). People who leave their homes to travel on uncertain journeys typically do so out of despair and the desire for a better life, breaking ties with

friends and family in the process. They might leave in search of new opportunities without proper resources or legal protection, which leaves them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Traffickers take advantage of these weaknesses by preying on the desperate and displaced. These people, disconnected from their support system, can quickly turn into easy targets for traffickers (Salazar et al 2021, 30-31).

Within the central region of Mexico, the states that have been publicly identified as origin and destination of sexual trafficking are Ciudad de México, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Estado de México, Michoacán, and Hidalgo. Young individuals between the ages of 16 and 22 are the most vulnerable to human trafficking in this area, while incidents involving girls as young as 10 years old and female students from both urban high schools and rural distance-learning secondary schools have also been reported. This area is most commonly organized by numerous families where human trafficking is not only an illegal business but also a way of life that is accepted and perpetuated through family members (Salazar et al 2021, 34-36). These inheritable trafficking networks can present themselves as legitimate companies in their local communities while conducting their operations behind, or even enforcing respect and power over the community, getting no one to interfere in these criminal activities (Salazar et al 2021, 34-36). Lastly, the southern region of the country is recognized as the "entry" door to the country. The dynamics of the area have been impacted socially and economically by this. It consists of Campeche, Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Oaxaca and Guerrero. Adolescent and adult women, boys and girls, international migrants, and indigenous people, specifically, girls between the ages 10 and 16, are amongst the populations at greatest risk of human trafficking in this region (Salazar et al 2021, 43-45). It has been designated as the area where the population is most likely to be caught for the purposes of human trafficking for acts of forced labor, begging, and slavery (Salazar et al 2021, 43-45). According to Salazar et al (2021, 48), the presence of human trafficking increased from 18 states in 2017, to 25 states in 2021 with occupancy in 126 municipalities. This only points out the magnitude of the ongoing problem.

The victims of human trafficking can remain in this network from two months up to numerous years, having no form of escape (Orozco, 2023). They are forced to service all the clients that come, with work hours around from 8 am to 10 pm (Jacinto, 2023). As Jacinto (2023) mentions, "how many times can your body be used during that time?" referring to the ongoing sexual exploitation that one woman faces. Approximately, the women being trafficked attend to around 30 people to whom they must provide any type of sexual service that the client requests (Gonzalez 2018; Jacinto 2023). At the end of their shift, the women hand over all the money earned that day to their trafficker or pimp, earning no money. The prices can vary on the area and depend on the day of the week, but they range from $80 pesos ($4.57 dollars) to $200 pesos ($11.43 dollars) per client. Likewise, there are cases where the victims are sold for $3,000 to $4,000 dollars (Gonzalez 2018; Jacinto 2023). Most of the time, the clients are extremely violent, stripping them of their respect and dignity. In cases where the victim wants to stop working, the traffickers use physical, emotional, and mental violence and threaten to kill their families and them if they don't comply. Sometimes, younger women get pregnant by their own traffickers or clients and must continue to provide sexual services. If they do not have a miscarriage due to the violence and the excesses their bodies must endure, the baby is born and is immediately taken by the traffickers to also use as a threat (Jacinto, 2023). Many of the women begin to abuse substances and take 4.5 times more pills than an average citizen to be able to sleep, for depression, anxiety, etc. The victims are 12 times more likely to have suicidal thoughts than an average person (Orozco, 2023). Only 2% of the victims of sexual exploitation trafficking survive, and of the women who die, 40% do so due to a violent manner (Romo 2018). Of that 2% who survive, some are rescued by operations, and others manage to escape from their traffickers, risking their lives (Romo 2018).

Mexico's response on the return of victims

Some victims receive additional assistance from the government, frequently in partnership with non-governmental organizations. These services include psychiatric counseling, legal support, and access to educational or career prospects (US Mission to Mexico, 2023). However, victim assistance differs across

the nation, remains unavailable in many locations, and is especially deficient for the victims of forced labor, or victims that live in rural areas (US Mission to Mexico, 2023). In certain NGO shelters, the government offers victims security, transportation, and medical support (US Mission to Mexico). While the victims take part in legal proceedings, Special Prosecutor's Office for Crimes of Violence Against Women and Trafficking in Persons (FEVIMTRA) continues to operate a high-security shelter in Mexico City that can house up to 50 female victims and their children for a maximum of three months (US Mission to Mexico, 2023).

In the State Attorney General's Offices and the Prosecutor General's Office of Mexico (FGR), only 6% of the total facilities have specialized shelters for victims. On the other hand, 79% reported not having a specialized shelter in the field (CNDH 2021, 71). By not having shelters, some Prosecutors rely on public and private shelters. Although Chiapas, Nuevo Leon, and Queretaro do not have shelters, they take responsibility for the crimes and activate assistance institutions in necessary cases, such as the State System for Family Development (DIF) (CNDH 2021, 71). Chihuahua, Michoacán, Sonora, and Jalisco state that, if necessary, they may request support from other civil institutions that operate shelters (CNDH 2021, 71). Similarly, of the State Attorney General's Offices and the FGR, only 3% have halfway houses, some with the support of other centers or institutions such as the Social Assistance Centers of the state and municipal DIF System, and the Women's Institute (CNDH 2021, 72). It is important to mention that many of these Prosecutors prefer to channel the victims to various civil society institutions that have victim care assistance (CNDH 2021, 72). According to the Embassy and Consulates of the United States in Mexico (2023), there are 29 shelters in Mexico that can help victims of trafficking, including 13 shelters specialized in trafficking, 11 for victims of gender violence, and five that serve a specialized population, such as indigenous women, children and adolescents, or migrants.

The National Shelter Network (Red Nacional de Refugios A. C., INMUJERES, RNR) has a model of care in shelters for women victims who have suffered violence and give assistance to both them and their

children. This network is composed of civil society organizations (85%) and government organizations (15%). It articulates actions between government and civil society and impacts the lives of women, girls, boys and adolescents (RNR). The first center of attention they offer are External Care Centers (Centros de Atención Externa). They are the external facade of the shelters, being the first point of contact for the women seeking help, where their past experiences are addressed in accordance to protect their human rights. The options that are offered include a free comprehensive process or entering an Emergency House, Shelter or Transition House (RNR). The second center of attention the National Shelter Network offers are Emergency houses (Casas de Emergencia), which are safe spaces for immediate and interdisciplinary care in the event of an emergency situation. These emergency spaces are available for up to 72 hours, where immediate attention is provided without risking the location of the shelter (RNR). Third, shelters (refugios) provide comprehensive specialized support and multidisciplinary intervention, addressing diverse needs of women, their sons and daughters who are victims of violence (RNR). They include psychological, medical, social, psycho-pedagogical, legal care and training for employment, economic self-management, music and art therapy. It is an established mechanism that helps prevent femicides and various consequences of violence (disability, mutilation, irremediable loss of mental health, injuries, among other consequences) (RNR). At last, the transition houses (casas de transición) which are housing spaces of inclusion and transition to independent and autonomous living for women who have completed the process within a shelter (RNR).

Despite the National Shelter Network's services, victims of human trafficking who were migrants or asylum seekers frequently lack the courage to report about their abuses due to government mistrust and fear of punishment. These victims frequently do not seek assistance, facing probable deportation if they admit to participating in trafficking (US Mission To Mexico, 2023). The law protects victims from prosecution for illegal activities committed directly as a consequence of being trafficked (US Mission To Mexico, 2023). However, the government lacks procedures to identify these victims among vulnerable populations, such as children incarcerated for suspected criminal activity tied to gangs and migrants in detention centers (US Mission To Mexico, 2023). Authorities have been known to unjustly imprison victims

of human trafficking and hold them in shelters while their cases remain unresolved (US Mission To Mexico, 2023).

In addition to the general lack of specialized assistance and protection, the authorities' failure to implement victim-centered processes discourage any victims of trafficking from reporting crimes or taking part in investigations and trials. Nongovernmental organizations condemn government officials for retraumatizing victims as a result of their insensitivity, victim-blaming, and poor protection of them during criminal proceedings (US Mission To Mexico, 2023). Experts also raised concerns about the fact that victims were occasionally forced to testify by prosecutors during court proceedings (US Mission To Mexico, 2023). The lack of governmental infrastructure makes it more challenging for victims to initiate a recovery or rehabilitate into society.

Case Study

Girls' vulnerability before trafficking

There are multiple factors that can contribute to the vulnerability of a victim. Monroig (2020, 10) asserts that the conditions of poverty, violence, and lack of educational and professional prospects make people more susceptible to becoming victims of sex trafficking. Individual elements including violent and drug-related cycles, trauma generational cycles, and family involvement in exploitation are also prevalent in all trafficking situations (Monroig 2020, 10)**.** One of the major questions asked to Orozco (2023) was, "In what type of state do they find survivors who have undergone human trafficking?" The survivors presented different characteristics when leaving: 57% were living in poverty, 64% had no work experience, 48% suffered from family violence, and 38% experienced sexual abuse before becoming trafficking survivors. The high incidence of poverty and no work experience limits their access to education and their ability to secure stable and safe employment. Sixty five percent of the survivors assisted came from dysfunctional families, and 34% suffered family abandonment. Ninety two percent suffered sexual

exploitation, and 56% entered FCC with some type of addiction. This points to a disruption of the support system that is supposed to offer safety and care. The abuse of violence, exploitation and abandonment issues can drive victims into dangerous situations where they are more likely to become victims of traffickers.

Repercussions

A major problem survivors undergo is the emotional repercussion of trafficking. The survivors expressed different symptoms, feelings, and consequences they experienced after escaping the network of human trafficking. Out of the six testimonies of survivors of human trafficking analyzed, all of them mentioned that upon their arrival they felt worthless and had lost the sense of trust. In Karla's (2023) recorded interview, she recognizes she felt, "like I was trash, that I couldn't get out of the hole and that nobody in society was going to help me. These symptoms of being worthless are very common in all survivors. The traffickers focus on destroying their identity and self-esteem, they crush the essence of each young woman, leaving the women with no perception of value in themselves. All of them had symptoms of depression –three of the survivors even mentioned that they had suicide thoughts. Karla (2023) also describes, "I started to cut myself and take pills… I was depressed and could not sleep at all". After surviving the horrible acts done to them, the idea of having a future, a life does not even come to their mind because of the depression and suicidal thoughts they have. Shigakane and Casassa (2007, 118; 2022, N/P) discuss that symptoms of long-term psychological trauma lead the survivors in search of abusive relationships, and substance misuse resulting with dissociation, high rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Dany (2023) expresses that, "My depression was triggered, leading to a crack overdose that made me very aggressive." These post trafficking problems are strongly overlooked, thinking that by escaping these networks, they are now safe and continue with their lives. Survivors, Karla, Paty and Dany mentioned that they were very aggressive, using violence against other people (See Table 1). The accounts of the survivors strongly show how the violence and suffering experienced during human trafficking create significant obstacles to connecting with support networks. After exiting, they are now expected from society to allow their help and receive assistance without reacting with violent form. Conventional societal norms,

which usually characterize such behavior as inappropriate or in conflict with normal feminine behavior, hardly allow women to express aggressiveness. In reality, these expressions and reactions are complicated consequences of the sexual exploitation and abuse of violence they underwent.

Human trafficking survivors and non-governmental organizations have a challenging connection, especially when NGO's take into account how trauma affects the survivors' wanting to accept support. These survivors are very resistant to receive help and services. The victim's sense of self in relation to others creates the inability to actively engage with the world or to exercise initiative (Shigakane 2007, 118-119). Nonetheless, this is a stage of recovery rather than indication that professional help is not wanted (Monroig 2020, 16). Rather than representing a rejection of help, survivors' unwillingness to accept care can often be a protective reaction to their trauma (Monroig 2020, 16). For NGOs, this dynamic must be recognized and there is a need to strategize to be able to tackle these issues of rejection of help in order to provide effective guidance.

Table 1. Survivors' repercussions

	Karla	Estrella	Areli	Leah	Paty	Dany
worthless	x	x	x	x	x	x
depression	x		x	x	x	x
shame	x	x	x	x	x	
guilt	x	x	x	x	x	
Suicide thoughts	x	x				x
Sleep deprivation	x	x			x	x
Drug use		x				x
Abusive relationship after	x					x
Violence and anger against others	x				x	x
Rejection from society		x	x	x		

Another problem in post-trafficking experiences is violence they experience from their traffickers. Most of the survivors reported suffering some type of physical violence (75%) “When I tried to defend myself, he started hitting me and would take out his gun” (Areli 2022). This leads to fear, and subordination from the survivors towards their traffickers. Eighty four percent reported suffering emotional violence, “My trafficker told me I was a whore, and that was the only thing I was good for”, and/or verbal (87%) “there were clients that would spit on me” (Leah 2022). Emotional violence can leave a wound as deep as physical violence. The constant reminder of your ex-trafficker hitting you, insulting you, and denigrating you is a thought that can invade the mind for the rest of life. For this reason, there are high probabilities that lead survivors to attempt against their own lives: 23% tried to commit suicide before entering FCC (Orozco 2023). It is evident that living with these wounds and attempting to continue their lives just as normal people is very complicated.

Another problem women face revealed remarkable vulnerability. They frequently hold resentment toward themselves for going through such a traumatic event. They experience physical and psychological effects such as low willpower, severely damaged self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Orozco 2023). In one of the interviews, Dany (2023), a survivor, recalls “I could not see any man, I was only able to talk to women, I was scared of all men.” Because of this, they need care programs that enable them to start a process of restoration for as long as it takes to heal both physically and emotionally, gain self-empowerment, and reclaim their lives by making strategic decisions about their future (Orozco, 2023).

Problems of Reporting

One of the problems that survivors face upon exiting is the fear of reporting against the crime. Many are still imprisoned after being freed—not by the trafficker, but by their own fears and incapacity to get the assistance they require (Johnson 2012, 380). After the victims are under this network, they enter a state of shock with no vision or sense of the future**.** They cannot be guaranteed complete protection, hence,

the majority of victims do not want to report. If victims are not going to receive any sort of psychological support, protection, or justice, they will not come forward with reports of the crime (Orozco, 2023).

In this recorded testimony, one of the survivors, Areli, vividly remembers the challenges and fears faced when attempting to report. She shared that despite her family's efforts to find her, the police were aware of the situation, and the authorities dismissed their concerns. Areli (2022) recalls, "The police already knew what it was happening, but they still told my brother that I was fine." This shows evidence that links on various forms have been established between the government structures and the traffickers. Seeing no justice demanded also makes the survivor believe that no one has her back, that if the authorities do not do anything about this issue, then no one will. The first form of connection between the traffickers and the government is the financing of political campaigns by traffickers and their networks to support the government (Martinez de Ita; Hernandez G. 2014, 95-96). This creates a situation where a person becomes elected president of a community of a municipality and feels obligated to give privileges to the traffickers (Martinez de Ita; Hernandez G. 2014, 95-96). These advantages include enabling them to conduct their business and giving them licenses to operate hotels, brothels, and bars where women are hired to perform sexual services (Martinez de Ita; Hernandez G. 2014, 95-96). The second type involves providing financial support for a campaign run by a family member, or collaborator of these networks—someone who is not a trafficker—but has connections to these networks (Martinez de Ita; Hernandez G. 2014, 95-96). The third form, just as Martinez de Ita and Hernandez G (2014, 95-96) describe, involves pushing a member of these networks—a trafficker per se—to the position of a candidate with authority, this form is termed "the institutionalization of trafficking networks" . After the survivor, Areli, was able to escape, she immediately went to file the report. However, she received threats from her traffickers: that in the case of not returning to work for them, they would kill her father. By doing this, it intensifies the threat because victims cannot safely turn to authorities. 6 months later the traffickers fulfilled the threat and killed her father. This situation is very difficult for the survivor to process, since a lot of the time, the one thing that is keeping them alive and fighting for their life is their hope to see their family again. Just as Dany (2023) recalls, "the one thing that kept me alive and gave me strength was my mother," Escaping to be able to be with their families and

then having them killed by their own trafficker is devastating for survivors. In particular, the traffickers threaten their victims that public ministries, judges, and authorities are their clients (Orozco 2023). In one of the recorded testimonies, Karla (2023), recalls, "One of the clients was even a judge, and I also had clients who were police officers." This testimony illustrates the harrowing realities that survivors frequently face, such as the unwillingness or incompetence of law enforcement to offer sufficient support in their predicament.

Challenges in Reporting the Crime

In addition, they also face the challenges of inadequate legal structures. A barrier that they had to overcome was that in 2005, when the victims were under the age of 18, the crime was not recognized as human trafficking by law and was instead labeled as child abuse (Orozco 2023). The way a case is handled legally, from victim care to prosecution, can be greatly impacted by classifying it as child abuse rather than human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Compared to child abuse legislation, which concentrate on domestic abuse or maltreatment, trafficking laws give severe penalties and specialized victim assistance in an effort to address the complexity of exploitation and organized crime (Shigekane 2007, 126-129). It impacts how the public understands trafficking concerns and how policies are made, which could result in underestimating the problem and distributing resources inadequately (Orozco, 2023). The authorities, in general, were unaware and indifferent about the pain and suffering that the victims were going through (Orozco 2023). Just as Orozco (2023) mentions in the interview, a couple of women who were rescued testified to the fact that some of the authorities mistreated the victims even after the interventions, demonstrating their general ignorance of human trafficking and indifference to the misery the victims endured. One of the survivors, Areli, recounts her experience, while trying to report against her trafficking, Areli (2022) stated that it was not until: "2 years later he was arrested, because he had hundreds of complaints of having trafficked sexually exploited girls". This meant that it took a long time to get the trafficker arrested, and only because he had multiple complaints about other victims being sexually exploited. After she was able to escape, she went back home to her family in Oaxaca, however, Areli (2022)

mentioned that, “Some lawyers came to my house to tell me that they needed me in Mexico City to declare against my trafficker because if not he was going to be set free.” As they confront their traffickers and recount their experiences, victims must actively participate in the prosecution process, which can be difficult and re-traumatizing (Orozco, 2023). The fact that so many of these court cases are handled out of Mexico City presents emotional and practical difficulties for victims who live somewhere else in the county (Orozco 2023). It can be extremely stressful for them to give convincing and clear testimonies, especially in consideration of the trauma they have gone through. Recounting their experiences and having to remember horrible moments can encourage the process of justice, but it can also revictimize the survivor. Their willingness to engage in the judicial system may be impacted by this circumstance, which could have a consequence on the overall effectiveness of Mexican trafficking prosecutions (Orozco, 2023).

Another problem victims face is the stigma in society attached to being a victim of human trafficking. In order to understand survivor experience, we should consider Mexican social norms in general. More levels of difficulties are added to the stigma surrounding sex work in Mexico, where machismo culture is deeply ingrained. The strong feeling of masculine pride known as machismo, which is frequently entwined with conservative, religious, and patriarchal ideas, has a considerable impact on how society views sex workers and the industry as a whole (Barry 1981). In this cultural context, sex work is frequently associated with immorality, which, regardless of the specifics, causes significant social exclusion for individuals who engage in it. Women are frequently expected to adhere to strict sexual norms, and any deviation—even when forced—can result in rejection and severe criticism (Barry 1981). When survivors return to their families and communities in rural areas they go back only to face severe societal rejection that pushes them away (Orozco, 2023). In several instances, authorities went so far as to argue for it: "If they're there, it's because they enjoy it," remarked a high-ranking police officer at the time (Orozco 2023). In these hostile unsupportive environments, retraumatization and revictimization are more likely to occur (Monroig 2020, 16). Survivors frequently experience shame and exclusion. One of the survivors illustrates this risk. Estrella, according to her testimony, was able to escape at the age of 14 years, yet when she

returned home, she suffered insults and discrimination. She was told by her community, “that I had chosen to be a prostitute” (Estrella, 2018). This can impede their ability to reintegrate into society and discourage them from getting support. Estrella recalled trying to go back to school after being able to escape when the teachers told her she was a bad example for the other students. For the next two years, she continued using drugs and alcohol to forget everything that had happened to her as a coping mechanism. After four years she recovered from substance abuse, and as of 2018, she continues to live with her parents and in poverty. This also makes her more vulnerable to fall into the cycle of drug abuse and trafficking.

After regaining their independence, some people manage to remain in their communities but still suffer from numerous fears, and do not want to reintegrate into society, where they frequently evolve into perceived chronic victims and actual victims (Orozco 2023). Just as Monroig mentions, the majority of young women who have been trafficked show a desire to escape their circumstances, aspiring for advancements in education and better job opportunities. Yet, they often feel trapped and unable to move forward for several reasons: the fear of reporting and potential injustice, the lack of rehabilitation programs, the harsh social rejection from their communities, and the deep-seated shame and stigma connected to their experiences. Many don't believe that the legal system can protect them or hold their traffickers responsible. During the time of exploitation, 94% of the survivors reported their aggressors, and 73% mentioned that their complaint was productive (Orozco, 2023). Like in Karla’s (2023) experience under the network of trafficking, she had to attend to clients who were police officers and judges. Their mistrust can often be reinforced by their past encounters with the legal or law enforcement institutions, which may have let them down. Their identity and self-esteem are severely damaged by this social rejection, which makes it impossible for them to ask for assistance or hope for a brighter future. Successful integration of a victim depends as much on the community's response to human trafficking as it does on the availability of relevant services and assistance (Shigakane 132, 2007). Due to their emotional and financial needs, trafficking victims are frequently caught in a complex cycle of exploitation, leaving them vulnerable to further trafficking and revictimization (Monroig 2020, 17).

NGOs response to survivors needs

Professional Activist

The perspective and viewpoint of a worker from an NGO is very valuable to understand the responses to survivors' needs. Rosi Orozco (b. 1960), is a dedicated human rights and sex trafficking activist from Mexico. Working in human rights since her thirties, commitment to fighting human trafficking, led her to start the Home Path Foundation (Fundación Camino a Casa) in 2007. In 2005, she underwent a significant seminar in Washington, D.C. Orozco was a congresswoman from 2009 until 2012 and made a substantial contribution to laws against human trafficking. Her professional trajectory demonstrates an integrated approach for preventing human trafficking by combining advocacy, policy influence, and direct assistance.

Another problem survivors face is what kind of help they can access. Only a small proportion of victims reach NGO's services (only 13 shelters specialized in victims of human trafficking) (US Mission to Mexico, 2023). This scenario draws attention to the lack of rehabilitation services as well as a larger structural problem. The scarcity of such programs can be attributed to several factors. One reason these rehabilitation services are restricted is a lack of funding. NGOs stated that victims in the majority of states did not receive sufficient funding from the government, and that the government did not adequately fund essential victim services (US Mission to Mexico, 2023. Medical and psychological attention frequently did not go beyond brief evaluations. Both state and local shelters usually only housed victims during a criminal trial; long-term reintegration services were severely limited, leaving victims extremely vulnerable to re-exploitation (US Mission to Mexico, 2023).

Prolonged periods in transitional housing are necessary due to the complexity of the needs of victims and the severity of the consequences of trafficking. Because survivors have been traumatized by

the abusive control of others, have traveled alone, and are separated from their families, they need more extensive, long-term, and structured services (Shigakane 122, 2007). Underage trafficking victims are placed in both public and private shelters. Leah (2022), one of the survivors, reported that "After I testified against the criminal act, I was taken by surprise that I was not allowed to go home and was directly transferred to a government refuge where I resided for a month.". Coming out of human trafficking, survivors need to have a sense of control. For a long time, the survivors have had no part in taking decisions for themselves. In this manner, not letting them decide and holding them under a shelter where they do not want to reside does not lead to recovery. Monroig (2020, 16) mentions that survivors may find themselves detained in shelters that are closely comparable to juvenile detention centers. They are often unwelcoming, lack proper assistance, and support for rehabilitation. Organizations and institutions that work with survivors are progressively creating better environments and shelters while strategizing to combine an appropriate balance of security and autonomy (Monroig, 16). While both the Integral Center for Women's Care (CIAM) and the National Network of Shelters dealt with incidents of gender violence, neither organization had medium- or long-term programs nor were they focused on assisting victims of human trafficking. Just as Shigakane asserts that compared to other marginalized groups, the demands of trafficking survivors are significantly greater (122, 2007).

NGOs also respond to the needs of medical health and pregnancy support. In terms of reproductive health, 35% of the survivors reported having been pregnant, and of these pregnancies, 56% were unwanted. At least one child was born to 35% of the survivors during trafficking, and 14% had an abortion. The Path to Home Foundation is aware that the effects of human trafficking not only impact the survivor but also the people in their immediate social circle, which is why it is essential to take the relatives (children, siblings and parents) of the survivors into consideration.

In one of the recorded testimonies Karla (2023) mentions the challenges of having a child:

> "Since I got pregnant and gave birth to a child while I was under the human trafficking network, I had to take care of a child too… How do I help myself to help the other person? The foundation helped me take care of my child while I was offered educational courses to start working".

This post-trafficking problem is often overlooked. Survivors that had a pregnancy during sexual exploitation not only have to care for themselves, but also take care of their child. Most of the children born in the network of human trafficking are from the traffickers and their victims. Looking at their children is a constant reminder of the torture they experienced. NGOs attempt to include services for secondary survivors, such as daycare and preschool since it is essential to have a comprehensive approach to those survivors who have birth during trafficking (Shigakane 2007, 128) makes emphasis on longer-term services, such as parenting techniques, daycare access and counseling, and support for children who have experienced or witnessed abuse. These long-term services are essential to improve a survivor's chances of living independently and to lower her chances of homelessness or re-victimization (Shigakane 2007, 128).

Path to Home Foundation provides insightful information to understand the background of the survivors. Path to Home Foundation has made an effort to prioritize housing, education, and psychological care—especially the latter. The NGO attempts to focus on helping young people who, after returning home for a while, choose to participate in their program for their care and the start of their rehabilitation. Many of the young women who arrive at the Home Path Foundation said they had previously spent time in two, three, or more shelters. There is a demand for long-term stays because of the complexity of the assistance and rehabilitation needed by survivors to recover and start all over again. Orozco (2023) mentioned that the duration within the foundation is defined as the number of months between entry and exit from the Foundation. The average stay within the program has been a little over a year. The 25% of the population with the longest stay at the Foundation has an average stay of almost three years. However, there were four survivors who stayed for more than 48 months. This only represents the struggle that FCC encounters to assist all the survivors with the right tools for recovery.

NGOs also respond to survivor's needs for education. Upon joining FCC, the survivors' educational background demonstrated the difficulties originating from their pre-trafficking histories and the

impoverished conditions of their regions. With 70% of the survivors showing educational lag, 10% being illiterate, and an average of only 6.8 years of education, it is evident that most had only completed elementary school (Orozco, 2023). The lack of formal education and professional experience is a major barrier for many survivors; it not only connects to their pre-trafficking lives but also functions as a vital first step towards different kinds of career possibilities and future opportunities. Drawing from my recorded interview with Rosi Orozco, a professional worker at the Path to Home Foundation, it is apparent that the Foundation's educational initiatives play a crucial role in assisting victims of human trafficking. FCC has struggled to offer a variety of programs for the survivor's different needs. These programs, that vary from elementary and secondary education in traditional and home school systems–INEA Home School system, to online learning at the high school level through ITESM's PREPANET program– are essential to help survivors access new forms of employment by providing educational opportunities. However, FCC has fought to achieve these programs since they find that is a vital part to ending the cycle of exploitation and poverty. One of the survivors, who was finishing High School at the program, Estrella (2018), said "my dream is to study human rights and become an activist of anti-human trafficking." This allows them the opportunity to start redirecting their life and their future. Education displays itself to be an essential component of the rehabilitation and reintegration process. Paty (2018), a survivor who was trafficked at the age of 16, went through the program of FCC. In the recorded testimony she utters, "I am in the process of finishing college majoring in law; I want to be a human rights lawyer to be able to fight against human trafficking and help all the young women and girls' '. Aiding survivors to complete a higher education not only persuades them to be more independent, but it also helps them regain confidence, sense of worth and higher self-esteem. The Home to Path Foundation strategizes to offer a broad range of educational programs, including technical training and university degrees in partnership with the 'Reintegra US' (Reintegrate USA) Halfway Program. They acquire such flexibility that is crucial because it acknowledges the different educational backgrounds and experiences of women in the program. For example, FCC provides special schooling for young women with cognitive disabilities who need additional help for learning and shows an attentive understanding of the specific barriers that each survivor faces. The program

not only assists survivors in making up for their lack of schooling, but it also gives them the tools they need to become independent and find work in the future. These young women reported by the staff member managed to gain 4 years of schooling (Orozco, 2023). From this group, 80% achieved gains in education (Orozco, 2023). Several young women achieved substantial increases, reaching high school level, technical studies, and like Patricia even university studies.

Work

Most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) agree that sex work does not simply convert into more legitimate types of employment. When Orozco (2023) was asked how survivors go from sex work to a decent work that allows them to live independently, she immediately stated that "being sexually exploited does not signify work." Multiple scholars do not recognize sex work, and any kind of it is a deplorable violation of human dignity (Kotiswaran 2021; Raymond 2003). Just as Raymond (2003) argues that although prostitution is a business, it should never be accepted as a legitimate kind of employment. She agrees that the women who engage in prostitution do not receive more dignity by legalizing, decriminalizing, or controlling the sex industry. All it does is boosts the sex industry (Raymond 2003).

NGOs also strategize about survivors' needs after they finish services. Leaving FCC is a process that is prepared months in advance of departure. The young woman of legal age chooses whether she wants to return with her family or live independently. This is an important decision the woman must make. FCC has found that it is important for survivors to acquire job training in order to introduce the young woman to this area and prepare her for an independent life. After the many challenges that FCC has faced, the first successful outcome of the program is that the young women are able to secure employment after leaving the foundation. According to FCC, during 2021, 27 young women succeeded in this (Orozco 2023). Within the FCC program, after exiting the program survivors may also decide to join the 'Reintegra US' program to continue their academic preparation. In order to emphasize education as a route to new career prospects, Reintegration (Reintegra) collaborates with safe houses such as Fundación Camino a Casa. This focus is

crucial because survivors frequently require assistance in navigating new job pathways. Reintegra's educational grants are a deliberate step in equipping survivors with the expertise required for long-term employment. In Karla's (2023) testimony, she says that as of now, she works at Foundation Reintegra: “Now I am an activist with a powerful voice that represents millions of victims in the few survivors who are afraid to tell their stories.”. She attends international conferences and gives talks to high schools and universities to prevent human trafficking and spread awareness. She has had the great opportunity to see the progress and work of some of the survivors in the Reintegra Foundation.

Karla (2023) recounts the successes of three peers:

> “Pam, who is studying to become a nurse since she wants to help and assist people because when she used to go to the hospital seeking help, she didn’t receive any attention. Also, Noemi, who is a lawyer, and she actually is handling my case. And Neli, she is studying hospitality and tourism, doing what she loves the most. All of them are making their dreams come true…being happy despite our past.”

These three survivors have experienced horrible situations. They have faced substantial repercussions; they constantly encounter new ones but work towards recovery. Acquiring a job appears to be associated with educational advancements as well as the young women's accomplishment of their medium and long-term goals. Based on the goals and mission statement provided on the United Commission Against Trafficking's website (Comision Unidos against Trata CUcT), it is apparent that this organization aims to offer a wide range of support services to victims of human trafficking. Just like one of the survivors mentions in her testimony Areli (2023), “CUcT gave me food, clothes, they gave me a lot of love… They also helped me find an apartment where I now live with my family.” Owning an apartment, having clothes of their own, allows them to have control over their lives. By 2021, apparently made a substantial difference in the lives of 151 survivors, 21 of whom were still reintegrating outside the shelters (Comision Unidos vs Trata). CUcT has strategized to have a real impact on survivors.

The journey to this point is covered with the different problems survivors face, along with the tools that are provided by different NGOs to help overcome them. A lot of the problems of trafficking can be very noticeable, yet, when post-trafficking survivors attempt to recover, there are not enough resources.

The survivor who shared her testimony with me, it took years of rehabilitation to reach a stage where she could even consider employment. She was hospitalized for over a month due to the extensive injuries from trafficking. She had psychological traumas and was heavily abusing drugs. The process of recovery can be everlasting, while attempting to overcome one trauma, another can emerge. Attempting to tackle them in the right way can have substantial differences. It was only after her time in a rehabilitation facility that she began to recover. Her recovery and subsequent completion of college, lead her to a job as a high school teacher.

The interview process with a survivor of human trafficking serves as an instrument for them to share their experiences but also mirrors the significant challenges they still face in overcoming their past. Initially, the plan was to divide her interview into two sessions: the first to recount her entanglement in the network of human trafficking, and the second to discuss the aftermath, including drug abuse, suicide attempts, and an abusive relationship. The second session of the interview was never completed. Even though she initially seemed eager to share her experiences, she didn't set a specific date for the follow-up interview and eventually canceled it more than three times. This inability to fulfill commitments suggests that while rehabilitation is crucial for reintegration into society and employment, it doesn’t necessarily equate to stability or full recovery. The challenges of re-entering society can have enduring repercussions, as evidenced by the survivor's hesitance and inability to follow through with the second interview. This situation underlines the complexity of recovery and the need for ongoing support even after survivors have achieved certain milestones like education and employment.

Advocacy alongside Service

Shifting away from the direct assistance model used by organizations, it is critical to recognize the role that other types of organizations play in the larger human trafficking scene. Rather than providing direct care, these organizations concentrate on advocacy, information gathering and dissemination, and policy influence—tasks that are as important in the battle against human trafficking. This alternative but

essential strategy is most effectively shown by research, data collection, and analysis organizations such as Without Trafficking (Sin Trata). Rather from providing assistance like refuge or rehabilitation, their focus is on comprehending the networks, patterns, and trends of human trafficking. Just as Areli and Estrella mention, there was a strong ignorance for the illicit acts being committed to them. This attitude of society is a reflection of a deeper need for public education and awareness raising about the hardships endured by survivors of human trafficking. This data-driven method offers invaluable information that can guide direct service organizations' strategies and have an impact on non-governmental and governmental policy. Through promoting policy changes, educating the public and decision-makers about the complexities of trafficking networks and their effects on individuals and communities, and increasing awareness of human trafficking, they contribute to the development of an environment which improves the efficiency of direct service organizations. Just as Karla, one of the survivors, has become an activist for anti-human trafficking. In the recorded testimony she said: “I give lectures in primary schools, secondary schools and universities on the prevention that young people and parents must have… Fighting with prevention is educating your children and ourselves as parents.” (2023). Advocacy is essential for initiatives to raise awareness of the problem, changing public opinion, and supporting cultural and legislative changes may eliminate human trafficking and assist survivors. In essence, Without Trafficking complements direct service groups by addressing the problem from a systemic standpoint, while the other organizations are on the direct services, offering immediate care and support to survivors.

Orozco vividly portrays not just the extreme hardships that victims of human trafficking endure, but also their incredible capacity for growth and recovery. Orozco (2023) talks about Miriam: this young woman, who fell in love with a pimp, was taken to Puebla and then to Mexico City, where she was exploited for almost two years. After her liberation, she entered the program at the age of 17, where she gradually recovered. Over time, she completed her high school education and enrolled in a private university where she studied Business Administration. She has her own apartment and currently lives in the Southeast. She

is in charge of her own business and is independent. This is a representation of their independence and social integration.

Another survivor that Orozco (2023) mentions in the interview is María del Carmen: Severely damaged not only by the exploitation she suffered but also by her own family history, she arrived at FCC deeply depressed, with post-traumatic stress like most of the girls, and with great resentment and insecurities. After a long convalescence and treatments, she decided to enroll in the Nursing school at UNAM, completing her studies very successfully. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she assisted many patients in the hospital she joined. Currently, she lives independently and has her own apartment. The stories of Miriam and María del Carmen serve as compelling illustrations of how survivors are able to start over, become independent, and effectively reintegrate into society given the correct resources and opportunity. Their experiences represent optimism and perseverance in the face of extremely difficult circumstances.

Conclusion

Women survivors of trafficking face numerous obstacles when trying to integrate into society. As seen in the analysis, these women experience substantial consequences that require addressing. They face rejection through stigmatization and humiliation, both from themselves and society, often feeling guilt and shame. Injustice is prevalent due to inadequate legal structures, where cases often don't proceed with convicting the offender. The psychological trauma they endure includes depression, intrusive memories, panic attacks, chronic pains, self-destructive behaviors, and substance abuse. Dany (2023), one of the survivors, expresses what she went through after being trafficked: “From depression to an overdose of crack, to trying to kill myself”. This is the life of a post-trafficked women who survived and was able to escape the torture—after constantly being sexually abused, being denigrated by her traffickers and clients

every single day—she fought for her life and then underwent this. Surviving human trafficking for sexual exploitation, to later, the shame, the depression, and the loneliness led her to taking her life away.

Trafficking survivors require unlimited access to human services such as food, shelter, and healthcare, along with intensive support programs tailored to their needs for successful community integration. Many lack the skills needed for independent living, struggle to build strong relationships, and face challenges in maintaining stable employment. NGOs strategize to offer adequate resources and programs to address these issues, facilitating recovery and community inclusion. In addition to psychological and legal support, educational programs are crucial for enabling survivor women to create a new life with a vision for the future, independence, stability, and employment. However, substantial financial resources are needed to sustain these programs and organizations, requiring multiple strategies with a comprehensive approach.

While advocacy and prevention of human trafficking exist, they are not sufficient. There is insufficient information about survivors successfully reintegrating into society, securing stable jobs, and living independently. The few who do face ongoing repercussions. International organizations with substantial financial support and power are needed to invest in and research better rehabilitation programs for human trafficking survivors. These programs should include comprehensive trauma recovery efforts, as trauma can endure for extended periods, potentially resurfacing at any point in survivors' lives. Educational programs should also be included to allow survivors to resume interrupted school cycles.

Survivors who decide to speak up today and use their voice for other victims do so after years of recovery, yet they still face revictimization. Building a new life is like constructing a tower of wooden cubes, placing them one at a time to finally stand on their own. However, survivors may encounter unexpected triggers, crushing everything they've built. Problems in post-trafficking survivors lack attention

and research. International organizations and governments must provide sufficient resources, tools, and support to help survivors recover and reintegrate into society.

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Appendix A.

Interview with Rosi Orozco

Comisión Unidos vs La Trata (United Commission Against Trafficking)
Fundacion Camino a Casa (Home to Path Foundation)

1. In what state do they find survivors who have experienced human trafficking?
2. What do survivors need after their return?
3. How is the NGO helping women who have experienced human trafficking?
4. What services do you provide ?
5. What about the organization itself—do they partner with other NGOs, government or legal entities?
6. What is their work like? As professionals working with survivors?

   Landscape of work
7. How do they go from sex work to a decent job?
8. How do they find employment?
9. What barriers she has observed in placing survivors in workplaces?

Appendix B.

Interview with Daniela Espinoza (Survivor)

1. In what year did this happen?
2. How long were you there? What went through your mind? What did you feel? What did you see?
3. Who fed you?
4. How did you escape? What gave you the strength to escape?
5. What happened during the period after you were out? Where did you go?
6. When you were in the hospital, did you think about reporting it? What were your thoughts once you were in a safe place? Did you file a report? Did you receive professional help?
7. What did you feel? Did you want to block it out?
8. After your rehabilitation, what happened? What do you want to do now? In terms of work?
9. What were the tools you needed to recover and which were the most valuable?