

THE UNSEEN FACES OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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Abstract: Goal 5.2 of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to „eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including *trafficking and sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation*” (p. 22). In Romania, *the National Strategy Against Trafficking in Persons* for the period 2024 - 2028 reveals that *in the field of combating trafficking in human beings, the specialized human resources are insufficient, and the need to train the main categories of specialists who can come into contact with the alleged victims of trafficking in persons persists*. In this context, we clarify in our article aspects such as the distinction between trafficking in human beings and „voluntary prostitution”; we delineate the causes, forms and indicators that differentiate prostitution from trafficking in human beings; the way in which recruiters aim to attract victims in situations involving the sale of one's own body as a commodity through the use of devastating psychological techniques and the installation of addiction to drugs, alcohol and, above all, abusive. The main conclusion of the research is that traffickers' strategies are increasingly complex, followed by efforts to avoid criminal liability.

Keywords: human trafficking, prostitution, drugs, domestic violence, refugees

Résumé : L'objectif 5.2 du Programme de développement durable à l'horizon 2030 des Nations Unies est « d'éliminer toutes les formes de violence à l'égard de toutes les femmes et de toutes les filles dans les sphères publique et privée, y compris la *traite et l'exploitation sexuelle et les autres formes d'exploitation* » (p. 22). En Roumanie, *la Stratégie nationale de lutte contre la traite des personnes* pour la période 2024-2028 révèle que *dans le domaine de la lutte contre la traite des êtres humains, les ressources humaines spécialisées sont insuffisantes et que la nécessité de former les principales catégories de spécialistes susceptibles d'entrer en contact avec les victimes présumées de la traite des personnes persiste*. Dans ce contexte, nous clarifions dans notre article des aspects tels que la distinction entre la traite des êtres humains et la « prostitution volontaire » ; nous définissons les causes, les formes et les indicateurs qui différencient la prostitution de la traite des êtres humains ; la manière dont les recruteurs visent à attirer les victimes dans des situations de vente de son propre corps comme marchandise par l'utilisation de techniques psychologiques dévastatrices et l'installation d'une dépendance à la drogue, à l'alcool et, surtout, abusive. La principale conclusion de la recherche est que les stratégies des trafiquants sont de plus en plus complexes, suivies des efforts visant à éviter la responsabilité pénale.

Mots-clés : traite des êtres humains, prostitution, violence domestique, réfugiés

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Rezumat: Obiectivul 5.2 al Agendei 2030 a Națiunilor Unite pentru Dezvoltare Durabilă este de a „elimina toate formele de violență împotriva tuturor femeilor și fetelor în sfera publică și privată, inclusiv *traficul și exploatarea sexuală și alte forme de exploatare*” (p. 22). În România, *Strategia Națională împotriva Traficului de Persoane* pentru perioada 2024 - 2028 relevă că *în domeniul combaterii traficului de ființe umane, resursele umane specializate sunt insuficiente, iar necesitatea de a pregăti principalele categorii de specialiști care pot intra în contact cu presupusele victime ale traficului de persoane persistă*. În acest context, clarificăm în articolul nostru aspecte precum distincția dintre traficul de ființe umane și „prostituția voluntară”; conturăm cauzele, formele și indicatorii care diferențiază prostituția de traficul de ființe umane; modul în care recrutorii urmăresc să atragă victime în situații care implică vânzarea propriului corp ca marfă prin utilizarea unor tehnici psihologice devastatoare și instalarea dependenței de droguri, alcool și, mai ales, abuzive. Principala concluzie a cercetării este că strategiile traficantilor sunt din ce în ce mai complexe, urmate de eforturi de evitare a răspunderii penale.

Cuvinte cheie: trafic de persoane, prostituție, violență domestică, refugiați

Introduction

Human trafficking is a violation of human rights, especially to liberty and personal integrity, and is characterized by *the exploitation of vulnerable people for material gain* (Touzenis, 2010). The forms of exploitation can be sexual (prostitution, pornography) or for work, forced marriage, committing crimes by coercion (online fraud, recruitment of other victims, drug trafficking, pickpocketing), organ trafficking, surrogate mothers (those women who are used to give birth to children), etc.

Traffickers use *vulnerable people* of different ages, ethnicities, and cultures, with the clear aim of obtaining illicit gains as much as possible. It should be noted that victims do not consent to exploitation, but, as research and reports by the ‘National Agency against Trafficking in Persons’ reveal, are deceived with *too good to be true offers* by traffickers who do everything they can at the beginning to establish a close connection with them, to gain their trust; they come up with *life-saving solutions* for any problem they face.

1. The distinction between human trafficking and „voluntary prostitution”

Prostitution has its origins in Antiquity, and throughout human civilizations, there have been certain rituals and legal provisions, some for and others against this practice. It is practiced in both economically and socially developed countries, and is often seen in some circles as „the oldest profession in the world.” Professor Doru Buzducea argues that prostitution is part of the category of social problems, as it „survived” even during the Inquisition. „Practitioners” expose themselves to risks such as serious health problems, violence, and even death. The consequences are also reflected at the level of society as a whole, as they destroy moral norms, threaten public health, diminish social control, and contribute to the development of other social problems (Buzducea, 2005).

The girls are usually very young and are either victims of human trafficking, or due to reasons such as poverty, lack of a job, lack of a family, or a disorganized family, marked by tensions, they end up practicing for a period of time „providing sexual services” to different people, for sums of money. This serious problem is associated with other social problems, such as alcohol consumption, drug use, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, and crime (Buzducea, 2010; Lazăr, 2010; Buzducea, 2022).

2. Life stories of women who are „behind the label of prostitute”

Elena Alina Tariceanu (2014) reveals the life stories of women who are „behind the label of prostitute”. Some of them ended up in this situation because „they started using drugs out of curiosity”. The author presents the case of Gina, a 16-year-old girl, who had started practicing prostitution „at the request of her boyfriend at the time”, who was a drug user. Another case is that of Mihaela, a young woman from the provinces, who had come to the capital to continue her master's degree studies and who, after completing her studies, got a job at a bank where she earned enough money to be able to support herself in a city like Bucharest, but she entered an entourage that led her to heroin consumption and her salary began to become insufficient to cover food expenses, maintenance and purchase of doses, which, according to her, were of „the best quality”, therefore also very expensive. Mihaela was, at the time of the investigation, arrested and convicted of drug trafficking, but, being pregnant at the time of incarceration, she was released from the penitentiary to give birth to the child. There are very few prostitutes who get pregnant and give up drug use, and their children are born with very serious health problems, or even die. The author reveals that women who sell their bodies for money in the street environment are usually stable in terms of geographical area and the activity of such a person in a certain area of a city is given by a certain „relational fabric” made up of the relationships she has with certain policemen, with the pimp, with a certain clientele, but also by the positioning of one's own home. They can migrate from one area to another, depending on the relationships they have with the pimps who correspond to those areas; the amounts earned often differ from one area to another.

Another case is that of Steliana, a young woman who blamed herself for choosing this „wrong path”, but who managed not to be fined: she was careful not to expose herself, permanently carrying out her „activity” in a fixed location: she refused to go anywhere else, and the place she chose, she called it „the room” and it was owned by „Mrs. Dida”, a mature Roma woman, about 40 years old, who fulfilled „all the characteristics of a pimp or a matron, providing prostituted women with a few rooms for the sale of sex and mediating the relationship with the police” (Tariceanu, 2014, p. 269).

Another author, Marian Ursan (2010, p. 512) reproduces in the research entitled *Drugs and prostitution: 'combinations' and nightlife in Bucharest*, statements of some pimps, of which we present some excerpts:

Mitu, 38 years old, a „combiner”, declared: „I take commission from the girls, I have nothing to do with them. As some can't stay outside, I find another boy, I combine him, and if he enters the room, I also have my share...”.

Alin, 23, „a small pimp, with big, unrealistic plans, „has only one girl who shoots for him” and „wants prostitution to be legalized, because he can no longer stand the abuses of the police”. Also, „in the area where Alin works, there are four other pimps, and between them there is a degree of kinship, which also gives him a certain degree of protection, he is not able to impose himself... he considers that he is a fine boy, who takes care of his daughter...” (Ursan, 2010, pp. 512-513).

According to the *New Penal Code*, Article 213, pimping represents: „determining or facilitating the practice of prostitution or obtaining patrimonial benefits from this practice by one or more persons and is punishable by imprisonment from 2 to 7 years and prohibition of the exercise of certain rights”.

Shocking are the cases of those women for whom „leaving prostitution is equivalent to death”. The *Abraca case* is the story of a young woman who had started practicing prostitution at the age of 16 and suffered from diabetes, and the lack of health insurance and drug addiction made the disease advance rapidly. Although she had reached one of her lower limbs with gangrene that „had extended to the entire leg and gave off a pestilential smell”, she continued to practice prostitution and still had „clients, „only that she could no longer perform normal sex, but only oral” according to the statements of the employees of the ARAS Social Ambulance. There is certainly a special psychological profile for that type of men who „resort to the sexual services of a dying woman” (Tariceanu, 2014, p. 273).

3. Causes and forms of voluntary prostitution

Drug addiction, along with the „mirage of money” and a precarious family environment, *can often lead to entry into prostitution* (Ursan, 2017). Narcotics close the „vicious circle of prostitution”, as women end up resorting to such practices to quickly earn the amounts of money necessary to procure their „daily dose”. There are, of course, also the nuanced forms of the phenomenon, such as the so-called „luxury prostitution” masked under the screens of erotic massage parlours, which are aimed at clients with greater financial possibilities, and the gains obtained from the development of these networks are huge and difficult to quantify or tax, being a component of the underground economy. This social phenomenon is a controversial one, and the solutions outlined over time have been either criminalization (prohibition and punishment) or legalization.

Felicia Ceașu, a researcher at the Romanian Academy, notes that „after the revolution, but especially in the last five years, the pornography industry has grown. There are *porn stars who appear on well-known talk shows, at peak hours*, explaining why they like to have this job and why it is better this way. There are also thousands and thousands of pornographic sites on the internet, and in Romanian, in which the announcement forbidden to minors is more of a formal one, because too few are paid” (Ceașu, 2024, p. 181). In the same direction, Virgiliu Gheorghe (2011, p. 30) reveals that „it has been found that the rate of marital

infidelity increases by 317% in the case of pornography consumers”, and „the use of pornography on the Internet increases by 370% the probability of resorting to the paid services of prostitutes”.

4. Indicators differentiating prostitution from human trafficking

Prostitution and human trafficking are extremely serious problems of contemporary society, with devastating consequences at the individual, family, community, and societal levels. The indicators that differentiate prostitution from human trafficking are:

1. The clothes they wear are not appropriate for the season, and often, the girls are on the street, dressed very scantily in winter.
2. They work long hours, even if they get sick.
3. They don't know the city, the area, and they don't socialize.
4. They are on the street in unfavourable weather conditions.
5. If they are in other countries, they do not return to their country of origin for long periods of time, even if they have children in the country.
6. They change their behaviour in the presence of group members. The presence of a single indicator may suggest low self-esteem or lack of determination, but a combination of two or more indicators present over a longer period of time strongly suggests a potential exploitative situation (Pascoal, 2020).

In human trafficking, psychological torture is due to isolation, disorientation of victims, impossibility of communication, lack of documents, and the abuses to which they are subjected.

Here are some statements by some teenage girls, edifying on the trafficking of girls:

„I asked him to let me go home. I was crying. They watched me while I was talking on the phone, but even so, my mother realized that something very bad was happening” (p. 19).

„I lived with my brother, my mother, and her husband in our village. I went to high school, and every day I had to walk 8 kilometres from home to school and back. My mother's husband drank alcohol every day, and whenever he got drunk, he sexually assaulted me. My mother knew about it, but she didn't do anything” (p. 18).

“When I decided to leave Romania, there was no chance for me here. I had a child to raise, my parents kept asking me for money, and the child's father had gone to Italy and had never returned. I tried many times to find work, but who would hire me without a high school diploma and with a child waiting for me at home? So, I thought this was my last chance. I went to Serbia with the help of a man, but there I was sold, and finally I found myself in Sarajevo” (p. 29).

„I don't know who to trust. Sometimes I don't even have it in me” (p. 21).

„At first, (when I came back) I was afraid to go outside in the daylight... I was afraid that people would see how ugly I was” (p. 21).

„I proposed to a girl that we run away. We had no idea that the pimp and the police were keeping an eye on us. They caught us and sold us. They knew we were

going to try to run away. I realized that I had no escape. The police brought us back every time” (p. 23).

„They destroyed my papers, they gave me another name, they stole my identity” (p. 23).

„It was a police raid. The pimp hid us in the basement. I stayed there for almost a week. We were desperate and hungry. We thought they had forgotten us there” (source: Galit, 2004, pp. 11-29).

The interventions of the social worker involve working with people who practice commercial sex, victims of human trafficking, drug users, men who use such services or who have sexual relations with other men, homeless people, people infected with HIV/AIDS, etc. To support each beneficiary, counselling, support, and social (re)integration services are provided, and primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs are implemented for children and young people at risk. An effective, Evidence-based intervention is aimed at addressing all the social problems concerned.

5. Alcohol and drug addiction in the context of human trafficking

On November 18, 2024, the press in our country reported „the investigation of dozens of pupils and students from Iasi, Bucharest, Galati, and Vaslui for 'trafficking in high-risk drugs, trafficking in high-risk drugs and carrying out, without right, operations with psychoactive substances, committed especially in school environments” (Netedu, 2024, p. 202). It is a reality in which the new generations of children and adolescents, amid conflicts with their parents, remain extremely vulnerable both to addictions and to the phenomenon of human trafficking. There is also a vulnerability of girls who are victims of (cyber)bullying in the face of human trafficking (see also Palaghia, 2019; Palaghia, 2024b). In Bacău there was a method of recruitment among high school students, in which girls who were part of the trafficking networks entered the school toilet and sedated the victims (vulnerable students, schoolmates, previously subjected to (cyber)bullying aggression) with formaldehyde; they declared to the responsible adults (teaching or auxiliary staff) that the victim was ill and accompanied her home. Subsequently, the victims were taken to places where they were abused, filmed, and later blackmailed by the members of the network with those compromising videos; thus, the victims were still kept in traffic (see Tăbușcă 2020; 2022). Even if they are recruited through the „fake love” method, the victims are drugged without their knowledge, even during the recruitment period, and end up confusing addiction with the love they have for the aggressor (see also Tăbușcă, 2024).

In an analysis of this contemporary phenomenon, Cristina Gavriliuță reveals how the „heads of trafficking networks” exercise their control by outlining the profile of the trafficker who imposes his authority and power on the victims (Gavriliuță, 2017). Addiction can be physical, mental, or mixed, the latter category being mostly narcotics (Rădoi, 2015). Specialists who work directly with surviving victims of human trafficking reveal that if in a period of two to three months the girls are not „taken out of trafficking” it is very difficult to get out of the claws of

the traffickers, since drug addiction is well established, the traumatic bond is strongly created, and the constraints go as far as the threat that if they are not sacrificed, loved ones (younger brothers or sisters) will be brought into traffic or close family members will be killed. In the case of families recruited for work, there are cases in which the girls of those families, who remain alone, known by traffickers as vulnerable, are also recruited through the „false love” method and end up being trafficked (Tăbușcă, 2021).

6. Gaslighting in the context of human trafficking

A series of researchers (Aninușanu *et al.*, 2016; Pascoal, 2020) reveals that traffickers are 75% narcissistic, boasting that they have „relationships”. They often receive the support of female relatives who have the role of controlling the victim and ensuring that the victim has no ties to other people outside the socio-family network they have created, thus shaping an environment in which the victim remains the only person the victim still has. This is why, at an initial stage, vulnerable girls are identified who have no friends and do not get along with family members. Victims of domestic abuse can be abused children or children who come from very authoritarian families. Traffickers give them the necessary attention, gaining their trust, and they act as if they can rely on them in any circumstance. They are very open and communicative, even discussing the illegal activities they engage in. They target victims as young as possible, who lack love, who have family difficulties, or who grew up in placement centers.

It is worth noting that not all poor families are vulnerable to the phenomenon of human trafficking, as traffickers are mainly looking for girls who do not get along with their parents or who are abused in their families of origin, which are not necessarily poor (Gavriliuță, Gavriliuță, 2013). In sexual exploitation, girls are determined to bring them as much money as possible, but not necessarily by using force, but especially by outlining a marital plan, such as raising money to buy a house, a car that they can benefit from together, and other similar matrimonial goals.

Traffickers use *devastating psychological techniques* to keep their victims subdued. One of these is *gaslighting*, a manipulation technique that causes the victim to question reality, including their own perceptions and memories (see also Stern 2023); *For the aggressors, it is a tool of systematic control through which they deny the things that happened and claim that things happened that in fact did not exist.* They downplay the seriousness of the abuse by stating either that the victim is exaggerating or imagining things; thus leads it to question its own experience and to accept increasing abuses; she ends up becoming convinced that the trafficker wants her well and is the only person she can rely on; she begins to feel responsible for the abuses to which she is subjected, she loses confidence in her own memory and ability to discern, thus becoming dependent on the aggressor and in terms of how she comes to understand reality.

The victim ends up living in a state of permanent confusion, no longer being able to distinguish between lies and truth; *thus, they become, by eroding self-*

confidence (see also Rădoi, Irimescu, 2021), dependent and psychologically dependent on the trafficker; it end up depending on his approval even for the basics. The effects of gaslighting on victims can be devastating and long-lasting: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (see also Enrile, 2017; Schwartz, 2024), anxiety disorders, depression, personality disorders such as addictive personality disorder, or more serious ones, such as borderline disorder and schizophrenia; difficulty trusting other people and reintegrating into society and eating disorders (anorexia and bulimia).

7. Motherhood in the context of human trafficking

In the specialized literature, there is research (Pascoal, 2020) that reveals that the victims identified in human trafficking are traumatized people who prefer not to talk about their own experience as a defense mechanism. Victims of sexual exploitation often do not consider themselves victims, as the exploitation is camouflaged by the sentimental bond with the trafficker, in which they can also become mothers. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has outlined a definition of APON (Abuse of Position of Vulnerability) as „any situation in which the person involved has no real or acceptable alternative but to submit to abuse” (OHCHR, 2010). Gallagher points out that the phrase „real and acceptable alternative” remains unclear (Gallagher 2012).

With the advent of the loverboy recruitment method, the absence of physical violence at this stage appears; it is basically replaced by a method based on a blind trust of the victim in the trafficker (Palaghia, 2024a). There are cases in which the recruiter maintains his role as a loverboy during the exploitation period, even going up to marriage. This method is much more effective than the former, *as the victim is almost unable to perceive the deception; he or she may appear as a victim of domestic violence, but does not consider himself a victim of human trafficking.* The act of marriage comes a lot in support of the trafficker, who can emotionally manipulate the victim much more easily in this way. The children of victims of human trafficking are either neglected or abused by relatives in whose care they are left or given to social services. Rafaela Pascoal shows that there are cases in which some children are controlled by a member of the criminal network; situations in which traffickers condition the mother's access to the children on the payment of new and huge „debts”, always increasing and justified as „expenses for the child”. Debts are constantly increasing due to situational factors created by traffickers, which lead to continuous exploitation. In particular, the children of exploited Nigerian women in Spain and Italy were used as coercive tools by the exploiters, as by keeping the children in them, traffickers could directly harm them, during which time they also emotionally abused the mother, to whom they suggested horrific ideas and made death threats, including „throwing from the balcony”. Verbal and psychological abuse, together with the fact that they know their children are in danger, generates post-traumatic stress for mothers, which affects their decision-making capacity. They live permanently with fear, anxiety and have only one goal: to protect their child. The author reveals how such a woman was forced to pay the trafficker an extra 400 euros, in addition to the other

„debts”, just to be able to visit her child. The traffickers told the authorities that the mother abandoned her child, continuing the exploitation and, in addition to the previous debts, asked her for another fee of 200 euros, justified as „expenses for the child”. The child entered the child protection system, was placed in foster care, and later became eligible for adoption (Pascoal, 2020).

From another perspective, Laura Ecedi-Stoisavlevici, in a criminological research on *women convicted of committing the crime of human trafficking* (2015), reveals that several factors favor their entry into trafficking, among which we mention: the existence of abuses, the precarious financial situation, the existence of relationships before the commission of the act with people involved in trafficking, as well as the lack of a place of work. Also, „most of the convicted women know the phenomenon quite well, before they themselves become trafficked, and the commission of this kind of crimes does not take place against the background of mistakes, of attracting them to commit the deeds by other people, but rather represents a rational choice, a risk taken”, but it is „a forced choice between good and evil”. As they could not find a job, these women „married or entered into cohabitation relationships at an early age, and the appearance of children surprised them with no experience on the labor market and not materially fulfilled, or they grew up in crowded families with serious financial problems, in which it was usual for only one family member to work, either they were caught up in prostitution, which no longer gave them the freedom and time needed to find a job, or they grew up in criminal families, in which committing crimes was a state of normality” (p. 199).

For women traffickers, „the children they have with male traffickers were used as a tool of manipulation and attraction in trafficking, it is a *modus operandi*: first the traffickers develop a relationship of „love” with the woman, after which the children appear, and after this moment the process of manipulation of the woman begins, she being forced to enter trafficking, at first as a victim, and then to go to the other side, recruiting, in turn, and exploiting girls much younger than her, who end up being „lovers” of their „boyfriend” and who, in turn, give birth to the children of the same „boyfriend”. The risk of re-entering traffic after the sentence period remains extremely high, as individual resources place them in the category of persons who present an increased risk of vulnerability. In all cases, these women were „pushed into trafficking by their life partners and were exploited in this way even after the appearance of children” and the attraction of the other women in trafficking was carried out gradually, without being aware of it at first, and after that such activities come to be accepted, to be considered as natural, each of the women taking care of their own children (Ecedi-Stoisavlevici, 2016, p. 198).

8. Organized begging in human trafficking

In co-opting people for begging, recruiters initially appear in the lives of victims as a life-saving solution for the problems they face, for example, lovers who come to save women from poverty and who pretend to provide support for difficult

life situations: they can be single mothers, women, or men without sources of income and without support. The recruiter is, in such cases, an unknown person who makes a business proposal to people he has seen in difficulty and to whom he claims to want to provide support. There are cases in the literature of children who sell their parents to beg, husbands who sell their wives and children, mothers who sell their children, etc. (Ungureanu, 2013).

The main ways of recruitment that the networks use are either by deception, promising a job in the country or abroad, or even the direct promise of ensuring a safe place to beg abroad, and implicitly, to make a lot of money in a short time and without work. The vulnerable categories are people who have certain disabilities and, obviously, children who can be easily manipulated and exploited.

There is also research showing that, especially in small rural communities, *information is transmitted mainly through the snowball technique, which involves a person finding out information and passing it on to their loved ones; they, in turn, transmit it to others, and thus the circle of those who hold the information is constantly widening*. Subsequently, victims *self-integrate into job seekers, specialists* stating that *their own parents can sometimes mediate the recruitment of minors*, or there are cases in which entire families are recruited for begging.

Specific aspects of the well-known *Tandarei case* are related to the way in which the children were recruited: either their families ended up being in debt to the traffickers and in exchange for that money they ended up giving them for activities related to begging or theft, carried out on the territory of other states; or some parents gave them voluntarily, for a part of the amount thus obtained.

Gulf operation revealed that members of an organised criminal group recruited Roma minors from poor communities and smuggled them into the UK, where they exploited them by begging or committing street crimes. The British police identified 168 exploited minors, aged between 7 and 15, and *the Directorate for the Investigation of Organized Crime and Terrorism* from our country collaborated with the British authorities, under the coordination of Eurojust. In this case, „neither the families they come from nor the children consider themselves exploited,” explains Norbert Celpek, a member of a foundation that deals with abused children: „When they earn money from stealing, children are praised, while it is put in their heads that going to school is a waste of time and money. After the age of 14, most of them end up prostituting themselves, because, no matter how skilled they are at stealing, traffickers no longer consider them useful. After all, the police can arrest them. After the age of 18, they marry and have children who become, in turn, victims of the same networks of traffickers” (in Burcu *et al.*, 2025, p. 37).

The methods of exploitation through begging can be of the type:

1. “*The outstretched hand that does not tell a story, does not receive alms*”²
– is characterized by messages written by traffickers in the language

² Actor Gheorghe Dinică's line from the movie *Filantropica*, released in 2002 and directed by Nae Caranfil.

of the destination country, intended, of course, to attract the pity of the public;

2. Playing a musical instrument;
3. Suggesting or presenting a disability;
4. Mothers who sit on the floor with their own children;
5. Street sale of newspapers, often used in countries such as Austria or Germany;
6. *Human statues* or disguising themselves as a character who stands still in crowded areas (see also Ungureanu, 2013).

9. Vulnerability of Ukrainian refugees to human trafficking

On February 24, 2022, when life seemed to resume its natural course after the COVID-2019 pandemic, the war in Ukraine began, and according to OSCE data, half of the people there lost their income, and over 6 million sought protection abroad, and over 5 million „were internally displaced” (OSCE).

Our country continued, through the competent public authorities, in 2022, to efficiently manage the situation of refugees from Ukraine, as a result of the armed conflict of the Russian Federation against this country, ensuring all measures and means for their integration in optimal conditions into the Romanian society, and the year 2022 was characterized by the transition from the specific measures of the Covid 19 Pandemic to specific measures to adequately address the needs of protection and support for refugees.

The vulnerability of Ukrainian refugees lies in the fact that around 90% of people fleeing the war are women and children, people at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking (especially children separated from their parents, who travel with people whose relationship with them cannot be verified); Ukrainians who do not benefit from any type of protection, due to lack of information or misinformation, people who do not have Ukrainian citizenship, Ukrainian Roma, people belonging to the LGBTQI+ community, the elderly or people with physical or mental disabilities are also at risk. As a rule, in „times of migration crises,” there are criminals or criminal groups that take advantage of „large flows of people to exploit the most vulnerable in the countries of origin, transit and destination” (OSCE, p. 2).

9.1. The indicators for refugees at risk of being trafficked are:

- The presence of strangers near the spaces arranged for their temporary accommodation and the granting of other facilities;
- They are approached by unknown people, who offer them, without them having requested: transport by vehicle, housing, a job, etc.;
- They are asked to pay for „intermediate services” to obtain a job;
- The presence of several so-called „traffic nodes”, which mainly target „people fleeing war on their own” (OSCE, p. 3);
- Providing a job with an „unrealistically high” salary offer, but which at first glance may leave the impression of an extremely attractive offer. The alarm

signals consist in the fact that complete information is not provided in relation to the position offered, and the job offer is an unofficial one;

- The refugee is either lured or pressured to follow the trafficker to a destination known only to him;
- A single refugee or an entire group either does not show up for the scheduled meeting with the social worker or simply suddenly disappears from the shelter.

9.2. Indicators which reveal that refugees may already be trafficked are as follows:

- The refugee has already been transported from one destination to another, even abroad;
- Refugees are coerced or manipulated into performing certain activities or having sexual relations without consent;
- Personal documents are retained by another person;
- The refugee no longer has freedom of expression and movement, being practically under the control of the trafficker and unable to contact relatives, trusted persons, such as family and friends;
- Working conditions violate employees' rights and the legislation in force;
- The refugee is either not paid or receives extremely low remuneration compared to the work performed;
- Signs of emotional, physical, or sexual violence are present – the person is afraid to communicate and is constantly afraid of being followed;
- The refugee is forced to repay some „debts” that the trafficker claims to have towards him.

10. Initial interaction and communication with a (suspected) victim of human trafficking

There are also some basic rules that the social worker must follow in the initial contact, interaction, and communication with a (presumed) victim of human trafficking, as follows:

- a. Creating a safe environment for the victim (the person can be separated from the group and taken to a place where there is a „safe space for dialogue”);
- b. We ensure the effectiveness of communication by identifying a translator or cultural mediator, if possible, of the same gender as the victim;
- c. We always ask for consent to start the conversation, as the person may not be willing to discuss traffic situations;
- d. It is important to immediately identify the basic, urgent needs that the victim has, as „people fleeing war, especially if they are victims of human trafficking, may have suffered multiple traumatic experiences and thus manifest impulsive reactions of an emotional nature and beyond, and

frontline intervention personnel must be prepared to manage them” (OSCE, p. 4);

- e. If we identify a (presumed) trafficked minor, we inform the child protection authorities or other competent institutions;
- f. Leaflets or videos made in collaboration with ANTP, meant to provide information on detection procedures, the rights of trafficked persons, and social assistance services, can also provide an opening for a conversation with the social worker;
- g. The social worker, after obtaining the consent of the presumed victim, has the duty to urgently notify the local coordinator for combating trafficking in human beings or the competent authority that will subsequently start the process of identification and provision of support and protection (if the person does not want to collaborate with law enforcement bodies, it remains extremely important to create the possibility for him to talk to an anti-trafficking specialist, either from legal public social services or from a non-governmental organization);
- h. Any institution that claims to support vulnerable groups and people fleeing war must establish specific, clear procedures that both staff and volunteers must know and follow closely, especially when a person presents one or more indicators of potential victim of human trafficking.

According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, there are a series of questions aimed at identifying signs of human trafficking during the initial conversation, which we have structured into several ten, as follows:

- 1. Can you manage your own assets, money, and have access to all your documents, such as your passport, travel documents, residence permit, salary payments, and social security? Are they sure they are in your possession and not someone else's?
- 2. Has anyone suggested that you use a false identity, other documents, lie to the authorities, your family, or other people?
- 3. Do you feel that you have been subjected to coercion, manipulation, emotional, physical or sexual abuse on the way to – or after arriving in this country?
- 4. Have you been in a situation where you were promised a home and a job, but the conditions turned out to be different from what you initially thought: for example, were you asked to perform domestic work or have sexual relations with the owner of the house as a sign of gratitude for hosting or as a condition for continuing to stay there?
- 5. Do you or your family feel threatened?
- 6. Have you been forced to beg, steal, videochat, use pornographic materials, or prostitution?
- 7. If you have already signed an employment contract, do you think the conditions provided are correct (is there a specified remuneration, and are

the working hours reasonable)? And if you already work, do the conditions correspond to the contractual specifications?

8. Have you found yourself in a situation where, to flee the war, you had to go into financial debt, and there is someone who is pressuring you to pay off these debts?
9. Is there anyone who has promised you financial gains or given you a sum of money, encouraging you to follow him, with the promise of ensuring a better future?
10. Did someone threaten you to move?

The social worker must be aware that there are at least 5 situations in which trafficked people do not want to collaborate:

- 1 They do not recognise themselves as victims, as they are either in the transfer stage or in one that precedes the actual exploitation, or they normalise any type of abusive treatment, based on previous experiences, or, in extreme cases, they are terrified of the threats of traffickers;
- 2 Undocumented migrants or those who are forced to commit crimes may avoid appearing before the authorities, precisely for fear of being sanctioned (either by punishment for their irregular status or by expulsion);
- 3 There may also be cases where certain individuals are „afraid to communicate with state authorities and do not trust institutions due to negative experiences with such officials in their region or country of origin” (OSCE, p. 5);
- 4 The victim is in a relationship with the trafficker and „feels emotionally obliged not to report him” (OSCE, p. 5);
- 5 There are, of course, also victims who do not want to be stigmatized, with preparation if they have been subjected to sexual abuse.

It therefore remains extremely important, decisive for preventing or interrupting the operating cycle as soon as possible, the „proactive detection of traffic signals”, together with the proper notification and reporting of situations of this type. It should also be noted that *a suspected victim of human trafficking cannot be reported to the authorities without their prior consent*, and if they request support to contact the authorities, it must be provided immediately.

Conclusions

The anti-trafficking specialists in our country paid attention to the immediate identification of people at risk of being trafficked and took measures to prevent, rescue and assist the victims, but there are cases in which *children were born during sexual exploitation*, as the traffickers are so cunning and unscrupulous that they have started to marry the victims and have children, and the exploitation turns into a „family business” in which the child is usually used to beg, especially in countries where a high profit can be obtained. *The difficulty of extracting victims from trafficking* is also given by the fact that *Romanian society is used to blaming*

them, which makes their *psychosocial reintegration* much more difficult and *facilitates re-trafficking*.

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