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## Exploring Human Trafficking Victimization Experiences in Portugal

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to access the experience of the victims of human trafficking, during recruitment, exploitation, and identification phases. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview, resulting in a clinical-forensic sample of nine adult victims of both sexes – two females and seven males, aged between 42 and 67 years ( $M = 56.67$ ;  $SD = 8.411$ ). Data analysis was done using thematic analysis and allowed to reinforce the dynamics of trafficking in human beings, concerning victims and traffickers (e.g., the deception in the recruitment phase) and dynamics of exploitation (e.g., entrapment strategies). This study was able to provide novelty concerning the hetero identification of the victims by community members. Despite the control strategies employed by the traffickers, some victims were identified and reported by neighbors to competent authorities. This should be considered as it may be indicative that educational campaigns are having an effect by enhancing the victims' identification.

### KEYWORDS

Victim; human trafficking; exploitation; experience

Although Human Trafficking (HT) has a multiplicity of contours that depend, to a large extent, of its purposes and of the actions and characteristics of its agents (Weitzer, 2015), it's possible to identify the presence of relatively common dynamics in the literature. Thus, numerous sources (Couto, 2012; Hughes, 2000; Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015; Musto, 2009; UNODC, 2014, 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2011) conceptualize HT as a process which tends to involve various phases, such as recruitment, travel-transit, exploitation, and (re)integration.

The recruitment phase concerns the moment of contact with potential victims to persuade them and make them accept the proposals of the traffickers. Recruitment is a fundamental concept in the definition of HT and has been discussed in relation to individual and structural 'vulnerability' (Zimmerman et al., 2011). In most cases, these are based on deception, by using fraudulent promises of economically and socially appealing jobs (Fernandes et al., 2020; Perrin, 2010; Rosenblatt, 2014; UNODC, 2014, 2016) but may also consist of leisure proposals, marriage, or sports opportunities in another country or region (Siegel & de Blank, 2010). The proposal typically includes, in the light of the economic deprivation of the victims, the payment of all the expenses related to the trip and accommodation at the place of destination for an initial period, however the victim stays in debt with the promise of being paid as they receive the income from the promised activity (Couto & Fernandes, 2014; Weitzer, 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2011) which never happens. However, there are situations in which the recruitment strategy is guided not by deception,

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but by violence, like kidnapping, as well as others where families sell their children as a way of making some money (Hornor, 2015; Nagle, 2008). The literature reveals that the traffickers, whether men or women, are often persons known or close to the victim (e.g., family members, neighbors, friends, influential people of the community) that can act in the different stages of the process and have an imminent financial motivation for the involvement in the crime (UNODC, 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2011). They also refer that the recruitment can be carried out by legal means such as employment, travel, or marriage agencies, as well as through advertisements in the media, which reveals a more elaborate organizational structure (Couto & Fernandes, 2014; Siegel & de Blank, 2010; UNODC, 2014, 2016).

The second phase travel/transit concern the movement made by the victims and the traffickers, whether it's on or out of borders. The travel-transit stage begins after an individual agrees to or is forced to depart with a trafficker (whether he/she is aware of being trafficked or not). This stage may include one or multiple points of transit and ends when the individual arrives at the location of exploitation (Zimmerman et al., 2011). Although not all HT situations involve a cross-border action, the planning of the trip, and the control of variables related to the entry to the country of persons in foreign countries (e.g., travel documentation) are aspects that are addressed and that take a lot more planning associating increased risk and costs to the operations (Arhin, 2016; Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). Therefore, in this stage the victim may be accompanied by a recruiter, another person of the network, or may even travel alone or jointly with other victims. Usually, when there is a cross-border, the victim travels with visas tourists, students, or similar situations (Kangaspunta, 2015; UNODC, 2013); other times they are introduced illegally in another country through routes controlled by criminal associations, who use them for other illicit activities (Arhin, 2016; Hernandez & Rudolph, 2015). Transport can take place through various means, whether by land, air, or water, there is often a combination of these means to avoid detentions (Kangaspunta, 2003; Zimmerman et al., 2011). For those traveling illicitly, journeys can be arduous, even life-threatening, as trafficking agents aim to make maximum profit from each trip, willingly risking the lives of their "cargo" to avoid detection (Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007). The travel-transit stage is also the time when many trafficked persons begin to suspect or even discover that they have been deceived. Psychologically, the events that signal to the individual that he/she is in danger (such as appropriation of documents, confinement, or threats of rape) may be considered the "initial trauma" in what is likely to be a future chain of traumatizing events (Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015; Wilson & Butler, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2011).

The exploitation stage corresponds to the period in which the victims are subject to conditions of exploitation and control of their behaviors and movements. Commonly, it begins when they become aware of the situations in which they are involved, despite the involvement being voluntary or not. That is, despite a prior consent to, for example, work in the sex industry (often the case of HT for sexual exploitation – where women initially consent to sex work, but not under the conditions of slavery and total control of movements and liberty) (Gajic-Veljanoski & Stewart, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2011). These exploitations may include, for example, forced labor and debt bondage, sexual exploitation, slavery, with episodes of physical violence, psychological coercion or abuse, deprivation, and confinement. These abuses may be accompanied by threats against individuals and their family members (Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015). During this period, the victims are forced to work in an almost uninterrupted manner, in bad conditions

(e.g., poor meals, sleep, and rest) and without any of their income or with much lower than they produce, being the traffickers the safe keepers of the money. For victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation this phase usually involves the practice of daily sex with many clients (Rafferty, 2013; Wilson & Butler, 2014), often without any possibility of denying their will or of protecting themselves against risky situations to their health (e.g., infectious diseases) or violence (Muftić & Finn, 2013). In this phase, the traffickers often employ a various number of control strategies that aim to maintain the exploitation and prevent the victim to seek help. These mechanisms pass, for example, by the retention of personal documentation (like the passport); by the use of physical, psychological, and/or sexual violence or threats of violence to the victim or her family; deprivation or limitation of freedom of movement, a situation which ends in isolation (Couto & Fernandes, 2014; Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015; Kleemans & Smit, 2014; UNODC, 2014; 2016), inducing the victims to a situation of economic dependence through a system of debt (responsibility for paying heavy travel, food, and accommodation, as well as penalties for noncompliance with the traffickers' guidelines); by the threat to the authorities and/or their family; or for the abuse or assisted murder of other victims (Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015; Kangaspunta, 2003; Siegel & de Blank, 2010). At the same time, the high geographical mobility that these victims are often subject, the migratory irregularities in which they are often found, the lack of knowledge of their rights, lack of language skills, fear, and feelings of guilt and shame that they often "carry" are factors that contribute to the maintenance of victims in this situation and to worsening the impact of crime (Arhin, 2016; Hernandez & Rudolph, 2015; Nieuwenhuys & Pecoud, 2007; Zimmerman, 2003).

### ***Challenges to victim identification and accessing services***

In 2009, Logan, Walker, and Hunter published the results of a meta-analysis on a set of empirical reports published in the United States on HT concluding that there are four main factors that support the maintenance of these victims in a situation of imprisonment and, consequently, of greater resistance to intervention: first, the fear of retaliation by traffickers and in relation to the police (e.g., extradition); second, the lack of knowledge of alternative problem – in particular with regard to their rights as human beings and victims of crime and the services to which they may be provided. Thirdly, isolation, fueled by the lack of social support, ignorance of the language and other cultural differences; and, finally, the physical and psychological imprisonment of the victims by restricting their movements and intimidation by traffickers. Feelings of fear and shame play a crucial role in this process, the main control strategy used by traffickers (e.g., victims are controlled through psychological means and less through physical violence, a more efficient strategy). Fear has enormous potential to constrain the processes of reasoning and decision-making, making it impossible for the victim to realize a possible escape (Logan et al., 2009). Other factors that constrain victims are their own lack of self-perception as such, for shame of being labeled as "victims," for fear of stigmatization, and lack of knowledge about the support they can get from social institutions (Barnert et al., 2016; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018).

### ***Impact of trafficking in human beings***

Many authors (Abas et al., 2013; Hossain et al., 2010; Stanley et al., 2016; Tsutsumi et al., 2008; Zimmerman & Kiss, 2017) emphasize that symptomatic reactions of HT victims,

especially those who establish PTSD diagnostic, tend to be more serious than those studied in domestic violence, torture, or armed conflict, nevertheless, with similar characteristics (Roe-Sepowitz et al., 2014): all constitute situations with the potential to threaten the survival of the victims involve levels of chronic stress and a danger of permanent disability, as well as an inability of victims to predict or control events that may affect their health or safety (e.g., the time they sleep, the number of clients and conditions in which they perform the work). Some explanations for this situation state that food deprivation, sleep, and rest, affect the capacity of the victims to think clearly and dramatically depress the immune system and natural mechanisms of body defense against pain (Nguyen et al., 2017). The sensory deprivation to which victims are often subject (as a result of the excessive number of work hours; extremely high levels of physical and/or psychological violence exposed by traffickers; the use of narcotics, medication, and/or alcohol [coercive or not]) (Borschmann et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2017; Rosenblatt, 2014; Westwood et al., 2016) and, finally, the usual difficulty in accessing health services contributes to the worsening of this impact (Westwood et al., 2016). Whereas, often in situations of HT, the fight or flight instincts are repressed either because they are perceived as impossible or because, in practice, changing the exploitation may entail increased risks, victims may develop strategies (e.g., depersonalization, psychological alienation) to change psychologically the situation in order to make these circumstances less threatening, aversive, or intolerable (Hopper, 2017; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2018; Logan et al., 2009; Zimmerman, 2003). However, these same strategies may, ultimately, also have negative short-, medium-, or long-term effects on the physical and/or mental health of the victims.

According to Logan et al. (2009), the characteristic behavioral submission in victims of HT is invariably accompanied by cognitive changes, processes of distortion, and distraction or alienation from reality. In the first case, the victims focus on their energy in the survival and/or surveillance of situations that may threaten and, in the second, fantasize, or redirect their attention to distinct elements of the threat. Another mechanism is to rationalize the situation in order to make it more acceptable in terms of reducing their impact; victims will be able to minimize the damage caused by the situation, try to justify it (compare it with others who find themselves in situations even more accepting exploitation) or even nourishing the belief that such experience or sacrifice represents the promises made to their family, the contract they have established with the trafficker or that, simply, it is their destiny (Bick et al., 2017; Rosenblatt, 2014). In situations where these processes are not feasible, victims may develop a psychological alienation, which is expressed in the loss of autonomy and in the feeling of withdrawal from the efforts to maintain their identity as a human being, leading to the view of themselves as mere objects, as if they were prepared to do everything that is required of them, without worrying about these life-threatening activities (Butler et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2007; Wilson & Butler, 2014; Zimmerman et al., 2011). However, this state is independent of the severity of exploitation and the objective degree of threat to the victim's life (Ehlers et al., 2000). Mental health necessarily implies a congruence between emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, so when they are inconsistent, cognition attempts to reposition them to ensure some balance. However, the experience of HT naturally promotes this dissonance, which can greatly affect coping and decision-making skills, leading to higher and persistent psychological dysfunction. Thus, as advocated by Zimmerman (2003), Oram et al. (2012), and Westwood et al. (2016) the victim produces a series of attempts to rebalance his/her physiological and psychological condition

that allows him/her to recover some sense of control over his life but, in the end, it also contributes to this same dysfunction and depersonalization. Once again, these reactions are applicable in situations of absolute closure or marked restriction of freedom of movements and since the survival of the victims is objectively dependent on their explorers.

## **The study**

### ***Purpose of the study***

There are some studies on an international level (Cary et al., 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2011) and national level that report on the type and the dynamics of trafficking in persons and its causes (Couto & Fernandes, 2014; Fernandes et al., 2020), the aspects of criminal proceeding (Gonçalves et al., 2019; Matos et al., 2018) and the perceptions of the phenomena by different actors of the community and also within the support and justice system (Cunha et al., 2018; Gonçalves et al., 2019; Lourenço et al., 2018). Nevertheless, little is known internationally about the experience of the victims (Ghafoori & Taylor, 2017; Helfferich et al., 2011) and there are no studies in the national context that access this population. The purpose of this study is to analyze the victims' experiences and to identify the characteristics of the exploitation by HT in Portugal, the barriers that prevent help seeking and also, the barriers the victims face when they try to leave. Survivors of this type of crime who are willing to share their stories are invaluable resources to further expand our knowledge of this extremely vulnerable population.

### **Research questions**

The emphasis of the research questions was to focus on the victimization experience and to identify the characteristics of the exploitation by HT in Portugal, the barriers that prevent help seeking and also, the barriers the victims face when they try to leave the exploitation. Therefore, the primary research question was, "What can be learned from the lived experiences of men and woman who successfully exited human trafficking exploitation?" Secondary question included:

- (1) How was the experience of exploitation?
- (2) How the recruitment happened (transportation and routes)?
- (3) How was the detection and identification of the victim?
- (4) What were the challenges and barriers to help seeking? And;
- (5) What are the feelings associated with the experience?

### ***Portuguese context***

The interest in studying HT in Portugal has been increasing since it became an independent crime in 2007. It started by analyzing and characterizing the dynamics, explanatory factors, and geographic contexts and analyzing the processes of assistance and protection and prevention (Couto, 2012; Couto & Fernandes, 2014; Fernandes et al., 2020). The subject of combating and suppressing this crime (Matos et al., 2018, 2019) the study of perceptions about HT on different populations (Cunha et al., 2018; Fernandes et al., 2020; Gonçalves

et al., 2019; Lourenço et al., 2018), is the main focus on the last years. Despite that, it is even more certain that the studies with victims are extremely limited, given the great difficulty in directly accessing these actors (Couto & Fernandes, 2014).

Portugal is simultaneously a country of origin, transit, and destination of HT. In the year of 2015, there were identified 193 presumed victims of HT, comparing to the year 2016 when were identified 264 presumed victims of HT. So, there is an observed increase in the total number of victims (variation of 36.8%), influenced by the growth of registrations in Portugal (with a variation of 68.8%) due to three major incidents with more than 20 victims associated with each (Ministério da Administração Interna [MAI], Observatório do Tráfico de Seres Humanos [OTSH], 2016, 2017). Also, in 2015, were confirmed 32 victims of HT (30 of them were identified in Portugal), while in 2016 the number rose to 118 victims of HT (108 were identified in Portugal and 10 in a foreign country; Ministério da Administração Interna [MAI], Observatório do Tráfico de Seres Humanos [OTSH], 2016, 2017). The countries of origin of the victims are dispersed by four continents, Europe (Portugal, Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine), Asia (Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines), Africa (Nigeria and other countries), and South America (Brazil and Other countries;) (OTSH, 2017). Whilst examining the types of exploitation that occurred in Portugal, there is still a clear representation of (presumed) trafficking for labor exploitation purposes. This is indicated by the fact that out of the 108 confirmed victims, 101 (93%) were victims of labor exploitation in the agricultural sector, where most of the victims are male (OTSH, 2017). According to official data in 2016, from 79 (presumed) victims that received medical or psychological assistance, there were 69 (presumed) victims that were given shelter, 33 (presumed) victims that received legal assistance, 33 (presumed) victims were assisted with education and 23 (presumed) victims were reintegrated in the labor market. Moreover, 31 (presumed) victims were given residence authorization and 25 were aided to return to their home countries (OTSH, 2016). Depending on the needs presented, each victim may have received one or more types of support at the same time.

## Methods

This study was approved by the Ethics Subcommittee for Social and Human Sciences under the code SECSH 038/2016. APA ethical standards were followed in the conduct of this study alongside with the fundamental principles of intervention of WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Woman, produced by the Health Policy Unit, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine with the support from the Daphne Program of the European Commission and the World Health Organization (Zimmerman & Watts, 2003).

The methodology and research design selected for this qualitative study included semi-structured interviews and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase process set out by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## Theoretical framework

We frame our investigation in the context of Applied Victimology, anchored in the Critical Victimology. We are trying to analyze the social context in which issues related to



victimology interwoven with questions of policy response and service delivery to victims of crime, from a human rights perspective (Walklate, 2011). We used a constructivist grounded theory. After each interview, codes and categories were created during analysis and helped to choose the next informant, and the guide was modified to explore related topics and elaborate categories. A constant comparative analysis, both within an interview and between interviews. Next focused coding was used in which most significant line-by-line codes were used.

## **Analysis**

The interviews were transcribed by the first author (seven interviews) and two research collaborators (two interviews each), educated and trained for the fact. The transcription of the interviews was done accordingly with the guidelines of Azevedo et al. (2017). The transition scheme was linear, and the type of transcription was naturalized in order to correspond to the thorough transcription of what was said and how it was said. This type of transcriptions advocates the preservation of the different elements of the interview other than the verbal content (such as non-verbal language, contextual aspects, and the interaction between interviewer and interviewee – or third parties involved).

Data were coded by the first author following thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), using the QSR International NVivo 10 Software. The interviews were analyzed based on the emerging themes, using an inclusive criterion (as each theme could be included in more than one category). An initial coding grid was used to guide the initial coding's, which were later refined and added as inductive codes emerged. The final coding grid includes core categories, subdivided by secondary and more ideographic categories. Themes emerged from the data and interpretative work was necessary to identify them. To ensure the validity and credibility of the results, different strategies were adopted, including constant comparative analysis of the data and a dense description of the meanings found therein, further identified in the results section by a detailed presentation and illustration of each category with excerpts of the participants' speech. Theoretical saturation was reached after seven interviews; after that we conducted another two interviews to ensure that there was no novelty in the data. Additionally, an independent coder (the second author) analyzed 40% of the interviews, randomly assigned, to ensure data reliability. After independent review by a co-coder, the fidelity rate was calculated using Vala's (1986) formula:  $F = 2(C1, 2)/C1 + C2$ . The number of agreements between the codifiers was divided by the total categorizations performed by each:  $2(617)/634 + 645 = 0.96$ . The result was a fidelity rate of 0.96, which represents an excellent level of agreement (Martins & Machado, 2006), allowing confidence in the results obtained. Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved by the coders by consensus. A senior researcher (third author) audited the coding process.

## **Procedure**

Individuals that consented to be participants were interviewed individually face-to-face. Interviews were semi-structured and were anticipated to last approximately 60 to 90 minutes. The researcher who selected the participants for the study did not have any prior contact or knowledge of the participants, safeguarding the possibility of coercion or undue



influence for participation in the study. The data collection took place between May and November of 2017. The interviews took place in the shelters or other place provided by the shelter institution, whereupon the researcher made sure to mobilize the necessary resources to stabilize possible emotional discomforts, since the shelter have at their disposal service providers who are familiar with the medical and/or psychological assessment of the participant. The interviews were audio recorded for later analysis. The recordings were used exclusively for the purpose of this study.

### **Participants**

For the purpose of this study, a total of the 23 agencies, governmental and non-governmental and three shelters for HT victims', dispersed throughout the mainland Portugal, that are part of the Network for Support and Protection of Victims of Trafficking, were contacted in order to publicize the study with the victims. It's a convenience sample, since the study doesn't have the pretense of representation.

### **Selection criteria**

The inclusion criteria were:

- (a) being a victim or presumed victim of HT;
- (b) to be at least 18 years old, with no maximum age limit;
- (c) having undergone some type of exploitation (sexual, labor, extraction of organs, illegal adoption, begging, slavery, and/or exploitation of other criminal activities);
- (d) having received support by the network;
- (e) being able to communicate in one of these languages: Portuguese, English, Spanish, or French.

There are exclusion criteria (e.g., disabilities) defined at the outset. It was incumbent upon the institution, the respective directors, to inform the researcher in advance of any situation that it deems relevant, considering the inclusion criteria and participation procedures. There was no prior screening of participants by completing tests, interviews, and/or other means of diagnosis in the study.

### **Consent**

During the face-to-face interview, the primary researcher thoroughly explained what proposed research entailed, its potential benefits, and any risks to the participant. The participants were also allowed to ask any questions and/or clarification of anything that might not have been understood. Written consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants (Table 1).

## **Results**

### **Participants**

The study sample is a clinical-forensic one, it follows from the fact that the victims come from clinical (medical support) and forensic settings (involvement with the judicial process)

**Table 1.** Socio demographic data of the participants.

ID	Social Support c)	Marital Status	Form of exploitation	Level of education c)	Age	Initial identification as a victim	Social status c)	Number of children	sex	Professional situation c)	Duration of Support	Type of Trafficking	Victimization experiences d)
1	Living alone	Divorced	Labor	1° grade	57	Hetero identification	Socially integrated	2	Male	Unemployed (looking for a job)	+ than 6 months	Domestic and International	one
2		Single		2° grade	49	Self-identification	Homeless	0	Male			Domestic	More than one
3		Single		No education	63	Self-identification	Homeless	0	Male			Domestic and International	One
4		Married		1° grade	55	Hetero identification	Socially integrated	2	Male		Until 6 months	Domestic	One
5		Single		1° grade	42	Self-identification	Socially integrated	3	Female		+ than 6 months	Domestic	One
6		Divorced		2° grade	62	Self-identification	Socially integrated	1	Female		+ than 6 months	International	one
7		Single		1° grade	64	Hetero identification	Homeless	0	Male		Until 6 months	Domestic	More than one
8		Divorced		1° grade	65	Hetero identification	Homeless	2	Male		+ than 6 months	Domestic	More than one
9	Nuclear Family	Married		1° grade	50	Hetero identification	Socially integrated	1	Male		6 months	Domestic	one

Data of the participants

<sup>a</sup>At time of recruitment

<sup>b</sup>This victimization experience refers to the fact that the participant mentioned being victim of exploitation more than once. It is merely the participant's perception of his own victimization experiences

and are HT victims. We did not aim to constitute a representative sample of the group of Portuguese victims, we aimed to access their speeches, either because it allowed us to understand and access their experience as a victim and allowed us for a greater enrichment of the understanding of HT from their idiosyncrasies. Hence, nine volunteered adult sheltered victims of both sexes – (two females and seven males), ages between 42 and 67 years ( $M = 56.67$ ;  $SD = 8.411$ ) participated in this study.

### **Participant profile**

**ID1** was a 57 years old man. Living alone, socially integrated, at the time of the recruitment. Was divorced with two children. He had 1<sup>st</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. He was recruited for labor exploitation, both domestic and international. He reported being victim of human trafficking only once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim as rescue was hetero identification and was receiving support for about more than 6 months.

**ID2** was a 49 years old man. Living alone, homeless, at the time of the recruitment. Was single with no children. He had 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. He was recruited for labor and domestic exploitation. He reported being victim of human trafficking more than once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was self-identification and was receiving support for about more than 6 months.

**ID3** was a 63 years old man. Living alone, homeless, at the time of the recruitment. Was single with no children. He had no education and was unemployed, looking for a job. He was recruited for labor exploitation, both domestic and international. He reported being victim of human trafficking once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was self-identification and was receiving support for about more than 6 months.

**ID4** was a 55 years old man. Living alone, socially integrated, at the time of the recruitment. Was married with two children. He had 1<sup>st</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. He was recruited for labor and domestic exploitation. He reported being victim of human trafficking once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was hetero-identification and was receiving support for about 6 months.

**ID5** was a 42 years old woman. Living alone, socially integrated, at the time of the recruitment. Was single with three children. She had 1<sup>st</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. She was recruited for labor and domestic exploitation. She reported being victim of human trafficking once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was self-identification and was receiving support for more than 6 months.

**ID6** was a 62 years old woman. Living alone, socially integrated, at the time of the recruitment. Was divorced with one child. She had 2<sup>nd</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. She was recruited for labor exploitation in Spain. She reported being victim of human trafficking once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was hetero-identification and was receiving support for about 6 months.

**ID7** was a 64 years old man. Living alone, homeless, at the time of the recruitment. Was single with no children. He had 1<sup>st</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. He was recruited for labor and domestic exploitation. He reported being victim of human trafficking more than once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was hetero-identification and was receiving support for about 6 months.

**ID8** was a 65 years old man. Living alone, homeless, at the time of the recruitment. Was divorced with two children. He had 1<sup>st</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. He was recruited for labor and domestic exploitation. He reported being victim of human trafficking more than once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was hetero-identification and was receiving support for about 6 months.

**ID8** was a 50 years old man. Living with nuclear family, socially integrated, at the time of the recruitment. Was married with one child. He had 1<sup>st</sup> grade of education and was unemployed, looking for a job. He was recruited for labor and domestic exploitation. He reported being victim of human trafficking once (it is merely the participant's time perception of his own experience). The initial identification as a victim and rescue was hetero-identification and was receiving support for more than 6 months.

### **Emerging themes**

We need to report that the theme and respective sub-themes should not be interpreted as independent of each other, instead, they are related and mutually dependent. Most of the participants reported a range of characteristics representing the Dynamics of Trafficking in Human Beings. We have all nine participants, with 634 references in this theme. From this theme emerged the following sub-themes: recruitment; exploitation; detection and identification.

## **Dynamics of trafficking in human beings**

### **Recruitment**

The recruitment is mentioned by the participants in relationship with their living conditions and difficulties at the time. They mention how the necessity for an opportunity was a relevant factor to accept the false employment proposals that were presented. Some of them had a previous relationship with the recruiter and later the exploiter (with previous labor relationships that did not raised "red flags").

### **Transportation/routes**

Another sub-theme that emerged with eight participants and 25 references were the forms of transportation taken to the place of exploitation and even the different routes that took place under the time of recruitment and exploitation, when the participant reveals that they move from place to place in order to work under different conditions. The forms of transportation are by land, mainly using private means of transportation (cars, vans) in order to evade detection, as ID7 mentioned "(...) *I went with him in the van.*"

The participants were recruited in Portugal, and exploited in the country, and some of them were recruited in Portugal and in Spain, were they frequently moved around to

different exploitation sites. Most of them that were exploited domestic and internationally, started the exploitation in Portugal, where they were recruited.

### **Vulnerability**

The participants reported structural vulnerabilities (e.g., unemployment and professional instability) as the major motives to accept the offer that was presented. Most of them were living alone, without social or family support, as some of them were inclusive homeless or almost homeless from at the time of the recruitment. The low level of education was mentioned also as a factor that impelled them to unqualified jobs (like those in the agriculture industry). The lack of knowledge on the subject was also a factor that was denoted from the discourse, because the participants mentioned that the fact, they did not know anything about the subject made them prone to victimization, by accepting without knowing the possible outcomes. There are references that mentioned the recruitment process to be very fast and without proper measure of what can come out of the proposal that it was being presented. We can see that through the discourse of ID6, when after leaving a legitimate job in Spain, was approached by some stranger and accepted immediately the job offer that was presented, without a proper reflection on the conditions; *“So I came and went to catch the train in Spain, to come here [Portugal]. When I got to the station, I met a gentleman who asks me if I want work. And I ask him, ‘What for?’ And he says to me, ‘Oh, it’s in agriculture.’ I say, ‘All right, so how much do you pay?’; [he said] it seems that it was € 25 daily, and I provide bed and food. And I said, ‘Okay then.’ And I went.”*

### **Trafficker portrayal and relationship with the victim**

The trafficker was only known to two of the participants; for the other seven it was someone unknown, with several references of a gypsy community as the main exploiters, being here in Portugal or in Spain, with organized networks of exploitation. There were also mentions of individual initiatives of exploitation perpetrated by couples (husband and wife) in private lands. When the recruiter and exploiter are known, the victim had a previous labor relationship with them that did not raise any red flag because everything was legal (the labor contract, the work, and payments).

### **False employment proposals**

All the participants were lured to the exploitation with job offers that turned out to be false. They state that clearly in the discourse. They mentioned that the job offer was too good to be true, but at the time it was an attractive opportunity to turn life and start over. *“They promised work. They promised everything . . . home, food . . . everything that was good”* (ID1).

After accepting the job offer and getting to the place of destination, they realized that after all it would not be as good as what they had promised them, and the participants felt cheated, unable to go back or out of that situation, due to the forms of control exercised by the trafficker: *“But when we got there, nothing was as he said at all . . . not even if we wanted to go away, we could not leave . . . we were tied, they beat us . . . there was no chance no escape . . .”*; *“I felt cheated”* (ID1).

## Exploitation

All nine participants focused on the exploitation aspect of HT, with 362 references to this sub-theme. They enhanced the control strategies, specifying different means of control that they suffered during their experience of exploitation.

### Control of movements

The means of control are wide-ranging, from control of movements, isolation, physical violence, fear, retention of ID, financial control, health care deprivation, and psychological/verbal violence. In addition to being diversified, the control strategies were exercised cumulatively, so as to avoid the escape of the victim and prevent a possible request for help, as we can see through the highlight's; *"they did not let us talk to them ... always controlled.* (ID1); *"Go to the doctor, no! Even if I wanted to ... they had to go with me ... they had my ID ... "* (ID4).

Or even if the participant was able to go to the doctor, or to another public service, he was controlled in an extent that the request for help was extremely difficult to do, *"They went with me ... she [exploiter] had to go ahead and take the ID ... and give the person who was at the counter, for example. And then she kept the ID again."* (ID4).

### Conditions

The participants detailed that the conditions of exploitation were inhuman, without sanitary conditions, without a place to live in dignity; *"No conditions, so it rained as much as on the street ... "* (ID7); where they went hungry *"I was often hungry."* (ID3), cold and lived in isolation or constant pressure. The participant ID1 reported the conditions when he arrived at the destination place; *"When I got there, they immediately put me in an old shack, without a mattress, to sleep with my feet on the floor or in one of those plastic panels."* The same participant even reported to seek clothes in social institutions and in clothes containers in order to have something decent to wear. Even the meals, when there was a place and time to take them, were apart from the exploiter or other people, as ID3 stated; *"I never ate with them at ... I never ate with them at the table. Never! They were disgusted by us."*

Being always forced to undertake labor tasks, which had no time to start or time to finish, having an undefined schedule at the mercy of the explorer's will as ID5 reported *"It was to wake up ... work, work, work, until the evening."*

### Barriers to help seeking

The barriers to help seeking are associated with the control strategies, described above regarding health care deprivation, physical and psychological abuse and isolation. *"So I was going to run away to where?!"* (ID7) and *"I did not run away because I had nowhere to go."* (ID8).

### Type of exploitation

All the nine participants suffered labor exploitation, in the area of construction and agriculture.

### **Dehumanization of the victim**

Seven participants reported behaviors that indicated a dehumanization of the victim by the exploiter. We have 28 references on this sub-theme. Alongside with the bad living conditions and control methods used, the participant was treated as an animal, as property that was possessed by the explorer for his will and use. As a merchandise, a human commodity. We can see through the extract of ID8 that state; *“they would not take me to a barber to cut hair, I had (hummm), big hair, had very big beard . . . ”* .

### **Duration of exploitation**

The duration of exploitation can vary from months to years. It was established subjectively by the participants (and not confronted with the time of exploitation referred in their court and service provider files). From the perspective of the participants the exploitation had a varied time duration, from *“5 or 7 months.”* (ID5), to *“10 year, I think.”* (ID1).

### **Attempted escape**

Four participants reported and actively attempted of escape. From those, two were successful and the other two weren't. Accordingly, the ID1 reported that he tried to escape as soon as he saw the conditions at the destination place, but it was too late to ask for help, because he was assaulted physical and psychologically for trying to leave, which led to a sense of helplessness that prevented him from seeking help another time. *“It was at the beginning when I tried to escape there, they tied me up and hit me with a stick they had . . . there in a tiny little house, they hit us . . . they gave me a long beating. I've been three days . . . three days there, closed! . . . there was nothing I could do!”*

Also, the participant ID6 tried to escape and it was successful, but not at the first time. When she was successful, she reached to the police and was rescued from the exploitation. ID5 reported being assisted by a medical doctor and exercised the right to do so unaccompanied, so the exploiter had no option unless to wait in the waiting room. As soon as she found herself in the presence of the doctor, she exposed her situation and all the protocols were activated and she only left the medical facility to go to a shelter. *“I had a medical appointment. And he had to take me to that appointment. But I told him I did not want his presence in the doctors' office. He [the exploiter] was very angry! That he wanted to come in with me and I said no.; He was very angry, very angry, but he left me, and I asked for help. (...) From there the raids began. They started calling the social worker, they started calling . . . and I did not leave the health center anymore. (...) They hid me there. He [the exploiter] was looking for me, if I was checked out or not, but they [assistant staff] said they did not know. (...) [from the medical center] I went to sleep for another house and then I came here.”*

### **Detection and identification**

The detection and identification of the victims' theme and sub-theme include verbalizations of the aspects between signalization (by proper authorities) and the rescue of the victim from the exploitation by the authorities. In this sub-theme the participants mentioned the actions that they took to protect themselves and the thoughts and feelings that occurred during that time. The identification was made mainly through hetero-identification (when



someone close to the victim – a neighbor- or even someone unknown to the victim made a complaint to the authorities).

Despite several seeds of doubt, which means knowing that something was not right, that they should not be treated like that, that they should have rights that were not being fulfilled, many of the participants did not acknowledged themselves as victims. Consequently, couldn't ask for help. Along with this idea, they revealed the feeling of guilt for being in the trafficking situation, which only reinforced the feeling of helplessness and made the victim think that he/she has no right to ask for help because he/she is in that situation at his own will.

### ***Between signalization and rescue***

The paths that the victim experiences between the signalization, by proper authorities, and the rescue from the exploitation, take a huge amount of time. The authorities often visited the campsites where the participants were being exploited, but did nothing to remove them from that situation, because the participants couldn't ask for help and were afraid of what the traffickers would do. But after those times the police came again and removed the participant to the police station where he felt comfortable to talk at will and told about his exploitation. ID1 said that he was able to speak freely because the police put him at ease and gave him aid to leave the exploitation.

There were participants that mentioned to live under exploitation and abuse for more than 9 months, since the police or other authorities talked with them and had them identified. That happened in order to gather evidence to prosecute and to present evidence in court. ID4 mentioned that experience. During the time, between the identification and the rescue from the exploitation, the participant took measures to ensure his safety, and that the trafficker did not had any knowledge that he had talked with the police.

### ***Hetero identification***

Six of the participants were able to leave the exploitation because there was someone who reported that situation to the proper authorities. Sometimes the complaint is made by someone who lives close to the victim, like a neighbor, who does not see that situation as normal, and seeks help. In the case of ID4, he often worked for other people from his neighborhood, but he was not paid directly, so that caused a red flag. *"The owner of the job said, "If you're the one working, why is he [the exploiter] entitled to your money?"* After that the neighbor was suspicious and one time, after seeing that ID4 was beaten, acted, and reported to the police.

### ***Seeds of doubt***

Despite knowing that something was not right; that there were rights that were not being held and despite the physical and psychological violence suffered, the control exercised over them, the majority participants do not recognize themselves as victims of HT. In fact, they do not recognize themselves as victims of any crime.

### ***Feeling of guilt***

The guilty experienced was also an element that constraint the help seeking of the victim and that affect the participant on their own victimization. Expressions like *"I was dumb to accept the proposal."*, reveal the victim blaming presented. ID6 revealed that he saw the victimization as his own fault, *"Ah! I blamed myself very, very much!"* ID8 mentioned that

the fact that he had accepted the proposal was as if he was voluntarily going to his death, “*The worst that I have been through. With my own feet, walking to my own death.*”

### **Self-identification**

Only two participants verbalized their self-identification as a crime victim and acted actively to seek help. It was the self-identification that engaged them in help-seeking behaviors wherever it took, because they knew they were being exploited.

### **Discussion**

The recruitment is aimed at vulnerable people, as various studies illustrate this idea (Cole & Sprang, 2015; Huang, 2017; Walklate, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2011). All the participants were unemployed, looking for job opportunities. Four of them were homeless and saw in the job proposal a way to change their lives. This goes along with the literature that states the traffickers aim for the most vulnerable person, in order to achieve their goal (Zimmerman et al., 2011). In the cases presented by the participants, situations of socioeconomic precariousness or vulnerability in terms of family history, although, as a background, there was a search for better opportunities to “fulfill the dream” on a more personal and/or professional level. Thus, in these specific cases, the balancing of the *pull* and *push factors* are essential to understand this dynamic. In Portugal the trafficking for labor exploitation has a greater expression, and as stated by Couto (2012), it could be necessary to assess if the general worsening of the conditions of life that has been registered in the last few years – constituting macro social scenarios structurally – are more unfavorable to recruitment and exploitation (e.g., greater percentage of females in trafficking for the purposes of labor exploitation). These considerations support the need to analyze the phenomenon of trafficking through a multidimensional and intersectional grid (Hughes, 2014; Kemp & Raijman, 2014; Kempadoo, 2015; Rosenblatt, 2014) particularly in the which concerns the profile of the victims and the vulnerability factors, insofar as it postulates that the intersection of the dimensions of sex, age, ethnicity/nationality and class, places women, young people, and immigrants, belonging to ethnic minorities and coming from economically depleted or dominated by social contrasts (e.g., with high rates of poverty and precariousness labor market) (Carbado et al., 2013) in a particular vulnerable position for discrimination, violence, and exploitation. Vulnerability thus exceeds political, economic, and socio-cultural forces, which has effects on various axes of the identity of the victims and constrain, and weaken them in their options (UNODC, 2013; Walklate, 2011).

The routes taken by the recruiters and exploiters are both domestic and international. With years of exploitation and movement between countries (Portugal and Spain) not detected by the proper authorities (police and social services). How can we better identify these routes and the victims that travel between them? What can be improved in the authorities, so they can better identify the actors of this crime (both recruiter, exploiter, and/or victim)? It is necessary to study the routes that appear at the national and international level, so we can better prevent, identify, and combat this crime. Only by doing a multidisciplinary research (policies, investigative services, social services, and other agencies), we can better fight this crime and attend its victims’. The routes established are sometimes camouflaged as legal routes and so not identified as criminal networks which difficult the identification (Cho, 2015; Mahmoud & Trebesch, 2010; Van der Leun & Van

Schijndel, 2016). The fact that the recruitment and exploitation were domestic, the movement is somehow more difficult to identify because it can be seen as a normal movement between communities or places (Bishop et al., 2013; Mahmoud & Trebesch, 2010; Wheaton et al., 2010).

The diversified control strategies that the participants reveal in their discourses proved to be an effective way to prevent the help seeking of the victim. The isolation, the use of threat, physical and psychological violence, and the constant surveillance prevented the victims to seek help despite being in their home country where they know the language and could reach for help. This goes accordingly to the literature (Bick et al., 2017; Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015; Meyers, 2016; Oram et al., 2012) where the control methods created in the participants a sense of captivity and helplessness that prevents them from seeking help. The diverse means of control, alongside with the inhumane conditions of the exploitation and the dehumanization of the victim by the traffickers, by treating the victim as human commodity or even an animal, lead the participants to experience feelings of helplessness that compel them to remain in the exploitative situation. Even when the participant made an escape attempt (e.g., run), the controls strategies employed by the trafficker (psychical and psychological violence) led to feelings of helplessness and withdrawal of the participants to never attempt to escape again (Le et al., 2018; Meyers, 2016; Wilson & Butler, 2014).

For the two victims who reached for help, the medical service providers and the police were able to extract immediately the victim from the exploitative situation and were able to provide the support. Greenbaum (2016) stated that the health care provider may, nonetheless, offer services and strategies aimed at harm reduction, even if a true exit from the exploitation is not feasible at the time of the medical visit. Also, a compassionate, nonjudgmental interaction with a health provider may ultimately lead a victim to trust the next provider and be willing to accept services at that time. This crime is a global problem, that demands an active response from the health care sector on identifying the victims of this crime when they seek medical attention (Baldwin et al., 2011; Macias-Konstantopoulos, 2016; Macias Konstantopoulos et al., 2013). However, the help seeking is unpredictable. We can see by the experiences of those two participants who tried to escape and weren't successful.

Despite knowing that something is not "quite right", the victim does not see herself as such (as a crime victim), which prevents the help seeking and the rescue from the exploitative situation. Alongside with the structural vulnerabilities of the victim, this lack of knowledge, the feeling of guilt (experienced by some participants) may suppress any desire or will to active reach for help, because the victim may see their exploitative situation and subsequent victimization as a punishment for their bad judgment, alongside with their incapacity to provide for their family (Hemmings et al., 2016; Jordan et al., 2013; Meyers, 2016; Zimmerman et al., 2011). The predominant hetero-identification, by the neighbor or other unknown person, potentially demonstrates that the informative campaigns had high value and relevance in providing public information/knowledge on this crime and in facilitating the identification of potential victims that are exploited in isolated areas, as like the victims exploited in the agricultural panorama in Portugal (Barrick et al., 2014; Bishop et al., 2013; Fernandes et al., 2020; O'Brien, 2016).

There were episodes when the time between the identification of the victim by the police and the extraction of the victim from the exploitative situation reached almost one year. Between the detection, identification, and extraction of the victim is necessary to use a better

approach and the improvement of the referral system, together with the way in which the police act to gather evidence of the crime is necessary. The victim remained in the exploitative situation despite being identified as a “presumed” victim and that is an ethical issue, but most of all it raises questions of “human rights”. The victim needed to undertake preventive and security measures, to defend herself for the harm of being discovered that s/he collaborated with the authorities. It’s necessary to access this issue and understand how the police investigation works so we can better serve the needs of security of the victim. Additional steps will need to be taken to rescue the victim as soon as possible from the moment of identification as a potential HT victim, to break the cycle of violence. Matos et al. (2019) clarified that the police has difficulty in rescuing victims earlier, because of the difficulty in collecting evidence later. They also mention that in Portugal the law foresees for the collaboration of the victim as an essential element to convict prosecution of traffickers, which may have contributed to how the police acted in these cases. Despite the HT crime being so difficult to gather court evidence of a crime, to prove and to prosecute, especially in Portugal we can’t depend on the victim to gather evidence. We need to gather that evidence from other sources (Farrell et al., 2012, 2014; Verhoeven & van Gestel, 2011) or by other means so we can better serve and protect the victim that is under exploitation.

## Limitations

The main objective of this study was to access to national and international HT victims’ experiences in Portugal. Nevertheless, the participants were voluntarily Portuguese nationals, that suffered from labor exploitation and were living in shelter. It is important to point out the main limitations of this study, particularly the difficulty in having direct access to victims (whether for security reasons or for the possible existence of some reluctance on the part of organizations to allow access to information on the intervention processes implemented in the absence of any control by institutional actors) (Brunovskis & Surtees, 2010; Couto, 2012; Weitzer, 2012). Although it was not intended to achieve a representative sample of the victims identified or confirmed in the national territory and of having been made multiple contacts in order to recruit a more substantial sample, the number of participants is small and thus prevent any generalizable conclusion. We also need to address the possibility that, in the process of selecting the participants, there has been some bias, that is, of the victims who were proposed to be interviewed by the institution, because in their view, the victim selected could be the one with more positive contributions in and are therefore more likely to be able to express their experience.

## Conclusion and practical implications

These findings are valuable, not only because of the lack of previous research with these populations, but also because they shed light on a subject that is sensitive and that requires more research. This work is also helpful because it can influence future policies and even practices with all those who contact with the victim of HT (service providers, police, and even courts), on how to deal with the victim upon identification and exit of the exploitative situation. To be able to better understand their fears and their experiences, in order to provide a better support (both social, medical, and/or legal). This work can also influence policy decisions, regarding the use of the testimony of the victim as a major proof for court;

it can inform new campaigns toward information and prevention to potentiate the number of identifications of the victims. Although our study was exploratory, it clearly addresses the need for more studies to examine the differences between different types of exploitation in the victimization by HT on a broad spectrum. HT is a criminal form of exploitation and abuse that can have a major impact (psychical, psychological, sexual, social, cultural) on its victim's and for that the identification of this crime is crucial. Identifying the victims that are under exploitation can be a huge challenge but is essential that the community, the law enforcement, police and other important organizations are aware of its dynamics and changes. It is essential to establish of a clearer referral pathway, contact, and information sharing protocols with other relevant agencies, in order to suppress the difficulties that were identified as much as possible. There were institutions that did not contribute to this investigation. Despite the support of the national rapporteur of trafficking in persons on the authorization and dissemination of this study. This issue needs to be addressed and there is a necessity to strengthen the collaboration between diverse social, medical, legal entities and the academic field, to gather and improve data on this topic, with view to field application. Doing so, both sides, academic, and community can succeed against this crime.

One of the challenges identified was the lack of knowledge of the victim about their rights. Improve victims' understanding of the criminal justice process to enhance their cooperation with law enforcement are essentials to identifying the victim and suppressing this crime (Matos et al., 2018, 2019).

These recommendations and suggestions for future research aim to serve as a trigger for generating ideas and discussion on how to better serve human trafficking victims and how to improve the existing network in Portugal, so we can be sure that the current and future needs of the victims are being addressed.

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