Special Issue – Family and Community

Editorial: The Embeddedness of Human Trafficking within Family and Community

Thematic Articles

Social-Climbing Projects of Families in the Context of Human Trafficking from Nigeria to France

Enduring Abuse for the Sake of Remittance: The sacrifices of trafficking victims

Ethiopian Domestic Workers and Exploitative Labour in the Middle East: The role of social networks and gender in migration decisions

Understanding Albanian Culture of Migration: The role of the family in precarious journeys and human trafficking

The Importance of the Family Environment of Trafficking Victims in Peru, Before and After Exploitation

Experiences of Families Separated across Borders Following Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Forced Marriage and Family Relationships

Short Articles

The Family as a Protective Factor: Economic considerations of Bangladeshi labour trafficking survivors

anti trafficking. review

ANTI-TRAFFICKING REVIEW

Special Issue
FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

ANTI-TRAFFICKING REVIEW

Issue 24, April 2025

Editorial: The Embeddedness of Human Trafficking within Family and Community

Nerida Veale

Abstract

Family and community play varied and important roles in facilitating human trafficking and helping victim-survivors recover from it. Despite this, many trafficking studies are individualistic in nature and do not consider the broader positioning of victim-survivors within complex social, family, and community structures. The discussion in this Editorial to a special issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review* provides an overview of the myriads of ways that family and community are central to trafficking. From the recruitment stage through to the recovery stage, the role of family in trafficking cannot be overlooked. In addition, trafficking has such a profound impact on family members, and in particular dependant children, that they should also be considered victims of this crime. The aim of this Editorial is to demonstrate that human trafficking is embedded within family and community and cannot be understood without studying the relational components that define it. It argues that to effectively respond to trafficking, the intergenerational impacts must be considered and holistic family-centric responses developed.

Introduction

Discourse, research, policy, and support strategies relating to human trafficking are often highly individualised. When human trafficking is framed through criminal justice imperatives, the people involved become individuated, divided into neat categories of 'the offender' and 'the victim'. References to connections or groups are often only used to refer to 'criminal networks' or an abstract notion of the 'community' to which victim-survivors must be promptly returned. Such discourses render the complex web of relationships which underpin our lives obsolete and remove individuals from the rich context of their social and cultural environments. Family, community, and interpersonal connections are central to the

human experience. They are also central to trafficking. The use and manipulation of relational bonds often lie at the heart of exploitation, meaning that trafficking is inherently embedded within family and community.

The articles in this special issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review* broaden the focus of much trafficking literature, moving away from an individualised perspective and towards a contextualised understanding of the role of family and community at each stage of the trafficking process. This Editorial provides a brief, introductory overview of the spectrum of roles families play in trafficking, from facilitating the trafficking process to motivating individuals to migrate and shaping victim-survivors' recovery. The impetus for this special issue came from research I conducted in Australia, which explored the experiences of victim-survivors with dependant children and family. From listening to the perspectives of victim-survivors and service providers in this research, it became very clear that families were a fundamental part of trafficking and integral to victim-survivors' recovery. Often, family members experienced such trauma themselves that they should have also been considered victims of trafficking. Yet it also became apparent that this perspective is not supported by most policies and practices that take a highly individualised focus to the problem. To understand the complex dynamics of trafficking, including why and how it happens, and how to best respond, we must take a collectivist approach that repositions family and community at the centre. By exploring families as traffickers, facilitators, protective and supportive forces, and as victims themselves, this Editorial, and the articles in this special issue, provide the first step towards embedding trafficking research within the family.

Families as Traffickers

A common myth that shapes popular trafficking narratives is that offenders are unknown to their victims and operate as part of sophisticated international criminal networks.[1] However, as the descriptions of trafficking in this special issue highlight, multiple actors play a role in the trafficking process, and family members are often central. A growing body of research is recognising that a

---

1 K Raby and N Chazal, 'The Myth of the "Ideal Offender": Challenging Persistent Human Trafficking Stereotypes through Emerging Australian Cases', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 18, 2022, pp. 13–32, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222182; E O'Brien, 'Human Trafficking Heroes and Villains: Representing the Problem in Anti-trafficking Awareness Campaigns', *Social and Legal Studies*, vol. 25, issue 2, 2015, pp. 205–224, https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663915593410.

significant proportion of trafficking offences are facilitated by family members, acquaintances, and friends who have ready access to vulnerable people.[2] A key example is the trafficking of minors for sexual exploitation in the United States. Multiple studies have found that the facilitators are most often family members, legal guardians, friends, or intimate partners of the victim-survivors.[3] Furthermore, recruitment by family members was the most common strategy reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline in cases of trafficking in the United States between 2020 and 2022.[4] Evidence of familial trafficking has also been found in trafficking for labour exploitation[5] and trafficking for sexual exploitation of adults.[6] Families, including parents and extended family members, are also most commonly responsible for coercing victim-survivors into marriage.[7]

---

[2] M Viuhko, 'Hardened Professional Criminals, or Just Friends and Relatives? The Diversity of Offenders in Human Trafficking', *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, vol. 42, issue 2–3, 2017, pp. 177–193, https://doi.org/10.108 0/01924036.2017.1391106; E E Edwards, J S Middleton, and J Cole, 'Family-Controlled Trafficking in the United States: Victim Characteristics, System Response, and Case Outcomes', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 10, issue 3, 2024, pp. 411–429, https:// doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2022.2039866; C N White *et al.*, 'When Families Become Perpetrators: A Case Series on Familial Trafficking', *Journal of Family Violence*, vol. 39, 2024, pp. 435–447, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-023-00522-w; L Puigvert *et al.*, 'A Systematic Review of Family and Social Relationships: Implications for Sex Trafficking Recruitment and Victimisation', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2022, pp. 534–550, https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321X16358719475186.

[3] Viuhko; V K Voller *et al.*, 'The Hidden and Misunderstood Problem of Familial Sex Trafficking of Minors in the United States: A Scoping Review of the Literature', *Child Welfare*, vol. 102, issue 2, 2024, pp. 145–180.

[4] Polaris Project, *Human Trafficking during the COVID and Post-COVID Era: An Analysis of Data on Human Trafficking Situations Reported to the US National Human Trafficking Hotline from 2020–2022*, Polaris Project, 2023, https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/ uploads/2020/07/Hotline-Trends-Report-2023.pdf.

[5] S Thulander and C Benjamin, *In Harm's Way: How Systems Fail Human Trafficking Survivors – Survey results from the first National Survivor Study*, Polaris Project, January 2023, https:// polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/In-Harms-Way-How-Systems-Fail-Human-Trafficking-Survivors-by-Polaris-modifed-June-2023.pdf.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] H Askola, 'Responding to Vulnerability? Forced Marriage and the Law', *UNSW Law Journal*, vol. 41, issue 3, 2018, pp. 977–1002, https://doi.org/10.53637/IPTD3484; see also, in this special issue: J Nelson and J Burn, 'Forced Marriage and Family Relationships', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 24, 2025, pp. 141–164, https://doi. org/10.14197/atr.201225248.

One of the main reasons for familial involvement in trafficking is that close connections are often required to build a sufficient level of trust for individuals to be manipulated and exploited.[8] Understandings of the types of coercion used to facilitate trafficking and exploitation are becoming more nuanced, with research showing overlap between the strategies of coercive control used in both trafficking and intimate partner violence.[9] Traffickers often use multiple forms of abuse to manipulate and exploit victims, including intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, denying, blaming, minimising, economic abuse, and sexual and physical abuse.[10] These strategies often build over time and rely on close relationships between victim-survivors and offenders for their success.[11]

Even if there are no pre-existing family connections, traffickers can build intimate connections with victim-survivors that mimic family relationships to facilitate exploitation. One example of this is the mother-like identity adopted by some female traffickers. In their research on Thai migrants in Australia, Macioti *et al.* explore the role of the 'Mother Tac' (also referred to as 'mamma tac' or 'mae tac'), a term which is short for 'mother of contract' and describes the woman who hosts Thai migrant sex workers, collects money from them, and organises their work once they are in their destination country. The study describes the complexity and ambivalences associated with the role of the 'Mother Tac' who may simultaneously care for a victim-survivor, while also playing a key role in her exploitation. The Mother Tac is described as being shaped by 'quasi-familial respect relations of subordination'.[12] In the Australian case of *R v Rungnapha Kanbut*, this family-like bond between the Mother Tac and the women she exploited was key to keeping the victim-survivors in a 'prison without bars'.[13]

---

[8]   E Koegler *et al.*, '"When Her Visa Expired, the Family Refused to Renew It," Intersections of Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence: Qualitative Document Analysis of Case Examples from a Major Midwest City', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 37, issue 7–8, pp. NP4133–NP4159, https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520957978.

[9]   M Segrave, B Hedwards, and D Tyas, 'Family Violence and Exploitation: Examining the Contours of Violence and Exploitation', in J Winterdyk and J Jones (eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Human Trafficking*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2020, pp. 437–450, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63058-8_24; S Bessell, *Fact Sheet: Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence*, The Human Trafficking Legal Center, 2018.

[10] Koegler *et al.*

[11] Raby and Chazal.

[12] P G Macioti *et al.*, 'Framing the Mother Tac: The Racialised, Sexualised and Gendered Politics of Modern Slavery in Australia', *Social Sciences*, vol. 9, issue 11, 2020, pp. 192–211, p. 200, https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci9110192.

[13] *R v Kanbut* [2019] NSWDC 931.

This is not the only situation where trafficking relies on a replication of family type bonds and hierarchical subordination. In this special issue, **Élodie Apard, Precious Diagboya, and Vanessa Simoni** describe the role madams play in facilitating trafficking for sexual exploitation from Nigeria to France. Based on their extensive fieldwork in these countries, the authors explain how madams, who are well-integrated into and connected within the wider Nigerian community, are described as a 'surrogate' family for victim-survivors, demonstrating again a reconfiguration of relational bonds to gain the trust and ensure compliance of victim-survivors. Madams rely on family connections to recruit women and girls, to encourage them to migrate, and to ensure ongoing control and compliance.

Apard *et al***.**'s article highlights that control and coercion operate within existing social and cultural structures, practices, expectations, and networks, within which complex family relationships and dynamics are embedded. Definitions of family must therefore include the broad nexus of social relationships within which individuals and traditional family structures are situated. A nuanced and dynamic approach to the concept of family is needed, one that prioritises interconnectedness as the defining characteristic. As Carol Smart highlights in her theory of personal life, individuals are increasingly shaping their interpersonal connections in ways that are meaningful to them, and their definitions of family may go beyond the confines of the legal and biological bonds, which have traditionally been the organising principle of family.[14] In relation to trafficking, this broader conceptualisation of family can be useful to unpack the range of roles and relationships that shape the trafficking process and to move beyond binary interpretations of victim–offender identities.

In relation to forced marriage, **Jacqueline Nelson and Jennifer Burn**'s article in this special issue argues that characterising young people experiencing coercion as victims and their parents, siblings, and extended family members as perpetrators is a reductive approach that should be replaced with a deeper focus on family dynamics, experiences, and histories. Reflecting on interviews with eight women who have experienced force marriage in Australia, and citing Smart and Shipman, they note that theorisations about family life need to 'capture the complex tapestry of competing obligations and aspirations'.[15] Such an approach is vital to shedding light on the location of traffickers within family circles and to understanding how trafficking relies on relational dynamics and a matrix of control that is socially situated within families and communities.

---

[14] C Smart, *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2007.

[15] C Smart and B Shipman, 'Visions in Monochrome: Families, Marriage and the Individualization Thesis', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, issue 4, 2004, pp. 491–509, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2004.00034.x.

Family as a Risk Factor and Facilitator

Another way that family is embedded in trafficking is by the role family plays in shaping an individual's life experiences, trajectories, and motivations. Family can be a risk factor or a protective factor against trafficking. Several studies have found that familial disfunction and a history of abuse are key risk factors for victim-survivors.[16] For example, Reid *et al.* note that exposure to intimate partner violence during childhood increases the risk for victimisation in trafficking during young adulthood.[17] These findings are supported by other studies which have identified commonalities in vulnerability factors, including negative childhood experiences, dysfunctional family dynamics, and parental substance abuse, that increase the risk of victimisation in both intimate partner violence and trafficking. One study found that intimate partner violence and associated trauma-related shame are both significant predictors of child sexual exploitation.[18] Trafficking and exploitation can also be an outcome or part of intimate partner violence. In this special issue, **Haezreena Begum Abdul Hamid** provides a nuanced understanding of women's motivations for migration. Drawing on three months of observations and 18 qualitative interviews with female victims of trafficking in Malaysia, her article describes how women in abusive relationships are exploited by their boyfriends and partners as an extension of the dynamics of control used in the relationship. Alternatively, escape from a situation of family or intimate partner violence may increase an individual's vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation.[19]

Not only do adverse family experiences and situations increase a person's vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, but they also shape and form the lives

---

16   S Kyriakakis, B A Dawson, and T Edmond, 'Mexican Immigrant Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence: Conceptualization and Descriptions of Abuse', *Violence and Victims*, vol. 27, issue 4, 2012, pp. 548–562, https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.27.4.548; R D Sanborn and A P Giardino, 'Human Trafficking and Domestic Violence: Etiology, Intervention, and Overlap with Child Maltreatment', *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*, vol. 6, issue 1, 2015, https://doi.org/10.58464/2155-5834.1251.

17   J A Reid, T N Richards, and T C Kulig, 'Human Trafficking and Intimate Partner Violence', in R Geffner *et al.* (eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse Across the Lifespan: A Project of the National Partnership to End Interpersonal Violence Across the Lifespan*, Springer, Cham, 2022, pp. 3339–3360, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-89999-2_159.

18   E D Walker and J A Reid, 'On the Overlap of Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Intimate Partner Violence: An Exploratory Examination of Trauma-Related Shame', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 39, issue 15–16, 2024, pp. 3669–3686, https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605241233268.

19   A Richert, 'Failed Interventions: Domestic Violence, Human Trafficking, and the Criminalization of Survival', *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 120, issue 2, 2021, pp. 315–343, https://doi.org/10.36644/mlr.120.2.failed.

and motivations of traffickers. Far from being 'ideal offenders',[20] traffickers are often individuals with complex histories of abuse, socio-economic disadvantages, and low educational attainment.[21] There is commonly an overlap between victims and offenders, with many trafficking offenders once being victims of exploitation or abuse themselves.[22] In Australia, between 2005 and 2019, five of the ten women convicted of human trafficking for sexual exploitation offences had themselves been prior victim-survivors of trafficking, and many had experienced family or intimate partner abuse.[23] Furthermore, all of these women came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and the majority moved into trafficking as a way to financially support their families. To return to the case of *R v Kanbut*, for example, the judge's sentencing remarks highlight the significant economic disadvantage Kanbut had experienced and the burden of her role of financially supporting her family, even from a young age.[24] Such cases challenge the 'victim' and 'villain' stereotypes often used in trafficking narratives.[25] They also highlight that family needs and dynamics can provide the motivation for trafficking offenders to exploit others.

As with traffickers, victim-survivors are often drawn into exploitation through the manipulation of a desire to financially provide for their families. Financially supporting family is often a key motivation for individuals to migrate under risky conditions in search of better opportunities and improved income. The need to financially support family is raised in several articles in this special issue.

---

[20]   N Christie, 'The Ideal Victim', in E A Fattah (ed.), *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy: Reorienting the Justice System*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1986, pp. 17–30, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08305-3_2.

[21]   A L A Baxter and N Chazal, '"It's About Survival": Court Constructions of Socio-Economic Constraints on Women Offenders in Australian Human Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation Cases', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 18, 2022, pp. 121–138, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222188.

[22]   A L A Baxter, 'When the Line between Victimization and Criminalization Blurs: The Victim-offender Overlap Observed in Female Offenders in Cases of Trafficking in Persons for Sexual Exploitation in Australia', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 6, issue 3, 2019, pp. 327–338, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2019.1578579; I Chatzis *et al.*, *Female Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation as Defendants: A Case Law Analysis*, UNODC, Vienna, 2020; E Veldhuizen-Ochodničanová and E L Jeglic, 'Of Madams, Mentors and Mistresses: Conceptualising the Female Sex Trafficker in the United States', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, vol. 64, 2021, pp. 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2020.100455; M Wijkman and E Kleemans, 'Female Offenders of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation', *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 72, 2019, pp. 53–72, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-019-09840-x.

[23]   Baxter and Chazal.

[24]   *R v Kanbut*.

[25]   O'Brien.

For example, **Lauren Moton, Stephen Abeyta, Meredith Dank, and Tsigereda Tafesse Muluge**'s article explores how familial financial responsibility in Ethiopia is one of the main factors that motivates women to seek domestic work in the Middle East. They conducted 100 in-depth interviews with migrant domestic workers seeking employment in the Middle East and found that over 80% of the women planned to send some, or all, of their earnings to their family members, specifically parents, siblings, spouses, children, or extended family members. Similarly, **Hamid**'s article states that for women in countries such as Indonesia and Myanmar, migration is sometimes the only viable option to escape poverty and unemployment and to earn a reasonable income for their families. Furthermore, in their short article, **Mary Caparas and Nadia Gapur** draw on their extensive experience as service providers in the United States to paint an illuminating and illustrative picture of the ways in which the need to financially support family can be a primary motivating force and risk factor for Bangladeshi men to enter into exploitative labour migration situations.

Risky migration underpinned by financial motivations can therefore be a family affair, with labour migration often a strategic decision for families to improve their financial situation. This is clearly demonstrated in the article by **Anta Brachou, Runa Lazzarino, Carole Murphy, and Eva Karra** in this special issue, which explores familial pressure as a primary driver of migration in Albania. Analysing a large dataset collected through mixed-methods study, the authors highlight that the decision to migrate is rarely an individual one; rather, it is a collective decision where parents, siblings, and extended family members play a crucial role. This type of 'sacrificial logic' whereby one family member is sent abroad to support the family is also described by **Moton *et al*.** who note that a sense of duty towards family and a desire to be financially supportive drives many Ethiopian women to seek out domestic work in the Middle East, despite its notoriety for exploitative conditions. Similarly, **Apard *et al*.** analyse how Nigerian families encourage one of their female family members, often daughters, to seek out sex work abroad as a way of furthering the family's financial prospects and social status, despite the known risks of trafficking in Europe.

Given the family's centrality in decision making, family members often facilitate migration by assisting in the process or providing loans to support the travel. **Moton *et al*.** and **Apard *et al*.**'s articles demonstrate the facilitating role family members and social networks play through the practical support of providing loans and assistance with the logistical elements of labour migration.

Once an individual is in an exploitative situation, their family can also be a motivating factor for keeping them there. Throughout this special issue, authors describe threads of complex and deep emotions such as shame, guilt, responsibility, pressure, and duty. Those who have migrated to support family but found themselves in an exploitative situation and unable to send money home, can experience a great sense of shame. For example, several participants in

Hamid's study reported feeling unable to return home until they could earn some money to support their family. Similarly, **Rebecca Treadaway**'s article analysed data from the UK Salvation Army's Beyond Programme and 12 interviews with practitioners to describe how migrants and victim-survivors of trafficking can experience feelings of guilt, anxiety, and powerlessness about an inability to provide financially, contributing to the family's perception of them as 'failed' migrants. In an Australian study I conducted looking at victim-survivors with children, financial considerations and the ability to support dependants in their country of origin was one of the greatest concerns reported by victim-survivors.[26] They prioritised sending money to family over funding their own needs, often leaving them surviving on the bare minimum. This situation can lead to an increased risk of revictimisation or further exploitation.[27]

The findings described above demonstrate that supporting family is one of the primary drivers for risky migration, for staying in exploitative situations, and for a heightened risk of future victimisation. Traffickers can strategically exploit family ties and encourage individuals to migrate to support family. They can also use threats against the family to manipulate their victims, for example, by demanding that family pay ransom or by threating to injure or kill family members.[28] Such threats are a common method used to keep victim-survivors in positions of exploitation and prevent them from talking to authorities.[29] The complexity of family relationships, the depth of emotions involved with family, and the strong influence family has over our lives are consequently key factors that facilitate the trafficking process.

Family, Recovery, and Victimhood

Not only are family key motivators and facilitators for entering into risky work or migration scenarios, but they are also a crucial part of post-trafficking situations. After leaving exploitative situations, the focus of most victim support programmes is victim-survivors' recovery. At this stage of the trafficking process family remain central. **Caparas and Gapur**'s composite case study in this special issue demonstrates the important role of family and community in supporting victim-survivors after they leave exploitative situations. Their piece argues for a family-centric approach towards support for victim-survivors of trafficking by

---

[26]   N Chazal, *Hidden Victims, Intergenerational Trauma: Supporting the Dependants of Modern Slavery Victim-Survivors in Australia*, University of South Australia, 2023, https://doi.org/10.25954/b2a1-8417.

[27]   *Ibid.*

[28]   Viuhko; Voller *et al.*

[29]   *Ibid.*

showing that family dynamics serve as a protective factor if survivors' families are upskilled to also help carry the family's financial security going forward. Despite the need for a holistic approach, the importance of family is not often recognised in trafficking literature, policies, and programmes. For example, **Treadaway**'s article in this special issue highlights that key modern slavery policies on victim-survivor support standards in the United Kingdom make scant reference to the role of the family in a victim-survivor's recovery. Furthermore, **Andrea Querol and Antonia Lerner**'s article demonstrates that in Peru, families can be stigmatised and separated from victim-survivors, or even blamed for their family member's trafficking experience. Based on interviews with 30 victim-survivors and 10 of their family members, **Querol and Lerner** show how family are often key to helping victim-survivors leave exploitative situations and supporting their recovery, yet they are too often sidelined or marginalised.

A research project I conducted in 2023 found that the structure of Australia's main support programme, the Support for Trafficked People Program (STPP), did not adequately recognise the importance of family, and in particular, dependants, in victim-survivors' recovery. The project found that although 29% of victim-survivors of modern slavery supported by the STPP between 2009 and 2021 had dependants, there was little formalised support for the care of these dependants, nor any additional funding for the expenses associated with raising children.[30] Victim-survivors I interviewed overwhelmingly placed their dependants' needs above their own, expressing, for example, 'I'm all about my child. I don't really think about myself at the moment to be honest'.[31] From this project, it became clear that for victim-survivors with children, their family was their most important priority, and that their own recovery would be put on hold until they could properly support their children. Moreover, having children or being pregnant has been described as 'an additional layer of vulnerability'[32] for victim-survivors of modern slavery, as the desperation to support family brings an increased risk of revictimisation or further exploitation.

For victim-survivors who are separated from their children, the desire for reunification and the need to ensure the safety and support of their children is even more pressing. In my research, victim-survivors with children in their country of origin all described the considerable suffering caused by the separation, and thoughts of reunification often overshadowed all other aspects of recovery.[33] Other research has echoed the importance of reunification for trafficking victims

---

[30] Chazal.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[32] N.a., 'People-trafficking Victims with Children Are "Overlooked"', *BBC*, 23 February 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-35636955.

[33] Chazal.

with overseas family members.[34] In this special issue, **Treadaway** notes that separation from family can hamper survivors' recovery due to the significant distress separation causes and an ongoing need for survivors to provide for their family. She also finds that the process of reunification is not always straightforward. Research has shown that the process of family reunification can be complex and difficult, and that it is a time where support is needed to repair connections and rebuild relationships which may have been damaged due to distance and lengthy periods of separation.[35] Some victim-survivors may have ambivalent feelings about reunification with family members, particularly if their family was in some way complicit in the trafficking process. Yet, as **Nelson and Burn**'s article demonstrates, familial involvement in exploitation does not always lead to a breakdown of family relationships, but rather to a reconfiguration and ongoing process of renegotiation of those relationships. The fact that family so often remain central to victims' lives, despite the complexity of these ties, highlights the need to ground trafficking theory and practice within family and community structures.

Holistically incorporating family and community into conceptualisations of trafficking is also key to understanding the full impact of trafficking and its ripple effects on those within victim-survivors' sphere. Trafficking can shatter family bonds, separate families, and have lasting intergenerational impacts.[36] Many trafficking responses take an individualistic view of victimhood which negates the centrality of the relational aspects of trafficking.[37] My research in Australia found that the dependant children of victim-survivors experienced

---

[34]   M Faulkner *et al.*, 'Moving Past Victimization and Trauma Toward Restoration: Mother Survivors of Sex Trafficking Share Their Inspiration', *International Perspectives in Victimology*, vol. 7, issue 2, 2013, pp. 46–55; K Juabsamai and I Taylor, 'Family Separation, Reunification, and Intergenerational Trauma in the Aftermath of Human Trafficking in the United States', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 123–138, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218108.

[35]   A Brunovskis and R Surtees, 'Coming Home: Challenges in Family Reintegration for Trafficked Victims', *Qualitative Social Work*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2013, pp. 454–472, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325011435257; B Meshkovska, A E R Bos, and M Siegel, 'Long-term (Re)Integration of Persons Trafficked for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation', *International Review of Victimology*, vol. 27, issue 3, 2021, pp. 245–271, https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580211011445; K Ramaj, 'The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 3, 2021, pp. 408–429, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823.

[36]   Chazal; Hestia, *Underground Lives: Forgotten Children – The Intergenerational Impact of Modern Slavery*, Hestia, London, 2021.

[37]   M Verhoeven *et al.*, 'Relationships Between Suspects and Victims of Sex Trafficking. Exploitation of Prostitutes and Domestic Violence Parallels in Dutch Trafficking Cases', *European Journal of Criminal Policy and Research*, vol. 21, 2015, pp. 49–64, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10610-013-9226-2.

many negative outcomes because of their parents' trauma.[38] Witnessing the physical and psychological violence associated with human trafficking can cause trauma to be transmitted from parents to children.[39] These experiences can result in vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress for children.[40] A study into the health of children of human trafficking victim-survivors found that mental health problems including depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and post-traumatic stress disorder are common, with 80% of them exhibiting at least one of these conditions.[41] Children can also experience behavioural problems and developmental delays, parental attachment issues, and disrupted schooling and social lives.[42]

Furthermore, having a parent who is a victim-survivor of trafficking places children at significant risk of experiencing violence, abuse, and exploitation themselves.[43] There is often an overlap between family violence and trafficking, meaning children may also be exposed to the negative impacts of family violence.[44] A study by Edelson *et al.* found a high rate of co-occurrence of exposure to domestic violence and child maltreatment or abuse, with between 30% and 60% of children who witness violence also directly experiencing violence themselves.[45] Another study by Willis *et al.* also found that children of mothers who are trafficked are significantly more likely to experience physical or sexual abuse.[46] Koegler *et al.* highlight that this is because of the insecurity and trauma of modern slavery, which can create family stress, especially when parents are separated from children.[47] In these situations, dependants may lose the protection of their parents, which can create 'generational

---

[38] Chazal.

[39] L Kleinschmidt, 'Keeping Mother Alive: Psychotherapy with a Teenage Mother Following Human Trafficking', *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, vol. 35, issue 3, 2009, pp. 262–275, https://doi.org/10.1080/00754170903234416.

[40] D C Branson, 'Vicarious Trauma, Themes in Research, and Terminology: A Review of Literature', *Traumatology*, vol. 25, issue 1, 2019, pp. 2–10, https://doi.org/10.1037/trm0000161.

[41] B Willis *et al.*, 'The Health of Children Whose Mothers Are Trafficked or in Sex Work in the U.S.: An Exploratory Study', *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, vol. 11, issue 2, 2016, pp. 127–135, https://doi.org/10.1080/17450128.2016.1189019.

[42] Chazal.

[43] *Ibid.*

[44] Bessell; Segrave, Hedwards, and Tyas.

[45] J L Edleson *et al.*, 'Assessing Child Exposure to Adult Domestic Violence', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 29, issue 7, 2007, pp. 961–971, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2006.12.009.

[46] Willis *et al.*

[47] Koegler *et al.*

vulnerability'[48] to abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. Research has also established that weak family relationships influence the risk of trafficking.[49] As dependants are often separated from their parents, family relationships and parent–child attachments can weaken family relationships, thus heightening the risk for children to experience abuse and exploitation themselves.[50]

Conclusion

Overall, this special issue demonstrates that families and communities play an important role in trafficking. In many cases, trafficking would not occur without the involvement of families or without the manipulation of family-like relationships. Families can facilitate trafficking, and they can also be key to helping victim-survivors leave and recover from situations of exploitation. Importantly, families are profoundly impacted by trafficking. The flow-on effect of victimisation reaches family members and the broader community. In particular, dependant children are often the hidden victims of trafficking, with their parents' victimisation creating ripples of trauma that cause mental and physical health challenges, behavioural issues, and an increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse for children.

Given the impact of modern slavery on dependants, there is increasing recognition in international jurisdictions that dependants should be assessed as primary victim-survivors of these crimes. A recent report by Hestia, one of the UK's main providers of victim-survivor support, concluded that a legislative amendment is required to recognise dependant children of modern slavery victim-survivors within the definition of victimhood.[51] The broadening of victimhood to include more than just the primary victim-survivor is well established in international principles. For example, the United Nations Human Rights Office provides a foundation for this:

---

[48]   V Brotherton, *Time to Deliver: Considering Pregnancy and Parenthood in the UK's Response to Human Trafficking*, The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2016, p. 30.

[49]   R Surtees, *Trafficking of Men – A Trend Less Considered: The Case of Belarus and Ukraine*, IOM Migration Research Series, No. 36, International Organization for Migration, 2008.

[50]   Chazal.

[51]   Hestia.

> *The term 'victim' also includes, where appropriate, the immediate family or dependants of the direct victim and persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims in distress or to prevent victimization.*[52]

Approaches to defining the victim-survivors of domestic violence have already advanced to include dependants as direct victim-survivors. For example, in the UK, 'there is now an analogous example of this approach in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 in which children of domestic abuse survivors are now explicitly defined as victims in their own right'.[53] In outlining the legislative background and impetus for the introduction of this definition of victimhood in the *Domestic Abuse Act*, the UK Home Office highlighted the long-term impact domestic abuse can have on children's wellbeing and development and reiterated that 'children exposed to domestic abuse are victims of child abuse'.[54] Such legislation serves as a precedent for broadening the definition of victim-survivors in modern slavery cases to include dependant children. If dependants are not adequately recognised as victim-survivors, despite the significant impact of modern slavery on them, their needs cannot be fully met, and they can suffer trauma that ultimately exposes them to further harm. Children and other family members of victim-survivors are often the 'hidden victims' of trafficking, and without adequate recognition of their status as victims a cycle of vulnerability to exploitation and abuse is created and maintained.

Nerida Veale is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at the University of South Australia. She has worked with government and non-governmental organisations to analyse survivor support initiatives and develop recommendations for survivor policy. Her research expertise spans international and transnational criminal justice, and she has authored several key books and journal articles in these areas. Email: Nerida.Chazal@unisa.edu.au

---

[52] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power', OHCHR, 29 November 1985, https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-basic-principles-justice-victims-crime-and-abuse.

[53] Hestia, p. 27.

[54] UK Home Office, *Transforming the Response to Domestic Abuse. Consultation Response and Draft Bill*, 2019, p. 16.

Thematic Articles:
Family and Community

Social-Climbing Projects of Families in the Context of Human Trafficking from Nigeria to France

Élodie Apard, Precious Diagboya, and Vanessa Simoni

Abstract

Most African women involved in prostitution in major European cities today come from Edo State in Nigeria, where human trafficking has become an economic model. Despite moral judgment and the stigmatisation of sex workers in Nigeria, sending a woman to Europe represents an opportunity that many families decide to take as they rely on the potential financial benefits that would allow collective social climbing. This article analyses migration for prostitution purposes as a family project, helping to shed light on the role of parents in the mechanisms that make possible and even reinforce the sexual exploitation of women in Europe.

Introduction[1]

Over the last two decades, trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation from Nigeria to Europe has attracted institutional and academic attention, as well as

---

[1] This article was originally published in French as É Apard, P Diagboya, and V Simoni, '"La prostitution, ça ne tue pas!" Projets d'ascension sociale familiale dans le contexte de la traite sexuelle (Nigeria-Europe)', *Politique africaine*, vol. 159, no. 3, 2020, pp. 51–82, https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.159.0051. This English-language version was peer-reviewed and revised for the *Anti-Trafficking Review* and is published with the permission of Association des Chercheurs de Politique Africaine and Karthala Editions.

media interest, mainly due to the topic's 'emotional power'.[2] Empirical research documents victims' vulnerability,[3] the specific conditions of their migration to Europe,[4] the political economy of trafficking,[5] as well as the challenges of 'reintegrating' victims.[6] However, few studies have focused on the family dimension of this type of mobility, despite the fact that families play a central role throughout the process. Firstly, the decision to leave or to send someone abroad can be made either collectively by family members, or individually by women/girls who want to achieve a better life and escape social constraints or intra-familial violence. Secondly, trafficking develops through the family networks of *Madams*, the women who organise the transport, reception, and exploitation of women/girls in Europe, and who were themselves previously involved in prostitution.[7] The trajectories of *Madams* set examples of social and financial success and are closely linked to the relationships they maintain with members of their families in Nigeria, but also with the parents of the women/girls they exploit. Furthermore, the control and pressure exerted by traffickers in Europe rests largely on the families back home, who may participate in the coercive practices developed by the *Madams*.

Most African women forced into prostitution in Europe come from Edo State, Southern Nigeria.[8] In this region, families' enrichment through migration to

2   M Jakšić, 'État de littérature. Déconstruire pour dénoncer : La traite des êtres humains en débat', *Critique internationale*, vol. 53, no. 4, 2011, pp. 169–182, https://doi.org/10.3917/crii.053.0169.

3   E Paasche, M-L Skilbrei, and S Plambech, 'Vulnerable Here or There? Examining the vulnerability of victims of human trafficking before and after return', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 34–51, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218103.

4   J Carling, *Migration, Human Smuggling and Trafficking from Nigeria to Europe*, IOM Migration Research Series 23, IOM, Geneva, 2006, p. 76.

5   S Plambech, 'Sex, Deportation and Rescue: Economies of Migration among Nigerian Sex Workers', *Feminist Economics*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2017, pp. 134–159, https://doi.org/10.1080/13545701.2016.1181272.

6   P De Montvalon, 'Sous condition "d'émancipation active": Le droit d'asile des prostituées nigérianes victimes de traite des êtres humains', *Droit et société*, vol. 99, no. 2, 2018, pp. 375–392, https://doi.org/10.58079/utbf; S Taliani, 'Coercion, fetishes and suffering in the daily lives of young Nigerian women in Italy', *Africa*, vol. 82, issue 4, 2012, pp. 579–608, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972012000514; D Brennan and S Plambech, 'Moving Forward—Life after Trafficking', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 1–12, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218101.

7   We will use the words 'prostitution' and 'prostitutes' by default in this article; they may carry negative connotations (such as *ashawo*, their equivalent in Nigerian Pidgin) but none of the Nigerian women we encountered in France or Nigeria used the terms 'sex work' or 'sex worker'.

8   Edo State's capital is Benin City, the former capital of the Benin Kingdom. The communities in this region belong mainly to the Edo group, but also include Esan, Isoko, and Urhobo.

Europe is one of the only available means of upward social mobility. The women's geographical mobility is supposed to ensure their families' social mobility, but is in fact subject to the particularly restrictive conditions set by criminal networks in charge of trafficking (forced silence, coercion, physical and psychological violence, etc.). These particular migratory experiences, lived by both the women and their families, have profound effects on family structure and social organisation, both in Edo State and within Nigerian communities in Europe.

The role of mothers is central here, since several 'levels of motherhood' are revealed in the relationships of power, obedience, and domination that characterise trafficking. The recognition and power conferred by motherhood, seen as a form of 'motherhood supremacy', offer a particularly relevant framework for this work.[9] It is, indeed, within the lineages of transmission and power between *Madams*, aunts, mothers, and daughters, that families' projects of social climbing develop.

The aim of this article is therefore to shed light on the place of family ties in human trafficking and, in particular, relationships between daughters and mothers—whether biological or symbolic—in order to determine the extent to which these family dynamics help maintain or even reinforce the mechanisms that enable the sexual exploitation of Nigerian women in Europe.

Methodology

This article is based on several types of primary and secondary sources. First, a Franco-Nigerian research team collected empirical data during fieldwork in Benin City, Edo State's Capital, from April 2017 to January 2020. This included observation sessions in Temples where oaths are sealed, interviews with priests in charge of enforcing these oaths, interviews with deported trafficking victims, and interviews with presidents and members of Benin City's Women's Clubs.[10] Part of the Nigerian team also worked in France, in collaboration with the Community Health Association Le Bus des Femmes, which works with sex workers and

---

9   O Oyěwùmí, *What Gender is Motherhood? Changing Yorùbá Ideals of Power, Procreation and Identity in the Age of Modernity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2015.

10   The research team in Nigeria, supervised by Élodie Apard, comprised five Nigerian researchers: Cynthia Olufade, Precious Diagboya, Prof Sam O. Smah, Omoregie Pat Iziengbe, and Osahon Victor Aiguobarueghian as well as a Franco-Italian researcher—Sara Panata. From her work in three major Temples in Benin City (Ayelala Uniben, Oluku, and Arosunoba), Diagboya has drawn up 16 observation reports and 8 interviews with the Priests and Chief Priests of these Temples. In Benin City, Olufade carried out 21 interviews with returnees, 3 interviews with Chief Priests, and 2 interviews with an intermediary responsible for organising the journey to Europe and accompanying the women on part of the journey. Also in Benin City, Panata interviewed 5 Club presidents and members.

persons forced into prostitution in Paris. Researchers carried out several observation sessions on sex work sites and had numerous informal discussions with social workers, cultural mediators, and victims of trafficking in Paris.[11]

Personal experiences and professional duties play an important role in the supplementation of the interviews and observation conducted in the field, since one the authors has been in charge of social, administrative, and legal follow-ups of about 500 Nigerian women or girls victims of trafficking in France. Therefore, this work also relies on the compilation of medico-social individual files of women accompanied by Le Bus des Femmes who entered Europe during the 2015–2018 period, i.e. around 450 Nigerian women a year (including around a hundred minors aged between 12 and 17, taken into care by the Child Welfare Service), monitored as part of legal or asylum proceedings.[12]

In addition, a mission was organised to Benin City in September 2018, notably to the Oba Palace,[13] followed by a final series of interviews between September and December 2019.[14] Finally, a second corpus of sources consists of the testimonies of former trafficking victims, collected and published by Le Bus des Femmes in their *Victoria Voice* booklet series.[15]

Data were discussed and analysed collectively, following an interdisciplinary approach and combining the perspectives of all researchers, as well as those of field actors, while reflecting on our respective positions as researchers and practitioners. In both the transcribed interviews and published sources, all names used are pseudonyms.

---

[11] Precious Diagboya, Cynthia Olufade, and Élodie Apard, together with Nigerian women working for the association, conducted observations in Bois de Vincennes and Château Rouge neighbourhoods.

[12] Vanessa Simoni was the *ad hoc* administrator for around a hundred underaged Nigerian victims of trafficking accompanied by Le Bus des Femmes between 2016 and 2019.

[13] The Oba of Benin, Ewuare II, granted an audience to Élodie Apard, Vanessa Simoni, and Cynthia Olufade, who passed on messages from victims of trafficking in France.

[14] Diagboya interviewed intermediaries (recruiters, travel agencies) and returnees in Benin City. Apard, Simoni, and Diagboya visited the Bakhita women's shelter in Lagos, where deported victims of trafficking are accommodated.

[15] The *Victoria Voice* collection includes three books bringing together testimonies, statistics, and recommendations written by trafficked Nigerian women between 2016 and 2018, under the direction of Vanessa Simoni and as part of Le Bus des Femmes. Three issues were published: *Trust* in March 2017; *Minors* in September 2017, and *Madams* in September 2018.

Families' Social Ambitions and Madams' Business Strategies

While criminal networks facilitating trafficking to Europe have been particularly active in Edo State over the past twenty years,[16] the phenomenon of sexual exploitation is not confined to this region or to this period. The organised transfer of women and girls from south-eastern Nigeria, forced into sex work in Lagos or even Ghana, was noted by colonial officials in the early 1940s.[17] However, from the end of the 1980s, trafficking began to evolve towards Europe, in the wake of other criminal activities, a severely deteriorated economic situation, and widespread corruption.[18] As an indirect effect of these crises, the feminisation of responsibilities led women to develop individual and collective survival strategies.[19] While men also resort to migration in response to these crises, transnational prostitution becomes a 'possible trajectory of emancipation'[20] for women. These economic factors are compounded by gendered forms of social and family violence (excision, forced marriage, obligations, and taboos), against which the Nigerian state offers no effective protection.

Two decades of trafficking and its financial spin-offs have profoundly transformed the economic and social landscape of the Edo area. In Benin City, while services facilitating migration are offered everywhere (language courses, money transfers, travel agencies, intermediaries for visa applications, etc.), numerous anti-trafficking NGOs are competing for European subsidies.[21] Many of the women/girls trafficked to Europe come from poor, densely populated neighbourhoods in central Benin City, where most families receive financial support from a daughter, mother, aunt, or cousin in Europe.[22] The European sex trade and related activities

---

[16]   The reason for the establishment of trafficking networks in Edo State has yet to be determined. Long-standing trade links with Italy and the need for labour, particularly in the agricultural sector in the early 1980s, could be explanatory factors, but historical work on the first generations of Nigerian women prostitutes in Europe would help clarify the conditions under which this traffic emerged.

[17]   L Fourchard, 'Prêt sur gage et traite des femmes au Nigéria, fin XIX-Années 1950', in B Lavaud-Legendre (ed.), *Prostitution Nigériane: Entre rêves de migration et réalités de la traite*, Karthala, Paris, 2013, pp. 15–32.

[18]   On the evolution of criminal practices in Nigeria, see S Ellis, *This Present Darkness: A History of Nigerian Organized Crime,* Hurst & Company, London, 2016.

[19]   A Adjamagbo and A-E Calvès, 'L'émancipation féminine sous contrainte', *Autrepart*, vol. 61, issue 2, 2012, pp. 3–21, https://doi.org/10.3917/autr.061.0003.

[20]   *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[21]   Plambech.

[22]   See O P Iziengbe, *The Economy of International Prostitution in Benin and the Role of the 'Purray Boys'*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series, no. 56, 2017.

have given rise to a new economic model, now dominant in Edo society, whose viability depends as much on the failure of the state as on the ability of families to fit into it, reproducing the dynamics of domination and exploitation that enable this type of trafficking.

In such a context, and despite the stigma attached to sex work in Nigeria, sending a daughter to Europe remains an option, and one that many families—not just the poorest—choose. The middle classes, who also struggle to meet their basic needs, draw their hopes of upward social mobility from the local success stories of the *Madams* and their families.

Success Stories and Migratory Imaginaries

Social, economic, and political factors nurture migration aspirations, and the choice of prostitution in Europe is not solely motivated by financial considerations. Of course, families can imagine themselves benefiting from the money generated by sex work in Europe or from their daughter's investments back home (such as building a house or buying a store). However, sending a child to Europe also brings other benefits, such as the acquisition of a new social status and the appropriation of the symbols of success conveyed by the collective imaginary.

In Edo State, the role model is the *Madam*, a term that refers as much to a function—pimping—as to an image: that of a former sex worker who managed to become wealthy by exploiting other women. In Benin City, *Madams* have a monopoly on the local means of enrichment: foreign connections and control of women who work for them in Europe. The fortunes made by some *Madams* have impacted the urban landscape of Benin City, where they invested trafficking money in real estate projects (more or less luxurious residences) and commercial projects (hotels, shopping complexes) that have become concrete symbols of their successful migration. The wealthiest belong to the first generation of women who left Nigeria for Europe in the early 1980s and who, having settled mainly in Italy, were nicknamed *Italos* on their return.[23] In Benin City, the *Italos* hold particularly prominent positions in the state's social, economic, and political life. As a young woman explained, whom researchers met in the Siluko Road neighbourhood, *Italos* are influential:

> *When I was a child, the role models I remember best are three Italo Madams from our neighbourhood: 'Madam Italy', 'Londonier', and 'Mama Ebo'. These three women had money and influence; they could control important people in society. In fact, going abroad for them was like going to their backyard. The way they spent money, the number of cars and houses they*

---

[23]   *Ibid.*

had, the way they dressed... everything about them was showing wealth; and indeed, they'd had it all by going abroad. Who wouldn't want to be like them?[24]

The *Madams* have also developed specific forms of sociability through the creation of Women's Clubs. Membership of these Clubs is highly selective, based on personal criteria (i.e. being a mother, having at least one child living in Europe) but mainly on significant financial commitments, as members have to pay multiple fees, including very high monthly contributions.[25] In Benin City, as in Europe, Clubs enable *Madams* to publicly display their success and wealth. Belonging to one of these Clubs guarantees public recognition of upward social mobility, which is showcased at weddings and other ceremonies attended by Club members, as well as at *Hostings* organised by the members themselves. At these parties, members wear the same outfit, the same type of jewellery, perform group dances and indulge in 'money spraying'.[26] People attending these *Hostings* testify about the way Madams display their wealth, such as an interview participant from the Akenzua Road area, who stated:

> *When Madams arrive at 'meetings'* [Hostings/events], *they are the leaders, the bosses. …. Guys and girls are there to show off. Maybe their sister has sent them a phone from abroad, maybe even an iPhone. If you don't have anyone outside Nigeria, you're worthless, you're nothing.*[27]

The possession of expensive smartphones is an important symbol of belonging to the privileged social class embodied by the Clubs, as images of success are largely constructed and disseminated on social media, renewing migratory imaginaries shaped by the *Madam* model.[28] Symbols of success also translate into families' behaviour, as demonstrated by one interviewee:

> *Going abroad can change a family's destiny. I know a family who could barely feed themselves before, they were so poor that they wore rags. Then their daughter went to Europe and things changed for them. Now, when*

---

[24] Interview with Bridget conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Benin City.

[25] Monthly dues vary and can reach several hundred euros. Some one-off dues can reach thousands of euros, and members who fail to pay are excluded from the Club. See S Panata, *United We (Net)work: An Online and Offline Analysis of Nigerian Women's Clubs*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series no. 77, 2019.

[26] The practice of showering guests with banknotes, preferably in foreign currencies such as dollars or euros. For the exercise to be successful, the floor must be littered with banknotes by the end of the party.

[27] Interview with F., conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Benin City.

[28] Panata.

they cook, they even throw food away. They've gone from tenants to landlords, and their mother wears 'Hollandies' [expensive Dutch loincloths] *to cook.*[29]

Examples of social success linked to migration, whether real or imagined, have permeated the collective unconscious so deeply that families with no members abroad perceive themselves (and are perceived) as deprived of any enrichment or social advancement opportunities. Adding to the frustration of families excluded from this system is the desire of many women and girls to progress in their lives, leading them to see sex work as a possible temporary activity, a transitional phase on the road to success. Once in Europe, they choose pseudonyms, 'street names', that often reflect the way they see themselves in the future: 'Achiever', 'Princess', 'Success'… Before their arrival in Europe, women are unaware of the conditions of exploitation, constraint, and violence that limit the realisation of these individual and collective ambitions; the migration project therefore develops in a context where desires for adventures abroad, fantasies of success, and social and family pressure combine to facilitate the trafficking process.

The 'Sacrificial' Logic within Families

Having made migration particularly attractive, *Italos* quickly became 'sponsors', encouraging women and girls to try their luck in Europe, persuading parents of the profitability of such a project, and 'sponsoring' their daughters by covering all the costs associated with their trip. Examples of families benefiting from their daughters' activities in Europe reinforce the *Madams*' arguments and make it easier for parents to support or encourage their daughters' migration to Europe, some even developing proactive attitudes, as the testimony of a Nigerian woman interviewed in Paris demonstrates:

> *My cousin, who had only been abroad for two years, started sending money home, and her mother began building a property for her. When my mother heard about this, she wanted me to go and join my cousin and insisted that I get in touch with her.*[30]

Once the decision to migrate is taken, relations are formalised between the woman/girl, her parents, and the *Madam* who will be funding her trip. The two families often already know each other, and sometimes they are related. Our

---

[29] Interview with M., conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Benin City.

[30] Interview conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Paris. See C Olufade, *Sustenance of Sex Trafficking in Edo State: The Combined Effect of Oath Taking, Transnational Silence and Migration Imaginaries on Trafficked Women*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series no. 56, 2019, p. 17.

informal discussions with Nigerian women in France during fieldwork demonstrated that while in many cases the nature of the work in Europe is known, the working conditions are not. The risks of the journey, at sea or in the desert, are more or less clearly perceived, but do not prevent the decision to commit oneself—or one's daughter—to a project which, if successful, will offer better living conditions to those left behind.

In the Edo context, the eldest daughter is usually sent first. What can be analysed as the 'sacrifice' of the eldest daughter is sometimes the result of a parental choice and imposed on the women/girls, and sometimes it is self-imposed; but often, it is the result of persuasion by relatives or peer-pressure, combined with the eldest daughter's responsibility to her mother and siblings, and the family's economic difficulties. This is explained by victims of trafficking who participated in the *Victoria Voice* project, as well as a woman interviewed in Paris:

> *Most girls* [in Europe] *are the eldest in their family. The eldest girls have to help. Like us. We send money to our families to pay school fees* [of the younger ones]. *Their situation in Nigeria is very difficult, because it's only the rich who can get work.... When you send 200 euros to Nigeria, that's a lot of money.*[31]

> *I'm my mother's first child. She knew I was leaving. I had to make the decision to leave home and go to Europe. Poverty in the family was too hard, everyone expected me to do something.*[32]

This sacrifice imperative develops mainly within the mother–daughter relationship. Indeed, while relatives are generally involved in the emigration decision process (fathers, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.), the mother generally plays the driving role with her eldest daughter.[33] This situation correlates with the fact that many Edo women/girls exploited in Europe come from single-parent families.[34] Often working in the informal sector, such as roadside hawking, these mothers involve their eldest daughters in such work from an early age, so the survival of the whole household quickly revolves around the mother–daughter relationship. Young girls who grow up witnessing their mothers' permanent struggle with poverty also

---

[31] Testimonies of Ese and Achiever, *Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 33.

[32] Interview conducted by Cynthia Olufade in Paris. See Olufade, p. 18.

[33] In a sample of 45 Nigerian minors interviewed, almost half explained that a member of their family had decided (or participated in the decision) that they would leave Nigeria. For half of them, it was their parent(s), and more often their mother (*Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 34).

[34] Out of a sample of 45 Nigerian minors taken into care by the Aide Sociale à l'Enfance de Paris, two-thirds came from single-parent families (*Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 34).

face the moral judgment of a society where single mothers are stigmatised. Eldest daughters must overcome financial difficulties and a lack of social status by contributing to the enrichment of their mother and siblings, either through a 'good marriage' or by going abroad.

If not the mother, then other women in the family play a decisive role in the migration project. For example, B. testified against her paternal aunt at the Paris criminal court in 2019. In her testimony, B. explained that she grew up in a Bini village in Edo State with her mother and stepfather, but when she was a teenager her stepfather demanded that she move to her father's house, whom she had never met.[35] It was at her father's house that the migration plan to Europe was made, but it was her aunt, based in Paris, who organised it. The aunt took in her fifteen-year-old niece along with other young girls and forced them into prostitution, as part of a 35,000 euro debt bondage for each of them.[36]

Arriving in Europe: Family pressure, moral obligation, and coercion

Generally, on arrival in Europe, women/girls are immediately placed under the authority of their *Madam* or someone 'monitoring' them on her behalf. The *Madam* quickly becomes an authority figure, both maternal and tyrannical, as an extension of the original mother–daughter relationship. However, the bond that forms before departure largely determines this relationship, as the women/girls are led through a ritual to swear an oath of allegiance to their *Madam*. During this ceremony, they pledge to follow her orders and repay a debt ranging from 30,000 to 70,000 euros without ever telling anyone.[37] If the commitment is made to the *Madam*, the biological mother is often present as a witness, while the Priest in charge of the ceremony is the agreements' guarantor.

---

[35] Preliminary discussion before the court hearing, held at Le Bus des Femmes in Paris in October 2019.

[36] Testimony gathered from the victim during the preparation of the case file. The paternal aunt, convicted of trafficking minors under the age of 15 (the youngest was 11), was sentenced to 12 years in prison by the Paris Criminal Court in December 2019.

[37] The oath taking ceremony takes place in a temple, either in the bush or in town, but always under the authority of a Priest in charge of organising the ritual, sealing the oath, and ensuring that the commitment made is respected. See V Simoni, '"I Swear an Oath": Serments d'allégeances, coercitions et stratégies migratoires chez les femmes nigérianes de Benin City', in Lavaud-Legendre, pp. 33–60; Olufade; P Diagboya, *Oath Taking in Edo: Usages and Misappropriations of the Native Justice System*, IFRA-Nigeria Working papers Series no. 55, 2019.

Once in Europe, the women/girls obey their biological mother, but more importantly, they obey the woman who facilitated their emigration, who becomes a surrogate mother. *Madams* are called *Mama* or *Iye* ('mother' in Bini, the language spoken by Edo people) by the women/girls and are also given the title of *Iye onisan* ('mother of the buttocks'), which symbolises both filiation and appropriation of their body. The term gives authority and expresses control over the women's/girls' genitals, the 'tools' of their labour and sources of enrichment for their *Madams*.[38] But the expression also illustrates the 'elaboration of a fictional kinship' which 'establishes a highly asymmetric relation of descent/dependence'.[39]

The Priest (also known as the Native Doctor or Juju Priest) is responsible for monitoring and supervising the agreement sealed through the ritual, but this role is often extended to the parents of the departing girl, as well as to the members of the *Madam*'s family, who can then take over in Benin City the settlement of any disputes arising in Europe. In addition to the woman/girl and the *Madam*, the members of their respective families are also involved in the process, since they benefit directly from it.

Faced with the realities of trafficking in Europe and the need to repay thousands of euros to their *Madam*, most Nigerian women develop opposition strategies. Some are unaware that they have to sell sex in Europe and try to oppose it as soon as they arrive. Others rebel in reaction to the conditions under which they must work (environment, pace, insecurity) and live (cost, control, violence). The sex work context has particularly deteriorated in France since the implementation, in the 2000s, of harsh laws further criminalising sex work and pushing sex workers to remote and thus potentially unsafe areas. This worsened even more during the so-called 'migration crisis' between 2015 and 2017, which led to market saturation and a price drop of paid sex, making it difficult for Nigerian women to earn the sums needed to repay their debts,[40] on the basis of remitting around 1,000 euros

---

[38] Similarly, the title 'Iye Eki' (mother of the market) is given to the chiefs in charge of the markets (organising and regulating them, and collecting taxes from traders), and the title 'Iya Egbe' (mother of the meeting) is given to those in charge of the hostings, who are responsible for welcoming guests and making sure that contributions are paid. In the Yoruba and Edo context, the term *Iya/Iye* (mother) refers not only to maternity but also to various forms of power, social recognition, and status. See O Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997.

[39] S Taliani, 'Du dilemme des filles et de leurs réserves de vie: La crise sorcellaire dans la migration nigériane', *Cahiers d'études africaines*, issue 231–232, 2018, pp. 737–761, https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.22438.

[40] On average, Nigerian women who come to Europe by land via Libya pay 30–35,000 euro, and those who arrive by air pay 50–70,000 euro.

every 10 days[41] from sexual services that cost between 10 and 50 euros.

When women attempt to renegotiate, the *Madams* and their entourage implement various coercive strategies with the aim of reaffirming, and then perpetuating, the debt bondage guaranteed by the initial contract. But the women's/girls' families also play a fundamental role in the implementation of these coercive logics, as is described in more detail in the next section.

Parents Associated with the Use of Violence

When Nigerian women/girls arrive in Europe, *Madams* often contact their parents in Nigeria, both to inform them of their daughter's arrival and to reaffirm the terms of the agreement. Men working within these networks may also act as interlocutors with the families. Often brothers, partners of *Madams*, recruiters, Priests or intermediaries, they operate in Europe and Nigeria at different levels, depending on their functions and their criminal affiliations, ranging from occasional opportunistic intervention to structured action, notably within Cults.[42]

As parents are often involved in the initial agreement, this reminder of each party's commitments is a mere formality. However, some parents were unaware of their daughters' migration plans, either because they had already severed ties with them or because daughters avoided telling family members as they did not want to be deterred. In such cases, Nigerian pimps in Europe try to locate the family in Benin and contact them to secure additional guarantees of cooperation. This is demonstrated by the case of P., a young Esan girl[43] who had been living in Benin City for two years after fleeing her village to avoid marriage and excision:

> *When I arrived in Paris, she* [the Madam] *asked me to call my mother. I called my friend with whom I lived in Benin and asked her to go to my village to find my mother. My Madam paid for her transport to the village and for her phone credits. When she found my mother, she called back my Madam who explained to my mother what was happening to me now. She*

---

[41] To this must be added accommodation and food costs.

[42] The Cults are secret societies inherited from student confraternities which, since the late 1980s, have been active far beyond university campuses. Their activities are similar to those of 'classic' criminal gangs (drug and arms trafficking, targeted assassinations, control of prostitution), but they have retained an important spiritual dimension. See Y Lebeau, 'Permissivité et violence sur les campus nigérians: Quelques lectures du phénomène des "secret cults"', *Politique africaine*, vol. 76, issue 4, 1999, p. 173–180, https://doi.org/10.3917/polaf.076.0173.

[43] One of the main sociolinguistic groups of the Edo State.

was surprised and started to cry. I told her not to worry, that this woman wouldn't hurt me, that she just wanted her money.[44]

Long-distance communications between parents and pimps are designed to establish and reinforce the relationship of authority and the submission to the contract, for both parents and children, but also to remind everyone of the risks in case of non-payment. In this context, the parents' role is very clear: they must ensure that their daughters pay.

When they fail to pay back the sums demanded by their traffickers or when they try to cancel or renegotiate the agreement made in Nigeria, the women are reminded of their obligations by the threat or use of physical or psychological violence. If the *Madams* and their entourage observe a refusal or a drop in performance, they systematically resort to threatening the families in Nigeria. This can involve planning an assassination using the services of the Cults[45] or harassing family members via the *Ayelala* Temples[46] that summon parents, threaten them with reprisals, and force them to pay the sums demanded if their daughter is unable to do so, as Leo explains:

> *The Madams can control the girls by telling them, 'If you don't pay me my money, I'll kill your parents. All your parents will pay me back my money, otherwise you will all die.'*[47]

Parents are told to remind their daughters of their obligations. An escalation of verbal and physical violence against them generally occurs if they do not accept to submit and call their daughter to order. From our fieldwork and observations, when parents accept such orders and participate in the exercise of violence against their daughters, they do so for several reasons: on the one hand, compliance with the contract is the only way to ensure the continuity of the migration project from which they hope to benefit; on the other, they know that the threats are

---

44   Testimony of P., collected at Le Bus des Femmes, January 2020.

45   The role of the Cults in human trafficking began to be taken into account in France after the trial of the Authentic Sisters, which revealed the close links between *Madams* and Cultists. See S O Smah, *Contemporary Nigerian Cultist Groups: Demystifying the Invisibilities*, IFRA-Nigeria Working Papers Series no. 76, 2019.

46   The *Ayelala* Temples, dedicated to the deity of the same name, are part of the legal-religious institutions of the Edo region, operating alongside the state judicial system (police and courts), which is considered to be inefficient due to corruption, slow proceedings, etc. While the Temples serve as places of worship, celebrating the deities of the Edo and Yoruba pantheons and performing divination, protection, and healing functions, as well as judicial functions, the *Ayelala* Temples specialise in settling disputes between people who have entered into an agreement via an oath. See Diagboya.

47   Testimony of Léo, *Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 27.

real, and that their lives are potentially in danger.[48] They therefore instruct their daughters to obey and pay the demanded money, sometimes going as far as giving the traffickers their daughter's new address or phone number. Parents are thus involved in the exercise of coercion, whether they consider it legitimate or not, and whether they do it out of choice, spite, or fear.

However, if families encourage their daughters to pay the debts, it is also because they themselves are part of social rationales of submission. Benefiting from a high social status in Benin City, *Madams* have the upper hand over biological mothers, who obey them directly or indirectly through their family members. Then, biological mothers of women/girls exploited in Europe also owe respect and submission to the *Madams*, who are their social elders, whatever their age.

These power relationships take place in a context where relations between rich and poor are superimposed on rigid and hierarchical authority relations between parents and children. So, if parents are invited to call their daughter to order from a distance, it is also to remind them that the power imbalance in Nigeria is an issue of social and economic inequality. The use of physical or verbal violence becomes unnecessary, since this class relationship embodies a pre-existing form of social violence that reminds individuals of their roles and duties. In Europe, as in Nigeria, parents are mere subordinates to the authority wielded by the *Madams* and their families, whose power is exercised equally over the women/girls and their parents. When families in Nigeria are victims of reprisals, it symbolises their own failure: unable or unwilling to exercise their parental authority, they call into question pre-established hierarchies, validated by a moral agreement and a spiritual commitment.[49]

Our field work suggests that by accepting these logics of domination, the families of Edo State are seeking to preserve their security in a context where violence is exercised with impunity. They are also motivated by fear of downgrading. In a system where rubbing shoulders with wealthy, influential families gives access to economic opportunities, they need to ensure their upward mobility, and sometimes their very survival. This desire for social advancement and better living conditions is a major factor in the pressure that Edo families exert over their daughters in Europe. They wish to develop ties with the city's dominant families and hope to get richer when their daughters have paid off their debts and begun sending remittances. Maintaining their authority over their daughters ensures that they will do so. Maintaining relationships of authority and submission is therefore largely guaranteed by maintaining a class relationship where rich and poor, parents and children, keep their position, as illustrated by Ese:

---

[48]   See Diagboya.

[49]   See Simoni.

The girls call their mothers in Nigeria to tell them that the work they're doing is not good, that they want to go back home. The parents tell them to stay and keep working. The Madams call the families in Nigeria to tell them that the girls are not working well and that they have no money. The families then tell the girls that they must work harder, otherwise their Madam will call the police and they will send them back to Nigeria and the families will have no more money. Some parents know what they're doing, others don't. The girls have to send money home. The girls have to send money back to their families to help them live, buy food, send the younger ones to school... The eldest daughters have to work and send money back to the family back home in Nigeria, who lives in poverty.[50]

The sacrificial approach initially adopted serves a dual interest: that of the parents, who plan their social advancement through the benefices of their daughters' prostitution, and that of the *Madams*, who, by exploiting other women, preserve the status and power they acquired in Europe but that they leverage in Nigeria.

Family Pressure and Avoidance Strategies

The pressure from parents on Nigerian women/girls exploited in Europe can be huge. While some have their family relationships screened by their traffickers—particularly in the early stages of their life in Europe—many are in daily contact, by phone, with their parents, and their mothers in particular.

Many women/girls question their situation and the sacrificial model that characterised their original project. But in a context where pressure, threats, and economic difficulties add up, not all families react in the same way to their daughters' distress. Some mothers cry on the phone, advising their daughters to stop street work and return home, while others encourage them to stay, work harder to pay off their debts quickly, and send them money, while downplaying the difficulties they face. In conversations, these directives translate into sentences like 'Make you dey strong', 'Na you we dey depend on!', 'Ashawo no dey kill na!'[51] This pressure is a source of great moral suffering for many victims, even if this suffering is difficult to communicate to parents in Nigeria. Women/girls share a number of reasons for their difficulty in expressing themselves, including their families' lack of knowledge about the reality of their lives in Europe, the pimps' prohibition on telling the truth, the fear of hurting their feelings and tarnishing

---

[50]   Testimony of Ese, *Victoria Voice*, no. 2, September 2017, p. 34.

[51]   'Be strong', 'We all depend on you!', 'Prostitution doesn't kill, come on!' Sentences reported by former victims, as well as by the nuns in charge of the COSUDOW shelter in Benin City and the Bakhita shelter in Lagos.

the family's reputation, and sometimes the cruel disinterest of some parents, who refuse to know:

> *She* [my mother] *doesn't understand how things are here, that it's not easy and all that.... I never told her I was a prostitute. She didn't even know I was going to leave Nigeria until she realised I was gone.... When you're here, they* [family members] *really think everything's going well for you. Before, I was very angry. I explained it to them. I didn't explain exactly how it was, because I don't want to hurt them.*[52]

Shame can be a major obstacle to intergenerational dialogue: the shame of saying you are a prostitute (for those who think that their parents do not know), but above all the shame of not being able to meet parental expectations, to pay debt, to cope with the job, or being too weak to make your sacrifice a tool for collective success. For most women/girls, these inabilities are synonymous with failure and frustration, associated with a feeling of uselessness. They feel they can no longer be the instrument of the family's enrichment, and some develop serious depressive symptoms:

> *I told* [my mother] *I was working on the street, and she cried [...]. They* [my family] *were really sad, they didn't know it was like that. They asked me to forgive them. I told them there was no problem. So far, I haven't told them that they* [the traffickers] *were beating me. [...] I used to have dreams at night, even when I was in the shelter, things would come into my head, I wanted to throw myself out of the window and die.*[53]

These multiple pressures and constraints lead Nigerian women to develop avoidance strategies. Some try to legitimise their inability to work through illness and pregnancy which can help them to gain their mother's support. Younger women, particularly minors placed under the protection of France's child welfare system, may invoke schooling as an excuse. However, these 'excuses' are not always enough for parents under pressure, and some decide to put the family at a distance: they space out their calls home or—although rarely—cut off contact completely. These avoidance strategies are part of an estrangement that adds to the geographical distance. This double distance often favours greater freedom for women/girls in Europe, who then move away not only from debt bondage but also from the rigid social rules of Edo society.

---

[52]   *Victoria Voice*, no. 1, March 2017, p. 37.

[53]   *Ibid.*

Avoidance Strategies in France, Social Pressures and Inequalities in Nigeria

Family pressure associated with criminal violence, problems of intergenerational dialogue, and avoidance strategies developed by women/girls have consequences on their ability to achieve their own upward social mobility in Europe outside the trafficking networks. Those who choose to leave the exploitation system are victims of ostracism and isolation, which, in an already very difficult context, makes them even more vulnerable and susceptible to the influence of pimps, relatives, and other members of the Nigerian community. Families in Nigeria who get involved in resolving conflicts between their daughters and the *Madams* also face major social constraints that limit their capacity for action and prevent legal proceedings before public courts.

Generational Renewal and Heightened Competition

Avoidance strategies put in place by women/girls in the face of family coercion are difficult to maintain over the long term, notably because of the place given to rebels within the Nigerian community in Europe. Nigerian women/girls who oppose the pressure of the debt bondage system are often devalued, even ostracised, by their peers, who tend to maintain the value of sacrifice. For example, some explain that they are subjected to denigration and pressure from other Nigerian women, who refer to them as 'useless' and urge them to return to prostitution to help their parents in Nigeria:

> *One day, I asked a girl in my shelter to lend me her phone so I could call my mother in Nigeria. I called my mother and she told me to go back to work on the street. When I refused, my mother threatened me. My mother asked me to leave the shelter, saying that there was no food at home in Nigeria and that my Madam's family was harassing them, so they needed money, saying that if I didn't leave the shelter, the oath I took would kill me. So I called my friends who still work on the street and they asked me what I was doing in the shelter since there was no money there. They told me I could go back to the street, where there was plenty of money. That's why, after a month in the shelter, I ran away and decided to go back to work on the street.*[54]

These rationales contribute to the development of complex forms of collective control, which have become stronger over time. This phenomenon has led to the recomposition of family and hierarchical logics outside Nigeria, between women of the same family. Some, considered by their parents to be incapable of

---

[54] Testimonial collected at the headquarters of Le Bus des Femmes, September 2018.

fulfilling their family duties, have witnessed the arrival of their younger sisters in Europe. The youngest daughters then take over the collective migration project in replacement of their elders, which introduces competitive strategies often established by the mothers. For their families in Nigeria, the arrival of younger daughters in Europe operates a shift in the relationship of authority and in the sibling hierarchy.

Furthermore, Nigerian women find it difficult to create social and family ties outside their community, notably because of the stigma attached to sex work. On the one hand, they are very poorly regarded by other West African nationals, and on the other, they are afraid of getting involved with French people, not knowing how to explain the circumstances of their arrival in France. It is therefore commonly accepted among Edo women that it is easier to have Nigerian friends and partners—who already know the reasons and conditions for their presence in Europe—than to socialise outside their community. These difficulties cause the community to turn on itself as women struggle to integrate into French society, learn the language, and get out of very precarious economic situations. As a participant in the *Victoria Voice* project explained, the *Madams* often ensure that the women/girls remain isolated, to better control them:

> *When I arrived in France, my Madam allowed me to make friends, but I didn't know it was a plan she'd hatched with the other girls. I told the girls everything I was doing and asked them to help me send money home. But they reported everything to my Madam. This created a lot of problems for me, which even affected my family. She demanded that I pay double [the] debt. It really hurt, and now I prefer to stay on my own and not have any friends.*[55]

Women who oppose exploitation and try to escape the trafficking system therefore find it hard to organise themselves in Europe in order to nurture a collective counter-discourse challenging that of the *Madams*. While the French judicial system partly responds to their need for justice by condemning their traffickers, parental responsibility for the forced departure of women/girls is not taken into consideration in Benin City, feeding anger and feelings of impunity among the victims:

> *Last month, I wrote a letter to our Oba, the ruler of the Benin Kingdom. I wrote that parents who forced their daughters to go to Europe to work as prostitutes should be killed.*[56]

---

[55]   *Victoria Voice*, no. 1, March 2017, p. 34.

[56]   Testimony collected at the headquarters of Le Bus des Femmes from a girl who took part in writing letters addressed to the Oba of Benin City in September 2018.

Such impunity not only enables the sacrificial logic to continue but also to be reproduced in Europe, where it is now increasingly common to see women placed in debt bondage by a female relative— aunt, cousin, or sister—who has arrived in Europe before them. It is in fact a survival reflex, both individual and collective, combined with the need to maintain a place in the community or within the family, that pushes some women to become pimps,[57] as explained by Faith:

> *Where does frustration come from? From your family at home. They call you and say, 'Auntie, I've got this problem'. And you can't do anything for them. … So sometimes I just want to call my mom and say, 'Mom, send me a girl you know, let me bring a girl here because I can't take it anymore, it's too hard'.*[58]

Many Nigerian women cannot meet the needs or expectations of their families. They do not always manage to send them money before they finish paying off their debts. Some send money in secret, which is punishable by violence, either against themselves or their parents. Then, when they have finished paying off their debt or decided to stop submitting to their traffickers, most women end up in abject poverty. Most of them want to stop engaging in prostitution, out of weariness, fear of police, or a desire to have children. However, for some, becoming a *Madam* appears to be the logical next step in their journey.[59] The numerous social constraints and migration restrictions in France reduce their employment opportunities, leaving the exploitation of other women as the only other option of earning money.

But in Nigeria, the success of a few projects creates a deceptive glow that masks the misery of all the others. Moreover, some of these successes are short-lived: many of Benin City's new houses, hotels, and restaurants built with trafficking money remain empty and fall into disuse for lack of maintenance, while some construction sites are abandoned before work is completed—all signs of the sudden interruption in money transfers.

---

[57] See also M Rizzotti, 'Chasing Geographical and Social Mobility: The Motivations of Nigerian Madams to Enter Indentured Relationships', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 18, 2022, pp. 49–66, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222184.

[58] Testimony of Faith, *Victoria Voice*, no. 3, September 2018, p. 29.

[59] Rizzotti.

The Edo Native Justice System and the Limits of Collective Social Mobility

Translating spatial mobility into upward social mobility is considered obvious in the Edo region, as in other parts of the world. However, in the context of human trafficking, the migration project is a risky gamble; seen as a long-term family investment, it is sometimes synonymous with collective failure:

> *My cousin was trafficked to Europe in 2012, but when she arrived she couldn't stand the work, so she fled and refused to contact anyone in her family. Then her Madam's family started harassing her parents back home to pay off the debt. Her parents sold land and even used their house as collateral to take out a loan and pay the traffickers. A few years later, the house was seized and the family had to move into a rented apartment.*[60]

Examples of families ruined after the refusal or the inability of their daughters to pay reinforce the logic of exploitation. If families are obliged to repay part of the debt, it is the result of persuasion, pressure, and threats exerted by the *Madams* and their relatives, with the complicity of some Temples. As places of worship, but also of sealing agreements and dispute settlements, Temples are at the centre of a local justice system, perverted by the financial power of trafficking networks.

In Edo State, two justice systems coexist: the first one, inherited from British colonial times, is based on police forces, public courts, and lawyers. The second one predates colonisation and comprises a multitude of Temples dedicated to deities from the Edo and Yoruba pantheons, such as *Olokun*, *Eziza*, *Osun*, and *Esu*, who are frequently called upon for their powers of divination, protection, or blessing.[61] Temples are also used for oaths of allegiance and debt collection, as well as in commercial affairs and land disputes, and have been associated with sexual exploitation since the rise of trafficking. Today, they play an essential role in the pressure tactics used by traffickers to force girls to honour their contracts: spiritual threats are made by the Priests against the women/girls or their families.[62] The way in which Temples settle disputes arising from trafficking cases in Europe also illustrates the place occupied by *Madams* and their families in Edo society. It notably appeared during an observation conducted at Arohosunoba Temple:

> *A trafficker's representative summoned the parents of a girl trafficked to Europe because of her inability to pay the debt: the mother* [a woman of about 40]*, in tears, declares that her child cannot stay any longer in*

---

[60] Interview with M., October 2019.

[61] Diagboya, p. 4.

[62] *Ibid.* See also Olufade.

Europe because she's unwell, bedridden, and can't go out, work and earn money. In tears, she asks, 'How can a sick child work and pay off a debt?' The Temple's personnel and other officials present shout and reject her arguments. The mother is then accused of receiving money from her daughter and not wanting to repay. The trafficker's representatives say that this is a lie, that the child is not sick, that she ran away and is now working elsewhere. The mother continues to cry and insists that her daughter is really ill and that she wants her child to return to Nigeria. The case is dismissed and the mother is advised to pay her daughter's debt rather than risk losing her child.

A man in his fifties, walking with a limp, comes to beg the Temple's staff on behalf of his child, explaining that his child has no money to pay the trafficker at the moment. But the man is insulted, humiliated, and driven out of the Temple, chanting 'Owan nor ga toe ogeo oo odekun gbe' ['Whoever is guilty of lying in the temple will be killed by the Temple deities']. *He is told that he can't come and beg the Temple without bringing money, that his child probably sends him money but he refuses to pay the traffickers.*[63]

In almost all trafficking-related debt collection cases observed in several Temples in Benin City between 2017 and 2019, the staff (Chief Priests, Priests, and assistants) ruled in favour of the traffickers, whose financial power is the main factor that ensures their stranglehold on this legal-religious system. Indeed, the Temples' capacity to operate relies on contributions of devotees, as well as an automatic deduction of 10% from the sums collected as part of debt recovery.[64] The financial stability of the Temples therefore depends to a large extent on the creditors' ability to make their debtors pay. This system, which is supposed to guarantee compliance with contracts, actually accentuates the balance of power against the exploited women/girls, since the two winning parties are the *Madams* and the Temples' staff. During observations in the Temples, cases involving debts to be repaid systematically took precedence over other cases.[65]

While this religious justice system had been infiltrated by human traffickers for years, a particularly striking event occurred on 9 March 2018. The Oba of Benin, heir monarch to the throne of the Benin Kingdom,[66] supreme religious authority

[63] Observation report by Precious Diagboya at Arohosunoba Temple on 1 September 2018.

[64] Diagboya, p. 15.

[65] *Ibid.*

[66] State founded in the thirteenth century and dominated by the Edo people, prosperous until the eighteenth century. See S Aderinto (ed.), *African Kingdoms: An Encyclopedia of Empires and Civilizations*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2017, p. 29.

for the entire Edo people, made a public announcement declaring oaths sealed for human trafficking purposes to be null and void, and forbade Chief Priests to administer such oaths in the future. Those who would disregard the ban would be killed by the palace deities.[67] This decision had a real impact on Temple activities, particularly on oath of allegiance ceremonies, as well as on trafficking revenues. The declaration triggered various reactions: from the euphoria of trafficking victims, who saw the end of their ordeal, to the despair of *Madams*.[68]

However, sexual exploitation has not stopped. The disappearance of spiritual threats is relative and violence persists. It has even given way to a more systematic use of intimidation measures involving families. While Temples and Priests can no longer officially administer oaths to women and girls for the purpose of trafficking, they nevertheless continue to issue summonses to the parents of those already in France, and to settle debt-related disputes. Moreover, rituals continue to be organised outside the Oba's territory and notably on the migratory route, according to the National Agency to Combat Trafficking in Persons in the Republic of Niger.[69]

The social and financial advantage of the *Madams* and their families over exploited women/girls and their parents is thus validated by the Edo legal-religious system, generally preferred to official forms of justice, deemed inefficient and corrupt. The hierarchical structure of the trafficking networks, which also characterises contemporary Edo society, can also be found in the Temples, whose staff recognise that the success model embodied by the *Madams* is an essential factor in their upward social mobility. Thanks to their fruitful 'collaboration' with the Temples, trafficking networks have strengthened their local roots and legitimacy. The enhancement of their position also strengthens the power of domination and coercion of the *Madams*, who use the strength of these beliefs and the fear they instigate to their advantage.

---

[67] Diagboya, p. 17.

[68] On social networks, trafficked girls expressed their gratitude to the Oba and *Madams* expressed their distress. In addition, during a mission organised in Benin City in September 2018, Élodie Apard, Vanessa Simoni, and Cynthia Olufade were received by the Oba of Benin and handed to him written and filmed testimonies from victims of trafficking living in France.

[69] Interview with Judge Moussa Mahamadou, member of Agence nationale de lutte contre la traite des personnes (ANLTP), Niamey, Niger, February 2020.

Conclusion

While some *Madams* have succeeded in making a fortune, most Nigerian women victims of trafficking are now part of the poorest populations in France's major cities. Having children helps them to acquire the status of mothers and enjoy relative authority, thus renegotiating their role within the family. But when they are young or single, becoming mothers can also increase their financial difficulties and affect their social integration in Europe. The image of the Nigerian trafficking victim, like that of other women 'in need of protection', feeds on a certain idea of vulnerability;[70] in France in particular, this negative image worsens when the life project does not correspond to the integration model promoted by the State. Getting married, having children, and sending money to the family in Nigeria are markers of success for individual and collective family projects, but they can also generate tensions with the host country, which values education, professional integration, and gender equality. The tension between models of success and models of integration is even greater in the face of illegality, turning Nigerian women from 'victims to be protected' to 'foreigners to be monitored'.

Faced with the realities of trafficking and the difficulties of integration in Europe, many women fail to fulfil their parents' initial plans for social advancement. If they choose to become *Madams*, it is often because the parents in Nigeria refuse to give up the original project of enrichment. This pressure increases when families are already more or less integrated into transnational criminal networks. It is much more difficult to fight against the parents' desire for rapid social advancement when other family members, even distant ones, are ostentatiously making a living from this activity—in Europe or Nigeria. A participant in the *Victoria Voice* project used the example of a friend:

> *Her mother would tell her: 'You have to build a house, buy a car, a gas station. Don't worry, I'm here for you, nothing will happen to you.' She became a Madam to please her mother. Everything she does, she does for her mother. ... There are two classes. When you have girls* [working for you in Europe]*, you're a 'big woman', you have lots of money. ... The rich and the poor have nothing in common. ... If she changed her mind, she would become her mother's worst enemy. She can't make personal plans for her life, like getting married and having children: her mother doesn't want her to.*[71]

---

70 A George, 'Saving Nigerian Girls: A Critical Reflection on Girl-Saving Campaigns in the Colonial and Neoliberal Eras', *Meridians*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2018, pp. 309–324, https://doi.org/10.1215/15366936-7176461.

71 *Victoria Voice*, no. 3, September 2018, pp. 48–50.

Paradigm shifts will certainly come from the women themselves, as the sustainability of the trafficking systems is being questioned today in every Nigerian community in Europe, but especially within Edo women's groups, where the debate is becoming structured. Several trials in France, resulting in heavy sentences for traffickers, triggered collective mobilisation among victims, leading to a reinforced collective agency. Although Nigerian women in Europe are overwhelmed by social difficulties, they are organising and catching the attention of public authorities.[72] In France, the granting of refugee status to Nigerian women victims of human trafficking has marked the beginning of a certain politicisation of trafficking issues, with victims now being recognised as a social group.[73]

The criminal dimension of the Nigerian diaspora cannot erase the capacity of its members to produce and reproduce a cultural identity of their own, beyond the system of exploitation; however, to understand Nigerian migration as a 'total social fact',[74] it is necessary to measure the impact of trafficking on the evolution of family structure, notably through the observation of the trajectories of Nigerian children born in Europe. The way these children will read their family histories, their mothers' backgrounds, and the treatment they received in Europe will be decisive in the production of new models of success and viable alternatives to the reflexes of social reproduction. The transmission of family history and collective memory is a major challenge in terms of identity and social cohesion, which must also be taken into account by the host societies in which these children grow up. Whether their mothers were victims or perpetrators of trafficking, their future will be linked to the individual and collective handling of this painful memory.

---

[72] A sign of that dynamic is the creation, in 2020, of Mission d'intervention et de sensibilisation contre la traite des êtres humains (Mist Association; Mission of Intervention and Sensitisation against Human Trafficking) in Paris. See https://mist-association.org/en/about-us.

[73] In France, women from Edo State are considered a 'social group'. See 'La CNDA précise la définition du groupe social des femmes nigérianes victimes d'un réseau transnational de traite des êtres humains à des fins d'exploitation sexuelle', Cour Nationale du Droit D'Asile, 12 April 2017, https://www.cnda.fr/decisions-de-justice/jurisprudence/decisions-jurisprudentielles/la-cnda-precise-la-definition-du-groupe-social-des-femmes-nigerianes-victimes-d-un-reseau-transnational-de-traite-des-etres-humains-a-des-fins-d-ex. Nonetheless, the majority of Nigerian women's asylum applications are denied.

[74] Sayad's understanding of emigration/immigration as a 'total social fact' makes it possible to combine the social, economic, and political dimensions of Nigerian migration with the analysis of a transnational phenomenon such as trafficking, and to mobilise the sociology of family transmission developed in his work to study the evolution of this diaspora. See A Sayad, *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité – 2. Les enfants illégitimes*, Raisons d'agir, Paris, 2006.

Élodie Apard is a Permanent Researcher at IRD (French Research Institute for Development), URMIS (Migrations and Society Research Unit), Université Paris Cité. Email: elodie.apard@ird.fr

Precious Diagboya is a Senior Research Fellow at IFRA-Nigeria (French Research Institute in Africa – Nigeria), University of Ibadan. Email: preciousdey@gmail.com

Vanessa Simoni is the director of the Mist Association (Mission of Intervention and Sensitisation against Human Trafficking) and *ad hoc* administrator for minor victims of trafficking. Email: director@mist-association.org

Enduring Abuse for the Sake of Remittance: The sacrifices of trafficking victims

Haezreena Begum Abdul Hamid

Abstract

This article discusses the interrelationship between exploitative practices and financial empowerment of trafficked women. It provides a nuanced understanding of women's motivations for migration and considers the impact of migration on victims and their families. Drawing from three months of observations and 18 qualitative interviews with female victims of trafficking in Malaysia, the article discusses women's perception of financial empowerment and the sacrifice, pain, and suffering they endured in exchange for an exploitative income. The findings revolve around three main themes: (i) the role of domestic violence in contributing to exploitation; (ii) the need for victims to support family as a reason to migrate for work, and (iii) enduring abuse and exploitation to support family and avoid the shame of returning empty-handed. The findings highlight how women are willing to endure various forms of abuse, including exploitation, mistreatment, and harsh working conditions, to provide financial support for their families and how domestic violence often serves to facilitate or render women vulnerable to exploitation

Keywords: trafficked women, exploitation, trafficking, abuse, unpaid wages, Malaysia

Introduction

Human trafficking is a complex phenomenon that is often influenced by social, economic, cultural, and other factors. Many of these factors are specific to individual trafficking patterns and to the countries in which they occur. For example, poverty, unemployment, armed conflict, corruption, gender inequality, and weak law enforcement can drive individuals to seek better opportunities abroad, often making them susceptible to being trafficked. Cultural norms and

family expectations can also compel individuals to migrate to work, as they feel obligated to support their families through remittances, even if this means having to endure exploitative working conditions.

To understand this phenomenon, this article explores the lived experiences of women who were exploited for their sexual or physical labour in Malaysia. Based on interviews with 18 women accommodated in a shelter for victims of trafficking in Selangor, Malaysia, it analyses the causal impact of trafficking on themselves and their family members. It also demonstrates the reasons for the women's migration and their hopes and aspirations in life.

Trafficking in Malaysia

Malaysia has been categorised as a source, transit, and destination country for human trafficking.[1] Most trafficking victims originate from Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, India, Thailand, China, the Philippines, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Vietnam. According to the 2024 Unites States *Trafficking in Persons Report*, in 2023, the Malaysian government registered 165 confirmed trafficking victims; 29 exploited for sexual purposes and 136 exploited in forced labour.[2]

There are a range of exploitative purposes for which individuals are trafficked to Malaysia.[3] Women and children are often trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labour, and domestic servitude. Many of them endure poor living conditions or debt bondage, or are unpaid or underpaid by their employers, employment agents, or informal labour recruiters. There are also problems of delayed wages, forceful termination, repatriation without receiving end-of-service benefits, delayed access to justice regarding wages, and arbitrary deductions from salaries.[4] Some women are trafficked for sex work by their own family, friends, and acquaintances. There are also instances where women are trafficked for the purpose of delivering babies who are then sold illegally to adoptive parents.

---

[1]   Australian Government, *DFAT Country Information Report: Malaysia*, DFAT, June 2024, https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/malaysia-dfat-country-information-report-24-june-2024.pdf.

[2]   US Department of State, *2024 Trafficking in Persons Report: Malaysia*, US DOS, Washington, 2024.

[3]   I M Iskandar, '67 Kids Rescued from Traffickers in Past 5 Years', *New Straits Times*, 18 November 2023, https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2023/11/979576/67-kids-rescued-traffickers-past-5-years.

[4]   M Javaid, *'How Can We Work Without Wages?' Salary Abuses Facing Migrant Workers Ahead of Qatar's FIFA World Cup 2022*, Human Rights Watch, August 2020, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2020/08/qatar0820_web_3.pdf.

Migrant domestic workers are particularly susceptible to exploitation. As of October 2023, there were 94,000 migrant domestic workers in Malaysia, the majority of whom are women. An estimated 69% were from Indonesia, 26% from Philippines, and 1% each from Vietnam and Cambodia.[5] A 2022 study by the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that 29% of migrant domestic workers were trapped in forced labour situations in Malaysia, compared to 7% and 4% in Singapore and Thailand, respectively.[6]

Men, women, and children who have been 'rescued' from their traffickers in Malaysia are detained in shelter homes, forced to undergo judicial processing, and expected to adhere to various rules and regulations before they are repatriated. These shelter homes are administered by the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (Ministry of Women), and the officers working there have the authority to protect and guard the victims. At present, there are ten shelters for trafficked persons: seven for women, two for children, and one for men.[7] Trafficked persons are given an initial 21-day interim protection order (for suspected victims; IPO) and a subsequent 90-day protection order (for certified victims; PO) from the courts. The period of detention may be extended by the courts to facilitate the prosecution's case against the traffickers, since the prosecutors mainly rely on the cooperation and testimony of trafficked persons.[8]

Economic and Familial Influences on Trafficking

Trafficking is influenced by multiple determinants which vary across contexts and forms of exploitation. Some of the common factors are local conditions that make people want to migrate in search of better conditions such as poverty, oppression, human rights abuses, lack of social or economic opportunity, or dangers from conflict or instability.[9] According to Kiss and Zimmerman, social and economic inequalities are the main structural drivers of trafficking and exploitation, and

---

[5]   J Low, 'Migrant Domestic Workers in Malaysia: Forced Labour and its Catalysts', *New Naratif*, 30 November 2023, https://newnaratif.com/migrant-domestic-workers-in-malaysia-forced-labour-and-its-catalysts.

[6]   International Labour Organization (ILO), 'Study Highlights Forced Labour amongst Migrant Domestic Workers in Southeast Asia', ILO, 15 June 2023, https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/study-highlights-forced-labour-amongst-migrant-domestic-workers-southeast.

[7]   H B A Hamid, 'Shelter Homes – Safe Haven or Prison?', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 20, 2023, pp. 111–134, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201223207.

[8]   *Ibid.*

[9]   UN Office on Drugs and Crime, *Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons*, United Nations, New York, 2012, p. 430.

harms can occur throughout all stages of the exploitation process.[10] In some cases, families find themselves stuck in a cycle of poverty due to inter-generational debt, which makes it difficult to survive and earn a decent income. Because many families in developing countries live in abject poverty, traffickers often emphasise to victims' families how the money will help them to survive. Therefore, labour migration is conventionally viewed as economically benefiting the family members who are left behind through remittances.[11] Some traffickers also give advance money to families before their family member migrates to work abroad. While this advance may provide certainty and confidence to the families that their loved ones are in good hands and will be able to earn a decent income to support them, it is considered a debt that needs to be paid off by the victim once they start working. Often the debt increases as traffickers force victims to pay inflated food and living costs as well as 'fines' for alleged violations.[12]

According to Démurger,[13] the migration of a family member who is the main breadwinner may bring additional income through remittances, which can support household consumption and expenses. In some cases, traffickers allow victims to send small remittances to their spouses and family members to make the victims compliant and avoid raising suspicion among the family members.[14] Although such remittances can be helpful, the victim's absence also places a heavy burden on the remaining family members who must take over the duties and responsibilities of the main caregiver. This situation can impact children, for example, by increasing their risk of dropping out of school, delaying school progression, disrupting family life which can lead to poor diets, and increasing psychological problems.[15]

In countries like Indonesia and Myanmar, migration is the only viable alternative for women in communities coping with poverty, unemployment, failed marriages, and family obligations.[16] For single mothers with children, the need to migrate

---

[10] L Kiss and C Zimmerman, 'Human Trafficking and Labor Exploitation: Toward Identifying, Implementing, and Evaluating Effective Responses', *PLOS Medicine*, vol. 16, issue 1, 2019, p. e1002740, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002740.

[11] S Démurger, 'Migration and Families Left Behind', *IZA World of Labour*, vol. 144, 2015, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.15185/izawol.144.

[12] R Surtees and L S Johnson, *Trafficking Victim Identification: A Practitioner Guide*, Regional Support Office of the Bali Process, Bangkok, and Nexus Institute, Washington, 2021.

[13] Démurger.

[14] UNODC, *Anti-human Trafficking Manual for Criminal Justice Practitioners. Module 4: Control Methods in Trafficking in Persons*, United Nations, New York, 2009.

[15] Démurger.

[16] International Labour Organization, 'Sex Industry Assuming Massive Proportions in Southeast Asia', ILO, 19 August 1998, https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/sex-industry-assuming-massive-proportions-southeast-asia.

to work and earn a decent income is even more pressing. Household heads in Indonesia have become aware of the income potential in Malaysia and encourage their daughters to migrate.[17] Prospective migrants usually acquire loans from their relatives, friends, or intermediaries involved in the migration process, so they can afford to travel.[18]

In most cases, trafficking victims are fearful of the authorities and do not want to be rescued because they want to continue working and support their family through regular or occasional remittances.[19] Although some women complain about being abused and exploited, some may have normalised these experiences, internalised negative self-worth, or have low expectations of themselves.[20] Consequently, women become exposed to 'everyday violence' and develop a sense of inferiority, which can keep them in a situation of exploitation.[21] 'Everyday violence', according to Stanko, relates to how women manage potentially dangerous situations on a daily basis and experience violence as a common occurrence. As a result, women often do not realise that they have been abused or harmed because they have become tolerant of the abuse they face.[22] By internalising 'everyday violence', women do not always regard themselves as victims, even though they have been objectively harmed.[23] Their reliance on income from trafficking for survival sustains the cycle of exploitation.[24]

[17] R Elmhirst, 'Labour Politics in Migrant Communities: Ethnicity and Women's Activism in Tangerang, Indonesia', in R Elmhirst and R Saptari (eds.), *Labour in Southeast Asia. Local Processes in a Globalised World*, Routledge, Oxon, 2004, pp. 387–406.

[18] A Kaur, 'Order (and Disorder) at the Border: Mobility, International Labour Migration and Border Controls in Southeast Asia', in A Kaur and I Metcalfe (eds.), *Mobility, Labour Migration and Border Controls in Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2006, pp. 23–51, https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230503465_3.

[19] G Forbes, 'Politics of Rescue, Voices of the Trafficked', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 51, pp. 44–45, 2016.

[20] J Dodsworth, 'Sexual Exploitation, Selling and Swapping sex: Victimhood', *Child Abuse Review*, vol. 23, issue 3, 2014, pp. 185–199, https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2282.

[21] E A Stanko, *Everyday Violence: How Women and Men Experience Sexual and Physical Danger*, Pandora, London, 1990.

[22] V Samarasinghe, 'Nepal: Young, Female and Vulnerable', in *Female Sex Trafficking in Asia: The Resilience of Patriarchy in a Changing World*, Routledge, New York, 2008.

[23] B Höijer, 'The Discourse of Global Compassion: The Audience and Media Reporting of Human Suffering', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 26, issue 4, 2004, pp. 513–531, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443704044215.

[24] R Klabbers *et al.*, 'Human Trafficking Risk Factors, Health Impacts, and Opportunities for Intervention in Uganda: A Qualitative Analysis', *Global Health Research and Policy*, vol. 8, issue 1, 2023, pp. 52, https://doi.org/10.1186/s41256-023-00332-z.

Trafficked persons are also generally unaware of organisations that can offer assistance, particularly if they are in a foreign country. Some are unable to speak the local language, restricted in terms of movement, and not familiar with the locality of the place where they reside. The lack of awareness of resources, fear of negative consequences, restrictions on movement, and the dependence on the trafficker and their income often prevent victims from seeking help. Victims may also fear retribution by the trafficker and other negative repercussions of leaving a situation of exploitation.[25] Such repercussions include not being believed by the authorities, being accused of criminal activities, shaming, and the prolonged judicial processes, all of which hinders them from being immediately repatriated. All these factors underscore the complexity of the human trafficking problem and demonstrate how trafficking is influenced by multiple determinants, which may vary across contexts and forms of exploitation.

Methodology

This paper is based on interviews with 18 trafficked migrant women held in a shelter in Selangor, Malaysia, conducted between 15 April and 15 July 2024. The questions covered women's reasons for migrating to Malaysia, their relationship with their families, remittances they received while working, and their experiences of living in the shelter. I also interviewed 3 shelter officers to gain a better understanding of the women's problems, their protection processes, and the challenges they face in their day-to-day interactions with the women. All 18 trafficked women and 3 professionals agreed to be interviewed voluntarily and signed a consent form. Although there were 38 women in the shelter during the time of the interviews, I selected only 18 because some of the women were rescued in groups during the same raid and had been working in the same place, which meant that they would have similar accounts except for their backgrounds. Most of them were also of the same nationality. Since I wanted to obtain a diverse sample of participants to identify the nuances of their accounts, I chose only two or three women from groups rescued from the same workplace.

Ethics approval was obtained from Universiti Malaya in Kuala Lumpur prior to the interviews. I also obtained a written and verbal permission from the Director-General of the Ministry of Women to access two shelter homes and conduct interviews with trafficked women and shelter wardens. Given my reputation as an anti-trafficking scholar and my previous experience interviewing trafficked women, the process of attaining access was somewhat easier than the first time. However, permission was only granted after the Director-General was convinced that the outcomes of the research would not be reported to the media and the research would be conducted based on the 'do no harm' principle, as contained

---

25   *Ibid.*

in the World Health Organization's guiding principles for interviewing trafficked women.[26] These principles were also used as a guide in drafting the interview questions.

The trafficked women are referred to by pseudonyms. They originated from Indonesia (13), Myanmar (3), India (1), and Malaysia (1), and their ages ranged from 19 to 44. Fourteen were trafficked for domestic work or cleaning, three into the sex industry, and one was forced to sell her baby. All except for one were rescued by the police from private dwellings throughout Peninsular Malaysia. One of the women with her newborn baby was rescued from an immigration office in Klang Valley.

I interviewed all eighteen participants in Malay, Indonesian, or English. In addition to the interviews, I spent 14 days in the shelter home to observe the situation and learn about the women's lives in the shelter.[27] Participant observation has been used in a variety of disciplines as a tool for collecting data about people, processes, and cultures in qualitative research.[28] Through participant observation, researchers learn about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities.[29] In this way, I was able to learn about women's day-to-day routines and understand the rules and regulations of the shelter as well as how women responded to them.

I analysed the data obtained from the interviews using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data which offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data.[30] This method can provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data. The analysis was used to explore and understand women's perceptions of financial empowerment, including the intricate details about the non-payment or under-payment of wages to which they were subjected. It also highlights how women choose to remain in situations of trafficking and exploitation due to the pressure to support their families.

---

[26]   C Zimmerman, *WHO Ethical and Safety Recommendations for Interviewing Trafficked Women*, World Health Organization, Geneva, 2003, p. 4.

[27]   For more info on the living conditions in the shelter, see Hamid, 2023.

[28]   B B Kawulich, 'Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method', *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 6, issue 2, 2005, pp. 43–70, https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.2.466.

[29]   *Ibid.*

[30]   V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2006, pp. 77–101, http://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Findings

The findings of the study reveal several key factors associated with family that can contribute to a woman's migration and exploitation experience. The data demonstrates three main themes: (i) domestic violence creates conditions that can facilitate or contribute to exploitation; (ii) the need to support family is a key reason for women to migrate for work; iii) women subsequently endure abuse and exploitation to support family and avoid the shame of returning empty-handed. These factors can combine to prolong women's experiences of exploitation or render them vulnerable to further exploitation.

Domestic Violence and Exploitation

Across the world, poverty, unemployment, and gender inequality lead men to assert their masculinity through violent means,[31] including through trafficking and other forms of violence against women. According to the International Organization for Migration, adults are often recruited into situations of trafficking by an intimate partner or family members.[32] A substantial proportion of trafficking cases involve persons with intimacy, bonds of trust, and familial ties. Lovers or spouses, for example, can sell or force young women or girls to migrate because they are in a superior position or a position of trust. This puts women at risk of being trapped in a cycle of human trafficking, violence, and exploitation.[33]

One such example is Rose, a 32-year-old Malaysian woman. Rose was exploited by her boyfriend for the purpose of selling her babies. She was unemployed and heavily dependent on her 63-year-old boyfriend for food, shelter, money, and emotional support. Rose was arrested together with her newborn baby while trying to arrange for a passport to travel abroad to sell her baby. Her boyfriend and two other individuals—a local man and a Vietnamese woman who were believed to be the potential buyers—were also arrested. Rose was upset about what happened and said:

---

[31]   Council of Europe, 'What Causes Gender-based Violence?', CoE, n.d., retrieved 6 April 2025, https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/what-causes-gender-based-violence.

[32]   L Puigvert *et al.*, 'A Systematic Review of Family and Social Relationships: Implications for Sex Trafficking Recruitment and Victimisation', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2021, pp. 534–550, https://doi.org/10.1332/20467432 1X16358719475186.

[33]   S Pandey, 'Trafficking of Children for Prostitution in West Bengal: A Qualitative Study', *The Anthropologist*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2014, pp. 591–598.

I have three children with my boyfriend and that was my third child. My boyfriend had already sold my other two babies for 12,000 ringgit[34] each. I didn't want to sell my babies, but my boyfriend said that I cannot take care of my own babies because I have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). I was only given 500 ringgit for each of my babies. My boyfriend used to beat me each time I ask[ed] for money.

In most circumstances, victims of domestic trafficking would prefer to return and live in their own houses, but in Rose's case, her mother refused to allow her to return home, saying that she was unable to care and give adequate attention to Rose.

When asked about the whereabouts of her boyfriend and her feelings about him, Rose said:

I love him very much even though he beats me. The police have caught him. He loved me very much and I don't know what to do now. I am under medication, so I am always in a daze.

A protection officer named Ms Rayd (pseudonym) said:

Rose's boyfriend is notorious for selling babies. He impregnates women in Thailand and sells the babies for profits.

Rose's story demonstrates the overlap of domestic violence and exploitation, highlighting how an offender uses a close relationship with a vulnerable woman to facilitate his exploitative behaviour.

Another example comes from Win-Win from Myanmar who also disclosed experiencing domestic violence at the hands of her boyfriend. Her story highlights how the instability of domestic violence can render women vulnerable to exploitation:

My boyfriend and I worked at a plastic factory and he used to beat me every day for petty reasons. I complained to my employer about his beatings and he terminated my boyfriend from work. My boyfriend then worked as a welder in Ipoh but was later involved in an accident. He fractured his left leg and could not walk without support. I had to go to Ipoh and help him out. I worked in a bakery to support him and my children. He kept

---

[34] Although the women refer to different periods of time, for informational purposes, on 1 June 2024, the exchange rate of 1 US dollar was approximately 4.70 Malaysian ringgits; see 'Currency Table: MYR — Malaysian Ringgit', *Xe.com*, retrieved 27 February 2025, https://www.xe.com/currencytables/?from=MYR&date=2024-06-01.

> *blaming me for his misfortune and continued beating me. I could not stand*
> *the abuse and decided to run away from him. That's when I contacted my*
> *friend who offered me to work as a waitress in Puchong but ended up being*
> *deceived, exploited, and raped by my manager.*

The above cases illustrate gender stereotypes and cultural norms which are often used to justify violence against women. Men are always presumed and accepted to be aggressive, controlling, and dominant, while women are seen as docile, meek, and subservient. These norms can become culturally ingrained attitudes that lead to high rates of abusive relationships, including exploitation.

The Need to Support Family as the Motivation for Migration

The vast majority of women interviewed (n=17) stated that the main purpose of their migration was to earn a decent income and support their families back home. For example, Awi from Paletwa, Myanmar, said:

> *I came to Malaysia because I was not earning enough money in Myanmar.*
> *There is also an ongoing war in my country. I needed to support my family,*
> *and I contacted an agent to find jobs in Malaysia.*

For Paite, war, floods, unemployment, and death of family members prompted her to migrate to Malaysia to support her family:

> *I am 26 years old from Kyataw, Myanmar, married, and have a daughter*
> *back home. I used to work at a hair salon near my village and earned 182*
> *ringgit, which is not enough to support my family. Life is difficult back*
> *home. There was a massive flood recently which destroyed a big area of my*
> *village, many of us lost our jobs. My husband, father, and brother were*
> *killed by the Junta army, and I [was] left to fend for my family. I heard*
> *that there are many Burmese working in Malaysia and that's why I decided*
> *to migrate to Malaysia. My daughter is growing up, and I need to support*
> *her education fees.*

Similarly, Sarina, aged 37, migrated to Malaysia to support her mother and 12-year-old daughter. She said:

> *I earned very little in Indonesia selling lontong [rice cakes in banana leaves]*
> *with my cousin, about 223 ringgit a month. I migrated to Malaysia because*
> *I wanted to support my mother and my daughter's school expenses. I worked*
> *as a cleaner with a company for four months and have not been paid my*
> *salary. I work[ed] for 12 to 13 hours a day, and I did not have a day*
> *rest. I am very sad because I feel like a failed mother to my daughter.*

Win–Win, aged 30 from Kyauktaw, Myanmar, was trafficked and raped by her manager before she was rescued by the police. Win-Win has two children in Myanmar and one child in Malaysia who is currently living with her boyfriend. She migrated to Malaysia in 2023 because of the civil unrest and to earn a better income, because her earnings in Myanmar were not enough to support her family. Win–Win said:

> *I arrived in Malaysia on 14 July 2023 with the help of an agent. I do not have any passport, and I entered Malaysia illegally on foot from the Thailand border through the jungle. I earned about 900 ringgit per month, and I used to remit money to my family back home... I had to work and support [my boyfriend] and my daughter.*

Another participant, Awi, said:

> *After being discharged from the hospital in April 2023, I accepted an offer to work as a waitress in Puchong with a salary of 1,600 ringgit. When I arrived at the workplace, I found that it was not a restaurant but a newly opened pub. After I entered the pub, I was not allowed to go out and had to obey to the boss's orders. I was asked to be a GRO [guest relations officer/bar hostess] in a pub and was not paid any wages until I was rescued by the police. I don't have any money now and I owe my family money. Once I am out of this shelter, I will have to work and earn enough money to pay my debts before I can return home.*

As illustrated above, women often migrate to support their families and provide financial stability in the face of poverty, war, or the loss of loved ones. However, this familial responsibility also becomes a double-edged sword. For example, women such as Win-Win and Elizabeth migrated to Malaysia to provide for their children and support their families financially, but their journeys led to exploitation and abuse. Win-Win's story in particular underscores the lengths to which women are willing to go in order to migrate illegally and endure sexual exploitation to fulfil family duties.

The interviews reveal that the family plays a critical and often complex role in motivating women to migrate, contributing to both their vulnerability and the choices they make. It illustrates how deeply ingrained familial obligations can lead women into precarious situations, because they prioritise the welfare of their loved ones over their own safety. This sense of responsibility can make women more susceptible to exploitation, as they may feel trapped in abusive situations or forced to endure harsh working conditions to send remittances home.

Supporting Family as a Reason for Enduring Abuse and Exploitation

Once in Malaysia, traffickers often control victims through threat and economic abuse, which includes withholding or underpayment of wages, or debt bondage. In some cases, traffickers or employers physically abuse their victims to silence or instil fear in them. In this study, 17 of the 18 women reported some form of wage abuse by their employers, such as unpaid overtime, arbitrary deductions, and delayed, unpaid, or withheld wages. Some also reported severe physical abuse, passport confiscation, threats, and limited freedom of movement. However, many women put up with these situations because of the need to earn money to support their families. Many also used various coping mechanisms and hoped that their employers would pay their salaries or outstanding wages.

This is demonstrated by 21-year-old Vijaya from Tamil Nadu, India, who used to work at a cotton factory and earned INR 9,000 (USD 107) per month. The amount was not enough to support her family. She wanted to migrate to Kuwait to work and earn a better income but her family did not allow it. Her parents suggested that she work in Malaysia because there are Malaysian Indians who can speak Tamil. Vijaya worked as a domestic worker in Malaysia and was subjected to prolonged abuse and starvation at times. Her employer did not pay her salary for two months and used to beat her with a baton and rubber hose. He also threatened her that the police would arrest and imprison her. She said that she endured the daily beatings because she needed the money and hoped to be paid her wages. When asked about her family back home, Vijaya said:

> *I have been in the shelter for 8 months since I was rescued. My younger brother took over my responsibility to support my family, but he was killed a few months ago. Now, my ailing father has to work in the factory to support the family because I am stuck here in the shelter. I am unable to work, and I am just idle here. I don't know when I can return home.*

Nelly, a 23-year-old woman from Kupang, Indonesia, worked as a domestic worker for a family for six months. Her agent paid her an advance salary of MYR 1,500 before she left her village. Her parents were grateful to the agent and gave Nelly their blessings before she left for Malaysia. However, Nelly suffered prolonged abuse and injuries at her workplace. Nelly said:

> *I wanted to call my agent earlier, but Madam kept promising me that she will pay my salary in one lump sum. I endured the suffering in the hope that Madam will pay my salary. I kept waiting to get paid, but they never paid me anything till today. I am now in the shelter, and I hope that they will pay me my salary and give me some compensation on the injuries I have suffered [at] their hands. My parents do not know what happened to me, and I hope that I can get paid before I am repatriated.*

In Nelly's case, her employers have been charged under section 13 of Malaysia's *Anti-Trafficking and Anti-Smuggling of Migrants Act* 2007 (ATIPSOM) and the Labour Office is trying to retrieve her unpaid wages.

Another example of a woman who suffered prolonged exploitation to support her family is Win-Win who said:

> I have not been working for many months and I am very worried about my family and my children. My mother and children know that I have been rescued by the police and placed in the shelter. I talk to them regularly on WhatsApp video calls here. They are in dire need of money, and I am helpless here. I need to work to support my family, and I will need to do that before I return to my family, I do not want to go back empty-handed... I need to work and support my family; they are all depending on me.

Rosidah, a mother of five children from Indonesia, migrated to Malaysia to work as a domestic worker. However, she was asked to do various jobs without being paid. Rosidah said:

> The employers told me that they paid my salary to the agent but I have not received a single cent. It is unfair on me and I feel cheated. I worked so hard and I have not been paid at all. I am very worried about my children back home because I left them with my neighbour and promised her that I will remit monies for my children's expenses. I don't really trust her but I had no choice. I hope she did not sell or give away my children to anyone (cries).

Nisa migrated to Malaysia to be with her Malaysian boyfriend but was later trapped in a trafficking situation. Nisa said in tears:

> I have three children in Jakarta and my mother is looking after them. I found an agent who offered me to work as a maid for 1,500 ringgit a month. I needed money to support my family because they are dependent on me. I have not received any salary. I did not know what was happening until the police rescued me and told me that I was a victim of trafficking. I need to get out of this shelter quickly, so that I can work and earn for my family. My sister is now the breadwinner of the family because I am here [in the shelter]. She always asks me to return quickly because she is tired of working and supporting all my children alone.

In some instances, the withholding of wages is used as a method to control the victims, which is illustrated in two cases discussed below. In both cases, the women's employers were wealthy and prominent individuals without financial constraints who nevertheless continued to exploit the women with impunity.

Elizabeth explained:

> *My employer is a 'Datuk' [an honorary title given by the ruler to a prominent person] and a plastic surgeon. She did not pay my salary and kept deferring to pay it. I could not leave the house because she owed me a lot of money. I was only able to remit 200 ringgit to my son. I have been in the shelter for one year and I am waiting for the lady to pay all my salary. She is being charged in court and she wants to settle the case by paying me some money. I am still waiting for my money. My son is waiting for me back home and he wants to get married. However, he vowed to only get married when I return to Indonesia. I left my son for so long and he grew up on his own because I was unable to remit any money to him. I feel very sad, but he does not blame me.*

Yati, also a domestic worker from Indonesia, was not paid her salary for six years. Her employer was also a prominent person and ran a retirement home. Yati was acutely traumatised by the experience working with her employer. She said:

> *I was forced to work long hours and had to sleep under the dining table for six years. I was sometimes given little food to eat. I still wake up in the middle of the night and cry because I am still traumatised. I was supposed to be paid 1,500 ringgit per month, but I have not been paid anything since I started working. The boss kept saying that he will pay me my salary when I go home but he never allowed me to return home. I have three children back home. I left them when they were little and asked my mother to look after them. I am supposed to send remittances to them from Malaysia, but I have not been able to do so for the past six years. I don't know what has happened to them and how they are surviving, I am still waiting for my salary to be paid and I heard that the Labour Office will help me.*

Sabariah and Dewi from Indonesia migrated to Malaysia to work as cleaners and were promised a salary of MYR 1,400 per month, which is much higher than the salary they were earning in their hometown. Sabariah, 37, has to support her 12-year-old daughter and her ailing mother, while 32-year-old Dewi had a large loan to pay in Indonesia. Her parents work on a tea plantation and make very little income. Both had to work long hours and were only paid one month's salary after working for six months. Their passports were confiscated, and they were not allowed to keep any money and not paid any overtime.

Deti, a 37-year-old woman from Indonesia who worked as a cleaner in Malaysia, has to support her two young children, mother, and six siblings. She managed to remit part of her salary but has yet to receive her full wages. She said:

*My employer owes me 17 months of salary. I was only paid for 10 months'
work, and I have remitted all my monies to my family. My boss would
send remittances and let me check the receipt. My mother and children are
facing financial difficulties, and my sisters have dropped out from school
because they cannot pay for school fees. My children are supposed to be in
elementary school, but they are unable to enrol because I am not working
and cannot send remittances. I am unable to help them. I feel helpless here.*

The existing perception towards the authorities makes it easier for offenders to
threaten victims and make these threats believable and powerful. In addition,
trafficked women often feel isolated and alienated in Malaysia, because most of
them came from different countries, are unable to speak the local language, and
are not familiar with the avenues to seek help.[35] They become alienated, highly
dependent on their traffickers, and continue to suffer in silence, which makes
it easy for the traffickers to subjugate and control them.[36] As a result, victims
continue to work for their traffickers and believe that even the minimal amount
they are being paid is better than other options available to them.

A sense of shame at being unable to send money home to family can further
cause women to remain in exploitative situations. For example, Sabariah explained:

*I feel very sad and ashamed of returning home because my family is
expecting me to bring home money. In my village, people thinks that I am
in prison in Malaysia, although I told my mother that I am in a shelter.
Because I am unable to go home and have to stay in the shelter, they consider
it a prison.*

These interview excerpts demonstrate how women are willing to endure various
forms of abuse, including exploitation, mistreatment, and harsh working
conditions to provide financial support for their families. Their sense of
responsibility and obligation towards their loved ones often compels them to
tolerate suffering, as they view their sacrifices as necessary for the well-being of
their children, spouses, siblings, or parents. Additionally, many of the women are
reluctant to return home empty-handed, fearing the disappointment or financial
hardship their families may face given that they have been working abroad. In
such circumstances, they risk being labelled as 'failed migrants,' which can bring
shame and embarrassment not only to themselves but also to their families. As
a result, they may choose to remain in difficult and exploitative circumstances
rather than returning home without money or financial means.

---

[35]　H B A Hamid, 'Sex Traffickers: Friend or Foe', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 18, 2022,
pp. 87–102, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201222186.

[36]　*Ibid.*

Conclusion

This article explored the interrelationships between exploitative practices, financial empowerment, and trafficked women's motivations for migration. It demonstrated that women's reasons for migration are often tied to fulfilling family needs and the desire to improve their family's economic status.[37] But in their quest to enhance their economic situation, women can be trafficked, exploited, and sometimes subjected to prolonged abuse. However, the abuse does not only come from the traffickers or employers but can also be inflicted by their spouses or partners. As some of the cases discussed highlight, domestic violence can have a close connection to exploitation, and coercive techniques can be used by intimate partners to facilitate exploitation.

Traffickers blackmail and subjugate victims by withholding or underpaying their wages. While it is clear that the women have suffered immense hardship and pain while waiting for their salaries, there may also be other factors that contribute to this victimisation, such as the need to fulfil their duties as a good mother, wife, or daughter, as well as the fear of being labelled a 'failed migrant' or the shame of returning home without adequate earnings. While the focus of this research was on women's financial empowerment and income, further research is needed to explore the possible responses from the family members of trafficked women.

To conclude, although remittances from exploitative work can augment families' incomes and improve their financial strength, they can also bring a sense of insecurity and pose a high risk of harm that can significantly impact families. While the income gained from working abroad can provide trafficked women and their families with a sense of empowerment, status, autonomy, freedom, and self-esteem, it may come at the expense of enduring severely exploitative practices.

Dr Haezreena Begum Abdul Hamid is a Criminologist and Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of Law, Universiti Malaya. Her career is dedicated to exploring critical issues such as human trafficking, terrorism, incarceration, gender, human rights, and sexual violence. She has made significant contributions to the field of human trafficking through her books, scholarly articles, and presentations at both local and international conferences. Email: haezreena@um.edu.my

---

[37] H Zlotnik, 'Migration and the Family: The Female Perspective', *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal*, vol. 4, issue 2–3, 1995, pp. 253–271, https://doi.org/10.1177/011719689500400205.

Ethiopian Domestic Workers and Exploitative Labour in the Middle East: The role of social networks and gender in migration decisions

Lauren N. Moton, Stephen Abeyta, Meredith Dank, and Tsigereda Tafesse Mulugeta

Abstract

Migrant domestic work in the Middle East is known for high rates of exploitative labour. Despite this fact, many women from Africa pursue this work as a gendered familial expectation or means of financial gain, among other motivations. In this article, we centralise how personal social networks—family, friends, peers, and communities—act as motivating factors for prospective migrant domestic workers in Ethiopia looking to travel for work in the Middle East. The analysis of 100 in-depth interviews with women migrant domestic workers seeking employment in the Middle East demonstrates that social networks and gender influence migration decisions in complicated, multifaceted, and sometimes contradictory ways. Social networks also play an important role in facilitating entry into domestic work for Ethiopian women and in seeking help when they experience exploitative conditions in the Middle East.

Introduction

A simple news search of the words 'Ethiopia' and 'domestic work' uncovers a litany of headlines reporting exploitative working conditions for Ethiopian domestic workers who have travelled abroad to pursue job opportunities. The uniquely abusive context defining the labour conditions of Ethiopian domestic workers

is not a new or unknown phenomenon.[1] Research has sought to understand the mechanisms undergirding the domestic work industry's existence for decades, with organisations like UNICEF conducting global research on the domestic work of youth as early as the 1990s.[2] During each stage of their migration and work, Ethiopian domestic workers are placed in a position of heightened risk of experiencing physical and sexual violence, unsafe working conditions, and long working hours for low pay.[3] Working in such contexts is detrimental to physical and emotional health, which may include the contraction of chronic illnesses, increased cancer and Tuberculosis risks, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unwanted pregnancies.[4] In response to an increase in outward migration during 2011 and 2012, along with rising concerns about abuse, exploitation, and the trafficking of workers, the Ethiopian government enacted a temporary ban on all labour migration to the Middle East from October 2013 to October 2018 to enhance the protection of its citizens.[5] This ban was succeeded by 'safer migration' policies referred to as Overseas Employment Proclamations, which focus on the regulation of employment agencies outside of Ethiopia.[6] Despite these changes, exploitation and adverse work experiences persist for Ethiopian migrant domestic workers.

1   R Begum, 'Domestic Workers in Middle East Risk Abuse amid COVID-19 Crisis', Human Rights Watch, 6 April 2020; J Busza, Z Shewamene, and C Zimmerman, *The Role of Agents and Brokers in Facilitating Ethiopian Women into Domestic Work in the Middle East: Findings from the Meneshachin ('Our Departure') Study on Responsible Recruitment Models*, Freedom Fund, London, 2022; M De Regt, 'Ethiopian Women Increasingly Trafficked to Yemen', *Forced Migration Review*, vol. 1, issue 25, 2006; R Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work*, Stanford University Press, 2015.

2   M Black and J Blagbrough, *Child Domestic Work*, Innocenti Digest, vol. 5, UNICEF, Florence, 1999.

3   A Bisong, *Regulating Recruitment and Protection of African Migrant Workers in the Gulf and the Middle East*, ECDPM, 2021; P Kodoth, *In the Shadow of the State: Recruitment and Migration of South Indian Women as Domestic Workers to the Middle East*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2020.

4   B Fernandez, 'Health Inequities Faced by Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers in Lebanon', *Health & Place*, vol. 50, 2018, pp. 154–161, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2018.01.008; L D Gezie et al., 'Sexual Violence at Each Stage of Human Trafficking Cycle and Associated Factors: A Retrospective Cohort Study on Ethiopian Female Returnees via Three Major Trafficking Corridors', *BMJ Open*, vol. 9, issue 7, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-024515.

5   International Labour Office, *Policy Brief: Key Findings and Recommendations from Survey on Labour Migration from Ethiopia to Gulf Cooperation Council States and Lebanon*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2019.

6   Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), *Ethiopian's Overseas Employment (Amendment) Proclamation No. 1246/2021*, Federal Negarit Gazeta of FDRE, Addis Ababa, 2021.

A myriad of factors—including economic, conflict-based, gendered, social, and environmental motivations—contribute to Ethiopian domestic workers' decisions to find economic opportunities abroad. In this article, we explore the largely unexplored topic of how familial and community social ties impact Ethiopian women domestic workers' decisions to seek out notoriously exploitative work abroad. In the next section, we outline domestic work, its importance to Ethiopia, and its place within the broader literature on labour exploitation in the Middle East. We then frame the study through social networks and migration theory, and as well as through gender analyses, to unpack the processes by which social ties and gender affect domestic worker migration from Ethiopia to the Middle East. Then we present empirical data from interviews with 100 Ethiopian domestic workers. We explore how social networks offer guidance to working in destination countries, the role social networks play in facilitating employment, and how familial financial responsibilities influence the decision of Ethiopian workers to migrate. We conclude that changes to the recruitment and migration process as well as greater awareness of harms associated with migratory labour are crucial to minimising the prevalence of exploitative labour for migrants, as is greater availability of decent, living wage work options within Ethiopia.

Literature Review

Ethiopia is one of Africa's primary countries of origin for low-wage domestic workers for countries in the Middle East.[7] While it is unclear to what degree this employment industry is growing or shrinking, it is clear that a significant number of Ethiopian citizens—particularly women—pursue work in the Middle East that is characterised by employment in private residences for the purposes of cleaning, cooking, childcare, and caregiving for sick or old family members. This type of domestic work has minimal entry requirements and thus typically attracts women, particularly from communities that lack adequate employment and education opportunities.[8]

---

[7]   A Moors *et al.*, 'Migrant Domestic Workers: A New Public Presence in the Middle East?', in S Shami, *Publics, Politics and Participation: Locating the Public Sphere in the Middle East and North Africa*, Social Science Research Council, New York, 2009, pp. 151–175; Z Shewamene *et al.*, 'Migrant Women's Health and Safety: Why Do Ethiopian Women Choose Irregular Migration to the Middle East for Domestic Work?', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 19, issue 20, 2022, p. 13085, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192013085.

[8]   B Fernandez, *Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers: Migrant Agency and Social Change*, 1st Ed., Springer, Cham, 2019.

There are many factors behind these migration trends. The impetus for seeking employment in domestic work often begins with familial livelihood. Poverty and a lack of access to consistent work in Ethiopia often drive individuals to seek stable employment by any means necessary.[9] Economic need creates pressure on those migrating to do so for the benefit of their entire family. For example, in one study, Ethiopian women expressed that they were pressured by their families to leave their households to pursue more immediate employment opportunities to contribute financially.[10] For others, domestic work is simply the best of very few options for economic advancement and stability.[11]

Researchers have noted that there is also a suite of nuanced factors aside from poverty and financial gain that contribute to migration motivations. A country's immigration policies can play a role in attracting foreign domestic workers. For example, countries with immigration policies that target specific geographical areas to attract workers often create a relatively stable flow of migrants from their target countries.[12] To this end, Ethiopian migrants may view domestic work abroad as an attractive option due to targeted marketing and the availability of roles and immigration pathways. Other structural mechanisms at both industrial and geopolitical levels can also encourage migration.[13] One example of this is the proliferation of industries created to aid unregulated migration, such as informal migration agencies helping to provide transport and other resources to migrants.[14] The relatively rapid modernisation of Ethiopia has also increased the ease of pursuing work abroad.

Factors within Ethiopia, such as a lack of education for women and girls, also encourages migration. Despite efforts to encourage primary education, child marriages for girls significantly limit their opportunities for pursuing higher education. The dropout rate among female students is considerably higher than that of males, and girls frequently bear the burden of household chores, which

---

9   G A Zewdu, 'Ethiopian Female Domestic Labour Migration to the Middle East: Patterns, Trends, and Drivers', *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 11, issue 1, 2018, pp. 6–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2017.1342976.

10   K Schewel, 'Aspiring for Change: Ethiopian Women's Labor Migration to the Middle East', *Social Forces*, vol. 100, issue 4, 2022, pp. 1619–1641, https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soab051.

11   *Ibid.*; Fernandez, 2018.

12   G Hugo, 'Migration and Development in Low-Income Countries: A Role for Destination Country Policy?', *Migration and Development*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2012, pp. 24–49, https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2012.709806.

13   G Adugna, 'Migration Patterns and Emigrants' Transnational Activities: Comparative Findings from Two Migrant Origin Areas in Ethiopia', *Comparative Migration Studies*, vol. 7, 2019, pp. 1–28, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-018-0107-1.

14   Zewdu.

can hinder their ability to attend school.[15] Because they have lower educational attainment than men, domestic work is one of the few options that women have to obtain paid work. It is also a highly gendered form of labour and relatively easy to obtain abroad, and therefore, it is a common route for Ethiopian women and girls to pursue.

Ethiopian domestic workers have noted challenges in differentiating between credible and fraudulent recruiters. Many believe that the dangers of both pathways are comparable but wish to bypass the lengthy bureaucratic processes linked to official migration procedures.[16] They have reported preferring irregular migration due to its fewer formalised barriers, which offers an increased perception of autonomy over the journey. It is important to note that both regular and irregular migration carry the risk of abusive and exploitative employment.[17]

There is a tendency to frame any component of legal migration or domestic work as 'safe' and illegal options as 'unsafe'. In reality, safety and legality act more as semi-disconnected spectrums. For example, migrants who use legal routes to the Middle East may still face exploitation due to the *kafala* system, which limits job mobility, permits employers to retain control of workers' passports, and can result in wage theft, forced labour, and physical abuse, especially among domestic workers. Victims often have little recourse due to the significant power imbalance with their employers.[18]

The *kafala* system is typically found in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Bahrain, Kuwait, UAE, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Qatar), and other countries like Lebanon and Jordan.[19] Bahrain and Qatar assert that they

---

[15] Women Watch, 'Ethiopia National Action Plan', United Nations, n.d., retrieved 11 February 2025, https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/country/national/ethiopia. htm.

[16] Fernandez, 2019; Shewamene *et al.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] J Busza *et al.*, 'Accidental Traffickers: Qualitative Findings on Labour Recruitment in Ethiopia', *Globalization and Health*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2023, pp. 102-115, https://doi. org/10.1186/s12992-023-01005-9.

[19] A Pande, '"The Paper That You Have in Your Hand Is My Freedom": Migrant Domestic Work and the Sponsorship (Kafala) System in Lebanon', *International Migration Review*, vol. 47, issue 2, 2013, pp. 414–441, https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12025; S Damir-Geilsdorf and M Pelican, 'Between Regular and Irregular Employment: Subverting the Kafala System in the GCC Countries', *Migration and Development*, vol. 8, issue 2, 2019, pp. 155–175, https://doi.org/10.1080/21632324.2018.1479215; H N Malaeb, 'The "Kafala" System and Human Rights: Time for a Decision', *Arab Law Quarterly*, vol. 29, issue 4, 2015, pp. 307–342, http://doi.org/10.1163/15730255-12341307.

have eliminated the system, but critics argue that the reforms lack effective enforcement and do not truly constitute abolition. The framework typically falls under the authority of interior ministries instead of labour ministries, which means workers often lack the protections afforded by the host nation's labour laws. This increases workers' susceptibility to exploitation and strips them of rights such as the ability to engage in labour disputes or join unions. Additionally, since workers' employment and residency visas are interconnected and can only be renewed or cancelled by their sponsors, this arrangement gives individual sponsors—not the government—control over workers' legal statuses, leading to a significant power imbalance that can be misused. In most cases, workers must obtain their sponsor's consent to change jobs, quit, or travel in and out of the host country. Departing from their job without this permission is considered an offense that can lead to the loss of their legal status and possibly imprisonment or deportation, even if they are escaping abusive circumstances. As a result, workers often have limited options when faced with exploitation, prompting many experts to suggest that this system contributes to human trafficking.[20]

Social Networks, Migration Theory, and Gender

Studies on transnational migration indicate that existing social networks in destination countries play a significant role in workers' decisions to migrate and in their overall migration experiences.[21] The concept of a migration network encompasses the complex web of personal connections through which migrants engage with their family, friends, and community members. These social networks serve as a basis for sharing information and offering support and assistance while navigating a new country.[22] Social networks usually include people from a migrant's country or hometown, or those who share similar cultural and language backgrounds. Having a strong and diverse social network offers many advantages, such as help with finding jobs, support during times of transition, emotional support, opportunities for social activities, and assistance during difficult times.

Our particular focus here is on the family and relationships with other community members (i.e. friends, acquaintances, etc.), as these connections act as a significant factor in migration. This is particularly clear when examining how an individual's

---

[20] K Robinson, 'What Is The Kafala System?', Council on Foreign Relations, 18 November 2022, retrieved 9 February 2025, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system; Pande.

[21] H M Choldin, 'Kinship Networks in the Migration Process', *International Migration Review*, vol. 7, issue 2, 1973, pp. 163–176, https://doi.org/10.1177/019791837300700203.

[22] S Haug, 'Migration Networks and Migration Decision-Making', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 34, issue 4, 2008, pp. 585–605, https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830801961605.

position in the family, their upbringing, and the support of their family can impact their decision to migrate.[23] We draw on the work of several migration scholars—Choldin,[24] Ritchey,[25] Coombs,[26] and Hugo[27]—who have put forth a number of hypotheses that explain the intersection of social networks and migration decisions. Specifically, we use three of these hypotheses to analyse Ethiopian women's decisions to migrate for domestic work: the information hypothesis, encouraging hypothesis, and facilitating hypothesis.

The information hypothesis asserts that the likelihood of moving to a different location increases when an individual has social connections who already reside there.[28] The appeal of relocating to these areas is heightened due to their network's familiarity with living conditions and job prospects in the destination country. The decision to migrate is heavily influenced by the extent of social connections one has at the destination and the information available through these relationships.[29] The encouraging hypothesis states that families may motivate their members to move abroad for work, often as a tactic to secure the family's finances.[30] Finally, the facilitating hypothesis suggests that friends and family members who have already migrated aid in the migration of those in their home country by helping them adjust to the new area, such as by assisting with job searches, providing material support, offering encouragement, and introducing them to new social connections.[31]

An additional lens to help contextualise these migration hypotheses is examining how gender plays a role in migration decisions. Patterns of socialisation, norms, and roles associated with gender significantly shape who migrates, the reasons for migration, and the methods used. In a patriarchal society, dominant gender norms affect women's opportunities for education and employment, as well as

---

[23] *Ibid.*

[24] Choldin.

[25] P N Ritchey, 'Explanations of Migration', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 2, issue 1, 1976, pp. 363–404, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.02.080176.002051.

[26] G Coombs, 'Opportunities, Information Networks and the Migration-Distance Relationship', *Social Networks*, vol. 1, issue 3, 1978, pp. 257–276.

[27] G J Hugo, 'Village-Community Ties, Village Norms, and Ethnic and Social Networks: A Review of Evidence from the Third World', *Migration Decision Making*, 1981, pp. 186–224, http://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-026305-2.50013-9; O Stark, *The Migration of Labor*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1991; Choldin.

[28] Ritchey.

[29] Coombs.

[30] Hugo.

[31] Choldin; Ritchey.

their ability to make independent decisions regarding migration.[32] In addition to financial motivations, higher foreign demand for stereotypically gendered occupations as well as shifting gender norms in origin countries have shaped the conditions for migration. Together, social networks, migration theory hypotheses, and gender analyses help us think about the various familial and community-related factors that impact Ethiopian domestic workers' migration decisions for potentially exploitative work in Middle Eastern countries.

Methods

We draw our data from a broader study, titled 'Exploring Vulnerability and Resilience to Forced Labor among Ethiopian Domestic Workers in the Middle East: A Panel Design'. We used a social network framework to explore the experiences of Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East and determine how these experiences either made workers more vulnerable or helped them develop resilience in situations of exploitative labour. The current analysis seeks to specifically examine how the social networks of prospective Ethiopian domestic workers impact their migration decisions to seek potentially exploitative work in the Middle East.

Over the course of one year, from October 2022 to October 2023, interviews were conducted with 100 Ethiopian women prospectively seeking domestic work abroad (see Table 1 for demographics). Our recruitment procedures relied on a local consultant and co-author of this article, in partnership with a domestic worker-led non-governmental organisation. Using a non-probability snowball sampling method, the team developed initial contact with the target population by tapping the organisation's existing social networks. The authors acknowledge that the recruitment method through a partner organisation and a non-probability snowball sampling method may have caused bias in our participant sample. As the first group of participants were selected from one particular social network, the sample could have been significantly shaped by the connections of that network, possibly excluding individuals from different social groups. Additionally, homophily bias could occur where participants recommend others who have comparable traits or beliefs, resulting in a sample that lacks diversity and may disproportionately reflect specific perspectives.[33] However, given that the target population can be difficult to reach, the snowball sampling method proved most

32 M Z Eresso, 'Sisters on the Move: Ethiopia's Gendered Labour Migration Milieu', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, vol. 53, issue 1, pp. 27–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2018.1519451.

33 D D Heckathorn and C J Cameron, 'Network Sampling: From Snowball and Multiplicity to Respondent-driven Sampling', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 43, 2017, pp. 101–119, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-060116-053556.

effective in recruiting the largest sample of participants to diversify perspectives. Table 1 demonstrates the key demographics of the interview participants. All interviewees are women and mostly young adults ranging from 18 to 30 years old. There is about an even split between participants who are married, divorced, and separated and those who are single. There is a similar split between those who have children and do not. Most commonly, participants reached primary or secondary education. The majority of women are from the Oromia region and mostly looking for domestic work in the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.

Table 1. Demographics of Ethiopian Interview Participants

Age	N=100
18–21	17
22–25	45
26–30	27
31–35	6
36-40	5
Marital Status	
Single	51
Married/Engaged	40
Divorced	9
Number of Children	
0	57
1	25
2	5
3	2
Have children but did not mention how many	11
Highest Level of Education Attained	
No formal education	3
Up to 8th year	49
9th to 12th year	40
Finished high school	4
College diploma	4
Region Where Respondents Grew Up	
Addis Ababa	11
Oromia	48
Amhara	20
SNNPR	21
Destination Country	
Bahrain	1
UAE	37
Jordan	49
Qatar	13

While all participants were prospectively seeking domestic work in the Middle East, some had prior experience working there and had since returned to Ethiopia but were now seeking to go back again. All participants had not yet departed and were interviewed while they searched for work or awaited to go abroad for employment they had already secured.

Data Analysis

All the qualitative interviews were either documented through notes or recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by transcribers proficient in multiple languages. The research team employed thematic analysis, an approach in qualitative research that involves identifying, organising, analysing, describing, and reporting patterns and themes found within a set of data.[34] After inputting the interview data into the dataset, the team identified recurring responses to establish themes in the data. During the coding process, the coders were guided by Ritchey's and Hugo's information, encouraging, and facilitating hypotheses and the findings are grouped by each of the hypotheses below.[35] In order to maintain the trustworthiness of our qualitative data analysis, a portion of the interviews coded by each analyst was reviewed by another member of the research team to ensure consistency in coding.[36]

Findings

Our analysis indicates that the Ethiopian women domestic workers in our sample were motivated to seek work abroad in ways that aligned with all three migration hypotheses: information hypothesis, encouraging hypothesis, and facilitating hypothesis. Our findings are delineated below.

---

[34] V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2006, pp. 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706 qp063oa.

[35] Hugo, 1981; Ritchey.

[36] P J Lavrakas, *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, 2008; P Schwartz-Shea, 'Judging Quality: Evaluative Criteria and Epistemic Communities', in D Yanow and P Schwartz-Shea (eds.), *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, Routledge, New York, 2015, pp. 120–146.

Information Hypothesis

Social Networks as a Guide to Working in Destination Countries

Prospective Ethiopian domestic workers often select their destination country in ways that align with the information hypothesis whereby they select a particular country because they have social connections there. Over half (52%) reported that they already knew someone in the destination country in which they have obtained or were searching for employment. They often sought advice from a sibling, cousin, or friend to help them determine whether a destination country was safe, had similar language or religious beliefs, and had employers with a good reputation.

Additionally, prospective migrant domestic workers may not be familiar with the language, customs, or laws, or where to seek help if they are in danger or in need of resolving a dispute with an employer. Ethiopian women commonly support each other but often struggle to access essential information during emergencies. Where to seek help and obtain contact details for Ethiopian community support networks is typically shared informally through word of mouth.[37]

Participants expressed a range of groups to whom they would reach out if they were in need of help in relation to their job placement or employer, particularly in reference to exploitative or abusive work situations. Thirty-nine percent of the women said that they would reach out to the employment agency or broker that connected them to their job for help. One woman stated: 'I will contact the employment agency. That is what they told us at the [pre-departure] orientation'. Participants also commonly explained that they would contact their friends or family members to advocate on their behalf to the proper channels if they needed help. Women often expressed a lack of confidence in the partners of the employment agencies in the destination country or the Ethiopian embassies and consulates. Twenty-eight percent said they would seek help from their parents, siblings, spouses, aunts, in-laws, or other domestic workers with whom they had become friends in the destination country. For example, one woman stated: 'I will call my friend [redacted] and other Ethiopians nearby for help'. Another participant noted that family members with experience working abroad might know the process of getting help, stating: 'I'm not sure, maybe I could contact my brother-in-law even though he is working in another country'. Others noted they would rely on family members to get a message to the employment agency, saying, for example 'I will call my spouse so that he can contact the employment agency in Addis Ababa'.

---

[37]   M Dank and S Zhang, *Between Hope and Hardship: Migration and Work Experiences of Ethiopian Domestic Workers in Jordan, Kuwait and Lebanon*, Freedom Fund, London, 2024.

Some women expressed that they were familiar with multiple sources of assistance: 'I will contact my cousin, the employment agency, or the Ethiopian embassy'. In only 13% of responses, government agencies in the destination countries were places to go for help: 'I think I can reach out to government agencies such as police or social services if I need help'. Conversely, there were many participants who did not know where to seek help. Another 28% did not know one source to which they could reach out for assistance in risky or dangerous situations. These women often simply stated: 'I don't know where to go'. Two participants referred to their church community or 'God' as a source of refuge in case they needed assistance: 'I don't know anyone I can reach out to for help except God'. Despite the varied levels of knowledge concerning where to turn to for help in an abusive work situation, overall, participants mostly relied on their social networks for information regarding help-seeking and knew fewer direct or formal channels of assistance.

Encouraging Hypothesis

Familial Financial Responsibilities

Familial and community-related dynamics in Ethiopia served as motivating factors for prospective domestic workers seeking employment in the Middle East. All women and their families faced significant economic challenges due to lack of employment opportunities in Ethiopia. This deficit puts the women and their families in vulnerable positions by making them desperate for any available options to sustain their livelihoods. This situation can subsequently lead women to accept jobs that may end up being exploitative. However, intersecting with economic constraints, familial dynamics frame migration as a gendered phenomenon. There is a deeply rooted cultural investment into women and girls' migration as a way to contribute financially to support their families. These factors align with the encouraging hypothesis whereby social networks motivate their loved ones to move abroad for work to contribute to their household financially.

Several participants noted that their spouses had a significant influence on their decision to go abroad: 'There are better employment opportunities to support my family, but it was my husband's decision [for me to go abroad]'. And, 'I went to work abroad because my spouse decided that I should go and work there to support our family'.

As discussed, Ethiopian women commonly seek domestic labour abroad in order to supplement their household income. Nearly one-third of interviewees (32%) cited their need to financially support their own family as a central motivating factor to migrate: 'I just want to make more money to support my family and have a better life in the future'. Others specified their motivation to provide for their children: 'I want to make money to raise my children'. Similarly: 'I want to

get a better income and support my child. I want to give her a better life than what she has now'.

Five participants had other family-related motivations to seek work abroad that were not associated with supporting their families. For example, some described that this may provide a pathway to financial independence *from* their family: 'I decided to go find better employment to support myself. My family is pressuring me to marry and I am not ready for that before becoming financially independent'. Another participant noted: 'I am dependent on my uncle now. I want to become financially independent'. Regardless of the relational dynamic with their families and communities in Ethiopia, the prospective domestic workers were pushed to find work abroad in order to fulfil their financial needs, wants, or obligations. In a way, familial and gendered factors facilitating the pursuit of work abroad act as two sides of the same coin: on the one hand is the motivation to financially support one's family; on the other, make enough money to gain independence.

An overwhelming majority (82%) of the women reported that they plan to send all or a portion of their earnings back home to family members, specifically their parents, siblings, spouses, children, or extended family. Some noted that they would send their entire salary home: 'I will send all of my salary home'. This is often because the women expect that their family will save part of the money they are sending, since they do not feel they can store their money safely in the employer's home.

Others discussed their plan to send a portion of their salary home but save some to support themselves throughout the duration of their work placement or for personal reasons: 'I will send some of it [money earned] home for my parents and save the rest of my salary for myself'. Similarly, another participant remarked: 'I will send all of my salary to my children. If I can provide for all their needs and still have some money left, then I will save it'. Those who desired to save their earnings for their personal needs still kept the needs of their family in mind: 'I will save it for myself. If there is an emergency, I will of course send some money to my family'. Even the participants who did not plan to send money directly home noted their plan to save it to make purchases to sustain the livelihood of their family: 'I plan to save up my money and build a house for me and my children when I return home'.

In some cases, the families had squandered all of the money the women had sent back home or claimed the women's earnings as their own. One participant described:

> *My main reason is to make enough money to build a house. I had built a house with my ex-husband with the money I sent him. But when we got divorced, he claimed it as his house and took it from me.*

Many participants indicated that they needed to pay off the debt they owe to whoever financed their journey abroad. Seventeen percent of participants discussed their priority of first paying off their debts: 'After paying back my debt, I will send half of the money to my family and save the rest'. Another discussed the importance of sending a portion of her money home while simultaneously paying off her debt: 'In the first year I will send all my salary home to support my family and repay my debt. After that I will start saving for myself'. It is clear that the women felt a strong sense of responsibility to their familial social networks and debt repayment before using their earnings toward their own wants and needs.

Facilitating Hypothesis

Social Networks and the Facilitation of Employment

Outside of seeking the assistance of an employment agency, domestic workers frequently tapped into their social networks to help them informally find work. This aligns with the facilitating hypothesis because the domestic workers' social networks are assisting them with finding a job and adjusting to the new country. Twenty-one percent of participants described that one or more individuals in their social network—such as siblings, parents, extended family, friends, and other domestic workers—helped or were helping them gain employment in their chosen destination country.

When asked how they found, or are finding, work in the Middle East, many specifically noted their siblings, parents, and friends: '[I found work] through my brother who is also working in Dubai'. Or, 'My sister, who is working in Dubai, [helped me find a job]. My mother whom I am staying with now is also helping me'. Others drew on multiple resources to facilitate their employment abroad: 'I found work through an employment agency and my friend who already works there'. Having existing relationships in certain countries influences prospective workers to choose domestic work in a specific destination country in order to have a network when they arrive.

Additionally, it is common for prospective Ethiopian migrant domestic workers to use brokers and employment agencies to help speed up and ease the process.[38] Integrated with assistance from their social connections, almost all participants utilised services from formal or informal brokers and agencies to obtain and facilitate employment in the Middle East. When using the services of agents and brokers, prospective domestic workers are required to pay for various materials and documentation prior to migrating. These include documents like passports,

---

38   L N Moton, M Dank, S Zhang, and T Tafesse, *'They Don't Give You Accurate Information About Anything'. Pre-migration Experiences of Ethiopian Migrant Domestic Workers*, Freedom Fund, London, 2024; Shewamene *et al.*

Certificate of Competency training, medical exams, and general broker fees.[39]

Prospective workers utilise different migration procedures depending on whether they migrate formally or informally, but many times, they are linked with employment agencies through brokers. These brokers can exploit women's lack of information by requiring a fee (a non-standardised amount the brokers determine) to assist with recruitment and travel arrangements. In our sample, some women paid as much as ETB 100,000 (approximately USD 1,800) for this service, with the average payment being ETB 25,000 (around USD 450). Commonly, our participants reported that they made the advance payment but did not know how much more they would be asked to pay by the brokers or employment agencies. They expressed that it is not clear how the brokers and employment agencies determine the amount of money prospective workers must pay for their journey.

To avoid being directly indebted to the agencies, domestic workers will sometimes borrow money from their relatives and friends, which aligns with the facilitating hypothesis. Their family members, whether those in the home country or those who have migrated to the destination country, provide material support to the migrant domestic worker to pay fees and debts associated with the migration process. While nearly half of the participants in our study noted borrowing funds for the employment process, 17% specifically identified individuals within their personal networks as providing financial assistance. Siblings and in-laws were particularly common as sources of financial support to pay for migration costs: 'My sister. She is the one paying for the process and my travel'. As noted above, family and friends who have experience working abroad were also keen to assist. When asked if they took on debt from the employment agency, a participant answered: 'No, my sister sent me the money I needed [from doing domestic work in Dubai]'. Similarly: 'My brother-in-law is paying for my journey. I borrowed 10,000 birr [USD 175] so far, and I don't know how much more I need to borrow from him'. In addition to providing financial assistance, some family members provide other sources of support while the women work abroad: 'My mother in-law is the one supporting me, lending me the money for the travel and taking care of my children in my absence… I borrowed 20,000 birr [USD 350] from [her]'. Generally, women in this study commonly relied on their family members as forms of financial and interpersonal support during the process of facilitating and migrating for employment overseas.

---

[39] L Olynyk, *Meneshachin Scoping Study: A Global Synthesis and Analysis of Responsible Recruitment Initiatives Targeting Low-wage, Migrant Workers*, Freedom Fund, London, 2020.

Discussion

Our findings illustrate that the social networks of prospective Ethiopian domestic workers have a large influence on their decisions to seek work in Middle Eastern countries. Particularly, women pursue this type of employment because there is a demand for domestic work in the Middle East, it is relatively easy to obtain, and provides a way for them to financially support their families in their home country. The structure and roles of a family can impact the decision-making process for migration, both directly and indirectly. Ethiopian women migrate to the Middle East for domestic work mainly because of the scarce economic opportunities in their home country and their limited access to education. This compels them to pursue higher wages and support their families by taking on labour like domestic work in the Middle East, even though these positions can involve the dangers of exploitation and harsh working environments.[40] These circumstances align with the broader international migration literature and the 'encouraging hypothesis' which emphasises that members of a family in an economic crisis—whether they are living in the home country or abroad—may motivate their loved one to migrate.[41] This encouragement is for the economic well-being of the family and is also contextualised by gendered notions of labour and family roles (e.g. women may be encouraged to pursue domestic work, while men may seek construction jobs).

The current study's findings demonstrate that many Ethiopian women are motivated to migrate for work to support their families in situations where they have few other choices for work outside the home. The findings also highlight that interdependent support and relationships are formed and sustained through the process of overseas employment. Domestic workers select certain destination countries because they can rely on their families and community members already living there to provide them with necessary information about the destination. This reflects both the 'information hypothesis' and Harbison's argument that the organisation and operation of families are not just extra factors for consideration but serve as central and strategic motivators in migratory decision-making processes.[42] Families pass on information and influence the motivations and values of individuals, ultimately shaping migration norms, and as a result, they directly and indirectly impact decisions about migration.

---

[40] Shewamene *et al.*

[41] Hugo, 1981; Stark.

[42] S F Harbison, 'Family Structure and Family Strategy in Migration Decision Making', *Migration Decision Making*, 1981, pp. 225–251, http://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-08-026305-2.50014-0.

Moreover, our participants' existing social ties in the destination country also help expedite their travel, secure their documents, and finance their journeys. This finding maps to Ritchey's 'facilitating hypothesis' where individuals who have access to valuable social connections are encouraged to move to new places because they can receive financial aid and practical assistance to support their journey and obtain employment.[43] Additionally, social networks supported the migrant domestic workers by helping them secure employment in the destination country and adjust to their new setting.

Our findings on familial financial responsibilities align strongly with the literature on gender and migration, which has shown that societal pressures on young girls and women often precipitate migration decisions. Scholars argue that in many circumstances where poverty is a driving factor for labour migration, women have limited influence in decision-making, with most choices being made to benefit their families.[44] Research in other African and Central American countries supports that women migrants are more likely to send remittances and provide financial support to their families compared to men. Additionally, scholars find that women tend to remit a larger portion of their earnings with greater consistency and frequency.[45] However, it is important to note that there were some cases in our sample where women migrated due to their personal ambitions and not because of their family responsibilities. This decision was often framed as gaining independence from the family, thereby further demonstrating the central role of family in an individual's decision to migrate for work.

The findings from this study broaden our understanding of the impact of social networks, particularly family and community relationships, and gender on migration. They also demonstrate how these relationships fill structural gaps, like the limited oversight of employment agencies and brokers and the lack of well-advertised and available help-seeking options, within the home and destination countries.

Policy Implications

The results of this study suggest several potential policy interventions to address the exploitative labour conditions experienced by Ethiopian domestic workers in the Middle East. While some policy attempts have been made to address the

---

43   Ritchey.

44   L A Oucho, *Migration Decision-making of Kenyan and Nigerian Women in London: The Role of Culture, Family and Networks*, PhD Thesis, University of Warwick, 2012, http://doi.org/10.13140/2.1.5007.2968.

45   C D Deere *et al.*, *Gender, Remittances and Asset Accumulation in Ecuador and Ghana*, UN Women, New York, 2015.

issue, exploitative work still remains. For example, in March 2023, the Ethiopian government launched an initiative to enlist 500,000 women for domestic work in Saudi Arabia, aligning with its commitment to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM). As stated by the Ethiopian Ministry of Labor and Skills, this formalised process aims to safeguard the lives, earnings, and overall welfare of Ethiopians in Saudi Arabia, thereby reducing the risks associated with irregular migration. The Ethiopian and Saudi Arabian ministries of labour implemented several essential measures to ensure that domestic workers receive training to understand Saudi regulations, cultural practices, and the specifics of their employment contracts.[46] A key component of this effort is the establishment of the National Partnership Coalition (NPC), which has continued the efforts of the National Anti-Trafficking and Smuggling Taskforce. The NPC comprises a diverse group of members, including government bodies; civil society organisations; faith-based groups; international organisations dealing with labour, migration, and anti-trafficking; as well as associations representing returnees.[47] These types of changes made at the structural level may be crucial to promote the safety and livelihood of migrant workers abroad. These new measures need to be evaluated to understand if this approach is helping reduce the exploitation of migrant workers and determine whether they should be replicated in other contexts.

As researchers, it is easy to make policy suggestions of grandiose proportions, designating them as the 'right thing to do', but these are often not possible despite their clear benefits. For this reason, it is also necessary to unpack some potential policy reforms at a smaller level, with higher degrees of feasibility. Despite new legal protections to combat exploitative labour conditions in several Middle Eastern countries (e.g. the signing of bilateral labour agreements), many domestic workers rely on their networks, like familial and social relationships, to help them decide in which country to work, acquire employment, seek help, and manage their earnings. Local lawmakers should implement social and legal changes, small and large, which solely address domestic worker safety.[48] Some good practices to implement could include mandated pre-departure training for domestic workers on topics like their rights, duties, where to seek help, and how to identify human trafficking and gender-based violence, and ensuring that recruitment is done through formally vetted employment agencies and brokers.

---

[46] N.a., 'Saudi Minister of Labor and Social Development, His Ethiopian Counterpart Sign Bilateral Agreement to Recruit Well Trained and Medically Fit Domestic Workers', Saudi Arabian Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 21 September 2022, https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/en/media-center/news/72148.

[47] Z Zelalem, 'Ethiopia Recruits 500,000 Women for Domestic Work in Saudi Arabia', *Al Jazeera,* 17 April 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/4/17/ethiopia-recruits-500000-women-for-domestic-work-in-saudi-arabia.

[48] Busza *et al.*, 2023.

Additionally, it is crucial to allocate the necessary resources that enable women and girls to remain in school to attain an education. However, this would require a cultural shift in gender norms, a reduction in child marriage, more government spending on teacher training and school fees, and a commitment to building more schools in rural areas. Furthermore, resources are needed to allow for in-country access to more lucrative employment that enables individuals to provide for their families without the pressure to migrate abroad. This could potentially be remedied by increasing access to vocational training programmes that are tailored to the aspirations of women and girls by first conducting a labour market assessment to understand which industries within Ethiopia are lucrative enough to support families without the need to go abroad for work.

While several countries have started to implement changes to their migration systems, domestic workers are often unaware of these new protections that they have access to, leading to the perpetuation of relying on informal networks for safety and justice. Therefore, a micro-level step that could be taken to address this would be to organise awareness campaigns at the local level in order to provide important information to migrant workers and the general public about possible pathways to accessing help, support, and safety while abroad. Additionally, these campaigns could distribute booklets, leaflets, and posters and partner with community-based organisations to spread knowledge about the plight of migrant domestic workers in exploitative employment circumstances. These awareness campaigns with a focus on domestic worker safety would help to facilitate effective communication channels between domestic workers and their social networks and increase opportunities for help-seeking. Ongoing research funded by Freedom Fund is presently working to address these gaps.

Conclusion

This article adds new insights to the literature on drivers of migration for domestic work. It explored how social networks—specifically interpersonal dynamics between family, friends, peers, and community members—and gender shape or constrain the choices of Ethiopian women migrant domestic workers. Our findings contextualise our broader argument that familial and gender dynamics influence migration decisions to seek potentially exploitative employment abroad. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that Ethiopian women migrating for domestic work often have a reciprocal relationship with their social networks.

Due to the heavy interdependence between the women and their social connections as sources of support, our findings make apparent the need for clear policy and programming aimed at creating sustainable structural support systems to supplement the informal support Ethiopian domestic workers already provide and rely on with their families and communities. While it is clear that domestic workers in Middle Eastern countries experience abuse, much of the literature

mainly focuses on the characteristics and experiences of the individual workers. Future research should examine the other side of the equation and explore what constitutes a 'good' employer. And further, how do the 'good' employers create conditions that do not force domestic workers to seek out informal pathways for employment or help. Exploring these aspects may serve as a starting point to advocate for standardisation measures across employers within destination countries, which can contribute to strengthening structures that protect migrant workers against labour exploitation.

Acknowledgments

Lauren N. Moton is a Senior Research Associate in the Human Exploitation and Resilience Program at the NYU Marron Institute for Urban Management. Informed by Black feminist and queer criminology, her scholarship examines the intersection of victimisation, marginalised identity, and criminal legal systems. She holds a PhD in Criminal Justice from John Jay College, CUNY. Email: laurenmoton@nyu.edu

Stephen Abeyta is a Postdoctoral Associate in the Human Exploitation and Resilience Program at the NYU Marron Institute for Urban Management. His scholarship primarily focuses on issues of work and labour. He received his PhD in Criminology and Justice Policy from Northeastern University. Email: sa5029@nyu.edu

Meredith Dank is a Clinical Associate Professor and directs the Human Exploitation and Resilience Program of the NYU Marron Institute of Urban Management. She is a nationally recognised expert on human trafficking. She holds a PhD in Criminal Justice from John Jay College, CUNY. Email: mdank@nyu.edu

Tsigereda Tafesse Mulugeta specialises in urbanisation and migration management, research, and policy advice and has over 18 years of experience in public sector capacity building. Tsigereda holds an MSc in Public Policy and Management from the University of London, Centre for Financial and Management Studies. Email: tsigereda3@yahoo.com

Understanding Albanian Culture of Migration: The role of the family in precarious journeys and human trafficking

Anta Brachou, Runa Lazzarino, Carole Murphy, and Eva Karra Swan

Abstract

This article explores families' roles in precarious journeys and human trafficking from Albania. It demonstrates that familial pressure is a primary driver of migration for many Albanians and sets the family at the centre of the Albanian culture of migration rather than as one of many other factors that can lead to precarious migration and trafficking. The decision to migrate is rarely an individual one; rather, it is often a collective decision where parents, siblings, and extended family members play a crucial role. This is particularly evident in cases where migration is seen as a means to escape poverty or improve social standing, with family members reinforcing the belief that success abroad is the only viable option. The article concludes with recommendations to enhance cultural competence among practitioners and integrate family-oriented considerations in migration policies and interventions, particularly in the United Kingdom.

Keywords: family, precarious migration, human trafficking, prevention, socio-cultural norms, decision-making, cultural competence, Albania

Introduction

Questions of who makes decisions about migration, if and how family are involved, and the reasons for, and consequences of, migration are critical in the context of growing international migration flows as well as the links between migration and human trafficking. Recent migration studies highlight the influence of the family on migrants' decision-making.[1] This is also the case in Albania, as we discuss in this article. Both our desk and empirical research on the role of the family in precarious migration decision-making linked to human trafficking of Albanian nationals demonstrate that migration is shaped by tangible and intangible factors. Understanding these complexities is crucial to address human trafficking and its intersections with migration,[2] family cultural factors, and the current landscape of securitarian migration policies and governance which hinder safe and legal pathways, and criminalise movement rather than addressing its structural causes and protecting migrants' human rights.[3]

Empirical research on migratory journeys across various national, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts provides valuable insights into the family's role in decision-making processes, including in relation to international migration from Albania.[4] These studies highlight the role that families, as well as the needs of family members,[5] play in the process of migration, and family influence on the individual's decision-making.[6] Crucially, they frame the family not just as another variable in the decision-making process, but as 'the context in which the decision

1   R Castaneda and A Triandafyllidou, *Migration, Decision Making and Young Families: A Literature Review, Working Paper 2022/12*, Toronto Metropolitan Centre for Immigration and Settlement (TMCIS) and the CERC in Migration and Integration, Toronto, 2022.

2   M Kaye and Anti-Slavery International, *The Migration-Trafficking Nexus: Combating Trafficking through the Protection of Migrants' Human Rights*, Anti-Slavery International, London, 2003.

3   B Anderson, U Khadka and M Ruhs, 'Demand for Migrant Workers: Institutional System Effects beyond National Borders', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 50, issue 5, 2024, pp. 1202–1225, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2279741; M Lloyd, 'Embodying Resistance: Politics and the Mobilization of Vulnerability', *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 41, issue 1, 2024, pp. 111–126, https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764231178478.

4   C Murphy *et al.*, *Cultural Influences and Cultural Competency in the Prevention and Protection of Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking: Insights from the UK and Albania*, MSPEC, London, 2024.

5   *Ibid.*

6   *Ibid.*

to migrate is taken by and for individuals',[7] highlighting the *centrality* of the family's role. For example, studies in diverse contexts, from South Asia to Africa,[8] identified that decisions in developing countries are made by 'the head of the family for the individual involved'.[9] These processes are frequently gendered, where a sense of obligation by eldest sons to support their families through remittances is often a key push factor in migration.[10] In other words, the family is recognised as the main institution for social control in which an 'intrafamilial implicit contract'—based on an unwritten agreement about the obligations and benefits involved in the migration journey—is established.[11]

Multiple factors contribute to the decision-making process. Decisions are taken by families and households in order to 'maximize the expected income and minimize risks',[12] balancing these against the security of staying: this is a critical element in irregular and mixed migration.[13] Several studies have demonstrated that the perceived risk of exploitation needs to be understood in the context of the living conditions in the country of origin. In vulnerable contexts, the risk of embarking on a precarious journey, coordinated by smugglers or traffickers, must be counterbalanced with the risk of staying, which may be equally high. These risks require understanding within the context of complex factors that influence migration decisions, including in some cases a 'culture of migration',[14] which has become pervasive due to protracted conditions of poverty, lack of job opportunities, famine, conflict, and violence.

---

[7]   M Nisa, *The Role of the Family in Migration Decision-Making in Bangladesh*, Master's Thesis, The Australian National University, 1986.

[8]   *Ibid.*.

[9]   *Ibid.*, p. 22.

[10]   *Ibid.*

[11]   A Fleischer, 'Family, Obligations, and Migration: The Role of Kinship in Cameroon', *Demographic Research*, vol. 16, 2006, pp. 413–440, https://doi.org/10.4054/Dem-Res.2007.16.13.

[12]   *Ibid.*

[13]   M Belloni, 'Risk in Context: Decision-Making in Irregular and Mixed Migration', Mixed Migration Centre, 6 December 2022, retrieved 1 July 2024, https://mixedmigration.org/risk-in-context-decision-making-in-irregular-and-mixed-migration.

[14]   W Kandel and DS Massey, 'The Culture of Mexican Migration: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis', *Social Forces*, vol. 80, issue 3, 2002, pp. 981–1004, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1353/sof.2002.0009.

It is crucial, even in contexts of structural vulnerability, to avoid viewing migrants solely as passive victims, yet it is equally important to acknowledge situations where self-determination is restricted due to external pressures.[15] For some marginalised individuals, migration presents an opportunity to forge a new identity or improve social status.[16] Moreover, imagination, i.e. the ability to envision alternative futures and possibilities, can be a particularly potent component in these contexts, as it is influenced by socio-economic conditions, culturally shared ideas, and personal experiences of mobility or immobility.[17] It allows individuals to picture new opportunities, a different way of life, or an escape from economic hardships or conflicts in their country of origin.

The complexity of migration decisions related to human trafficking shows that dominant Western views of slavery and exploitation are not universally applicable. The role of the family is interconnected with specific cultural norms which may be different from Western frameworks, and which play a significant role in pre-migration and migration decision-making. Individuals who do not migrate may be perceived as lazy or failures, experiencing shame and embarrassment.[18] Men are particularly affected by cultural shame, as migration is frequently associated with masculinity in certain countries and in relation to certain migration corridors.[19] Gender aspects in migration decisions expose individuals to human trafficking through pressure to conform to gender roles and identities, power imbalances in the control of marital resources, and dependencies that prevent partners, mainly women, from leaving exploitative or abusive relationships.

---

[15]   M Czaika and C Reinprecht, *Drivers of Migration: A Synthesis of Knowledge*, IMI Working Paper Series, paper 163, 2020.

[16]   *Ibid.*

[17]   J Hagen-Zanker, G Hennessey, and C Mazzilli, 'Subjective and Intangible Factors in Migration Decision-Making: A Review of Side-Lined Literature', *Migration Studies*, vol. 11, issue 2, 2023, pp. 349–359, https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnad003.

[18]   M Bylander, 'Contested Mobilities: Gendered Migration Pressures among Cambodian Youth', *Gender, Place & Culture*, vol. 22, issue 8, 2015, pp. 1124–1140, https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2014.939154; L Heering, R van der Erf, and L van Wissen, 'The Role of Family Networks and Migration Culture in the Continuation of Moroccan Emigration: A Gender Perspective', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, vol. 30, issue 2, 2004, pp. 323–337, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183042000200722; Kandel and Massey; Czaika and Reinprecht.

[19]   M Maroufof and H Kouki, 'Migrating from Pakistan to Greece: Re-Visiting Agency in Times of Crisis', *European Journal of Migration and Law*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2017, pp. 77–100, https://doi.org/10.1163/15718166-12342116.

Other studies have highlighted that emotions,[20] such as entrapment, jealousy, and frustration,[21] combined with societal expectations and the culture of migration, motivate individuals to migrate to avoid 'social death' or prevent them from returning before achieving success abroad.[22] For survivors of trafficking, the fear of returning home and the resulting dishonour due to unmet family obligations significantly influences their decisions and their willingness to return to their home countries, and is prevalent in many geographical contexts.[23] Families often invest in their migrating members, expecting repayment, even in cases of initially consensual smuggling. The fear of returning 'empty-handed' can lead to survivors being ostracised by their families or communities. Consequently, the guilt associated with 'failed' migration can compel individuals either to migrate again or to stay in the destination country rather than returning home. This can hamper reintegration and increase vulnerability to re-trafficking and exploitation.

Migration, smuggling, and trafficking are separate phenomena with intricate connections, widely explored in the literature. Migration, and in particular precarious migration, carries risks that can lead to human trafficking recruitment. This necessitates a better understanding of the complex factors influencing migration decisions. In this article, we conceive precarious migration journeys as those affected by high insecurity and uncertainty in different realms—from employment and financial resources to accommodation and family and social networks—and in the different stages of the journey, including departure, transit, and arrival. Precarious journeys can expose migrants to higher risks of rights violations.[24]

---

[20] P Boccagni and L Baldassar, 'Emotions on the Move: Mapping the Emergent Field of Emotion and Migration', *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 16, 2015, pp. 73–80, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2015.06.009.

[21] B Kalir, 'The Development of a Migratory Disposition: Explaining a "New Emigration"', *International Migration*, vol. 43, issue 4, 2005, pp. 167–196, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2005.00337.x; Belloni.

[22] S Bredeloup 'The Migratory Adventure as a Moral Experience', in N Kleist and D Thorsen (eds.), *Hope and Uncertainty in Contemporary African Migration*, Routledge, London, 2017, pp. 134–153; Hagen-Zanker, Hennessey, and Mazzilli.

[23] R Lazzarino, 'Between Shame and Lack of Responsibility: The Articulation of Emotions among Female Returnees of Human Trafficking in Northern Vietnam', *Antropologia*, vol. 1, issue 1, 2014, pp. 155–167, https://doi.org/10.14672/ada2014260%25p.

[24] D Beadle and L Davison, *Precarious Journeys: Mapping Vulnerabilities of Victims of Trafficking from Vietnam to Europe*, Anti-Slavery International, ECPAT UK, and Pacific Links Foundation, 2022.

This article is based on a larger, seven-month project exploring cultural competence in trafficking prevention in the UK.[25] It addresses the need for updated research on the critical role of family and socio-cultural norms in precarious journeys and human trafficking within Albania's unique culture of migration. We argue that household and family networks are central to this culture, which we examine in the context of the recent rise in Albanian arrivals to the UK, including cases of asylum-seeking, modern slavery, and human trafficking.

Building on prior research,[26] we explore these dynamics and emphasise the need for cultural competence within the UK's anti-trafficking system to acknowledge and effectively address the familial norms and values contributing to precarious journeys that may lead to trafficking, whilst aiming to contribute to more effective prevention of human trafficking and exploitation.

We first present an overview of migration from Albania, followed by the methodology of the study. Next, we present key findings from our research, focusing on the broader themes of the culture of migration, i.e. collective decision-making, the role of extended networks, and the impact of stigma and traditional family roles. We conclude with recommendations for practice and policy, centring on prevention of human trafficking and the potential for earlier intervention strategies revolving around enhanced cultural competence of the anti-trafficking sector in the UK.

Migration from Albania

Based on 1989 and 2001 censuses, it was calculated that 600,000 Albanians were living abroad, predominantly in Greece and Italy, and that a similar number considered migrating, with half trying but failing.[27] In 2022, the Albanian Institute of Statistics reported a 10.5% increase in the number of people leaving the country, totalling 46,460 individuals.[28] These data capture a persistent pattern over the past three decades, where mass international migration has been perceived as a

---

[25]   Murphy *et al.*

[26]   R Van Dyke and A Brachou, *What Looks Promising for Tackling Modern Slavery: A Review of Practice-Based Research*, Bakhita Centre for Research on Slavery, Exploitation and Abuse, 2021; A Brachou, *Human Trafficking from Albania to the UK: Interrogating the efficacy of the 4Ps Paradigm of Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnerships*, PhD Thesis, University of Hull, April 2022.

[27]   C Carletto *et al.*, 'A Country on the Move: International Migration in Post-Communist Albania', *The International Migration Review*, vol. 40, issue 4, 2006, pp. 767–785, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2006.00043.x.

[28]   Institute of Statistics (INSTAT), *Population of Albania*, 2023.

lifeline, particularly for those in economically disadvantaged regions like northern Albania.[29] The key migration waves in 1991 (immediately after the fall of the communist regime), 1997 (in the aftermath of the civil war), and 2000 (following the state's post-pyramid schemes collapse) were driven by factors such as political instability, poverty, and high unemployment rates, especially in rural areas.[30]

Several scholars highlight the uniqueness of Albanian emigration,[31] not only within post-communist Europe but also on a broader scale, due to its rapid intensity and specific characteristics—which include the pivotal role of the family.[32] Carletto and colleagues, for example, designated it as a 'country on the move', underlining how leaving the country became part of household-level strategies to cope with the economic hardship of transition.[33] Yet, those in extreme poverty are often unable to migrate.[34] As a result, immobility, whether due to lack of resources, networks, or legal opportunities, becomes linked to economic hardship, as those who stay behind can be excluded from the benefits of remittances and better job prospects abroad. But for those who do migrate, remittances to their families and communities are a crucial component of the Albanian economy,[35] making migration a key pathway to financial stability and reinforcing a 'culture of migration' where mobility is essential for economic success.

---

[29] Carletto *et al.*; I Gedeshi and E Jorgoni, *Social Impact of Emigration and Rural-Urban Migration in Central and Eastern Europe: Final Country Report, Albania*, European Commission, 2012.

[30] These events were components of a massive Ponzi scheme, leading Albania into financial collapse. K Barjaba and R King, 'Introducing and Theorising Albanian Migration', in *New Albanian Migration*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2013, pp. 1–28; Carletto *et al.*; J Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development', in *Albania on the Move: Links between Internal and International Migration*, Amsterdam University Press, 2012, pp. 59–106.

[31] R King, E Uruçi and J Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Its Effects in Comparative Perspective', *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 13, issue 3, 2011, pp. 269–286, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2011.593335.

[32] Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development'.

[33] Carletto *et al.*

[34] *Ibid.*

[35] M Stampini *et al.*, 'International Migration from Albania: The Role of Family Networks and Previous Experience', *Eastern European Economics*, vol. 46, issue 2, 2008, pp. 50–87, https://doi.org/10.2753/EEE0012-8775460203; J Vullnetari, 'Family, Migration and Socio-Economic Change', in *Albania on the Move: Links between Internal and International Migration*, Amsterdam University Press, 2012, pp. 165–194.

Within the triple approach proposed by Vullnetari to frame Albanian emigration, along with transnationalism and the neo-classical push–pull factors model, 'the role of social networks, family and kinship—as theorised by the new economics of migration—has been crucial in sustaining much of this migration'.[36] The family has remained one of the most enduring aspects of Albanian culture and society over the decades. Its significance grew even further following the collapse of state support systems that were in place during the communist era.[37] Despite this, there is a dearth of analysis of the 'micro-level determinants' of such distinctive and predominant migration phenomenon.[38]

Despite these fixed factors, international emigration from Albania over the last three decades has been a dynamic phenomenon.[39] Notable changes are related to the gender and household dimensions. In the early 1990s, young men were most likely to emigrate; subsequently, the whole family and also women started leaving the country.[40] A specific group of women frequently discussed in literature consists of those involved in the sex industry[41] and in trafficking for sexual exploitation, where they have often been stereotyped, victimised, and infantilised.[42]

In research on human trafficking, the role of the family has been emphasised, spanning from direct involvement and family risk factors[43] to more indirect cultural family norms and pressures, such as expectations around remittances.

---

[36]   Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development', p. 79.

[37]   *Ibid.*

[38]   Stampini *et al.*

[39]   Barjaba and King; King, Uruçi and Vullnetari.

[40]   Vullnetari, 'Albanian Migration and Development'.

[41]   *Ibid.*

[42]   R Andrijasevic and N Mai, 'Editorial: Trafficking (in) Representations: Understanding the Recurring Appeal of Victimhood and Slavery in Neoliberal Times', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 7, 2016, pp. 1–10, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121771; J Campbell, 'Shaping the Victim: Borders, Security, and Human Trafficking in Albania', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 2, 2013, pp. 81–96, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.20121325.

[43]   A J Nichols *et al.*, 'Practitioners' Perspectives on Working with Families of Minors Experiencing Sex Trafficking: Family Risk Factors and Implications for Family Based Interventions', *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 158, 2024, pp. 107–132, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2024.107132; L Puigvert *et al.*, 'A Systematic Review of Family and Social Relationships: Implications for Sex Trafficking Recruitment and Victimization', *Families, Relationship, and Societies*, vol. 11, issue 4, 2022, pp. 534–550, https://doi.org/10.1332/204674321X16358719475186.

However, this latter role of household cultural norms has been less investigated and, in relation to Albania, little attention has been paid to the role of the family in precarious migration that may lead to human trafficking.[44]

Existing studies highlight both macro-level factors such as poverty, unemployment, limited education, weak legislation, and corruption, and micro-level factors such as domestic violence and patriarchal family structures, which increase vulnerabilities.[45] Gender-discriminatory norms continue to play a key role, as deeply entrenched patriarchal values limit women's autonomy and increase their exposure to violence and exploitation. In rural areas, where women face societal pressure to marry young, traffickers and smugglers exploit these norms by deceiving them with false promises of marriage or work abroad.[46]

Our study revisits some of these themes offering updated insights into how cultural, familial, and societal norms shape vulnerabilities to human trafficking. In Albania, persistent economic challenges and political instability continue to drive emigration, including irregular migration, which is reflected in asylum trends. In 2015, Albanians were the second-largest group seeking asylum in Germany.[47] Similarly in 2022, approximately 16,000 Albanians applied for asylum in the UK, accounting for 16% of all asylum applications.[48]

In the UK, Albanians have been among the highest numbers of referrals into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM)[49] since 2018. In 2022, referrals increased

---

[44] E Farruku and S Özcan, 'Factors Contributing to Child Trafficking in Albania: Push Factors', *Eurolimes*, vol. 29, 2020, pp. 31–48.

[45] V Bekteshi, E Gjermeni, and M Van Hook, 'Modern Day Slavery: Sex Trafficking in Albania', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, vol. 32, issue 7/8, 2012, pp. 480–494, https://doi.org/10.1108/01443331211249093.

[46] K Kempadoo, J Sanghera and B Pattanaik, *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New Perspectives on Migration, Sex Work, and Human Rights*, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, 2005.

[47] M Ristik 'Albania, Kosovo Top German 2015 Asylum List', *Balkan Insight*, 7 January 2016, https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/07/albania-kosovo-top-german-2015-asylum-list.

[48] P W Walsh and K Oriishi, 'Albanian Asylum Seekers in the UK and EU: A Look at Recent Data', Migration Observatory, 2023, https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/albanian-asylum-seekers-in-the-uk-and-eu-a-look-at-recent-data.

[49] The National Referral Mechanism is the UK framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

by 84%, reaching 4,613.[50] This rise was largely driven by a significant increase in reports of labour exploitation of Albanian men, who accounted for 1,631 referrals. The number of referrals of adult Albanians grew by 79% to 3,661, while that of Albanian children increased by 130% to 559.[51] This increase, coupled with recent media narratives about Albanians[52] and a political decision to increase the bilateral cooperation to curb smuggling and illegal migration,[53] emphasised the need for further research. The situation called for evidence-based guidelines and interventions to address these issues effectively and to develop preventive measures in collaboration with Albania.

Methodology

The data presented in this article was collected as part of a larger seven-month project looking at cultural competence in trafficking prevention in the UK, with a focus on Albanian potential victims of trafficking. This work was carried out in close partnership with Mary Ward Loreto (MWL), a service provider in the UK and Albania. The project involved a range of methods. MWL in Albania had monitored migration patterns, and the role played by family, over a long-term period through engagement with service users and during the research study they conducted on migration.[54] The MWL study had a sample of 1,105 individuals with an equal gender distribution and different ages. The data from this study were instrumental in co-designing our research topic guide and shaping our study's focus.

---

[50] 'Modern Slavery National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK End of Year Summary 2022', GOV.UK, 2 March 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2022/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2022.

[51] *Ibid.*

[52] A R Boakes, 'How British tabloids' framing of Albanian migrants fuels anti-immigrant sentiments', European Western Balkans, 10 October 2023, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2023/10/10/how-british-tabloids-framing-of-albanian-migrants-fuels-anti-immigrant-sentiments.

[53] 'Statement of cooperation on Home Affairs between Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Albania and the Home Office of the United Kingdom', GOV.UK, 29 November 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-albania-joint-statement-on-home-affairs/statement-of-cooperation-on-home-affairs-between-ministry-of-interior-of-the-republic-of-albania-and-the-home-office-of-the-united-kingdom.

[54] Mary Ward Loreto, *Beyond Borders: Analytical Research Report*, 2023, https://marywardloreto.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/BEYOND_BORDERS_Analytical_Research_Repor.pdf.

We also collected data through an online stakeholder survey in the UK (n=40), consultations with stakeholders and people with lived experience in the UK and Albania (n=15), two focus groups (n=23), and a Shared Learning Event (SLE) in Albania (n=33).

In this article, we only report on and discuss the findings from the focus groups and the SLE, due to their specific focus on examining the role of the family in Albania in the migration decision-making process, and its links to human trafficking. The SLE took place in Tirana, Albania, in October 2023 and was co-led by the research team and MWL. The event involved 33 participants who included representatives from law enforcement, teachers, social workers, municipal workers, members of the United Response Against Trafficking (URAT) network, and representatives from the Coalition of Shelters. The research team presented initial findings from the study to the audience in English, with simultaneous translation into Albanian to help facilitate discussion. Additionally, two focus groups were conducted in Albania, in Albanian and translated into English by an Albanian member of the research team. The focus groups included 13 parents (11 mothers and 2 fathers) and 10 young people, four men and six women, aged 18 to 25, from the northern regions of the country who were recruited by MWL.[55]

We adopted a non-intrusive, participant-centred approach, allowing discussions to be guided by participants and ensuring they only shared what they felt comfortable disclosing, without pressure to delve into sensitive topics. Thus, as the focus was on family decision-making, information about experiences of trafficking, or destination countries were not disclosed and were not included in the consultation and focus group topic guides.

The data from the focus groups and the SLE were analysed by the research team using thematic analysis.[56] Codes were developed that were representative of predetermined themes originating from concepts evident in the literature, as well as themes based on concepts that were prevalent within and across all or most consultations—in this case, key themes such as familial influence, the role of extended networks, and the broader socio-economic context.[57]

---

[55]   The selected areas were specifically chosen due to their high cases of individuals embarking on precarious journeys to the UK.

[56]   V Braun and V Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 2, 2006, pp. 77–101, p. 16, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706 qp063oa.

[57]   A Farrell and R Pfeffer, 'Policing Human Trafficking: Cultural Blinders and Organizational Barriers', *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 653, issue 1, 2014, pp. 46–64, https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716213515835.

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee at St Mary's University. A risk assessment was conducted for the chosen research sites in Albania, and safe, confidential locations were identified for holding the focus groups and the SLE. This approach was further strengthened by involving MWL, which works directly with the participants and stakeholders and has substantial experience in the area. Particularly for the focus groups, the involvement of MWL ensured that additional support to participants could be provided if needed.

Limitations

The use of focus group discussions with young people to explore migration experiences may have influenced participants' responses. Individual interviews were considered; however, focus groups were deemed the culturally safest way to gather data on this topic. This approach, reflecting the MWL team's emphasis on group work—creating a safe space, fostering solidarity, and encouraging shared discussions around collective experiences like migration—provided a more culturally sensitive and supportive environment for participants. Similarly, discussions with parents about their role and motivations in migration decision-making might have been shaped by a tendency to prioritise their children's well-being over personal interests, especially in a group context. The study does not address the impact of self-selection bias, as only certain individuals chose to speak to researchers about their involvement in migration. However, this is something common to qualitative research adopting snowball, purposive sampling among vulnerable populations.

While this article refers to 'parents' broadly, it is important to note that the data primarily reflects the perspectives of mothers, as fathers were underrepresented in the study. This imbalance may reflect a tendency for women to be more engaged with services and more willing to participate in research rather than an indication of their leading role in family decision-making.

This limitation prevented a detailed exploration of gendered dynamics in parental roles and decision-making within the family. Furthermore, as the focus of this study was on trafficking prevention through the enhancement of cultural competence, we did not explore how various family members or close or extended family dynamics influence migration decisions. Likewise, there is limited discussion of how the family interacts with broader community and macro-level contexts, as this did not fit the aims of the research. Lastly, there are no claims to generalisability, especially given the small sample size, as is common in qualitative research.

Findings

Findings from our research suggest that Albania provides a compelling case study of family-influenced migration. The umbrella theme yielded by the analysis of the focus group data is that of the existence of an Albanian culture of migration, characterised by the pivotal role of the family modulated along the following subthemes: *a collective decision-making process*, *the role of extended networks*, and *stigma around migration and traditional family norms*. These subthemes highlight how deeply ingrained the culture of migration is within Albanian society, influencing not only individual choices but also collective family strategies and social perceptions surrounding migration.

A Culture of Migration

The culture of migration has become widespread due to the conditions of the country's structural vulnerability over the last decades, as mentioned above. A pervasive sense of hopelessness contributes significantly to this phenomenon; many people have internalised the belief that their circumstances will never improve. It is common for parents in Albanian households to view their country as offering few opportunities, which reinforces their belief that migration is the only viable option for a better future. One parent maintained:

> *I support my child to migrate and go to provide income for his life, but I want him to return to Albania and build family life here. But I see that they [children/young people] do not find their place here even when they return.*

Consequently, they often decide to migrate or send their children on migration journeys, despite the potential risks and the precarious routes available to them.[58] This sentiment is particularly strong among young people, many of whom see their future outside Albania.[59] One young person shared:

> *I study economics in Tirana, and after finishing my bachelor studies, my goal is to leave for Belgium and continue my master's there, as I also have relatives there. I like it because there is the best education, and I enjoy living abroad.*

---

[58]   Murphy *et al.*

[59]   A Hoxhaj, *Albania's brain drain: Why so many young people are leaving and how to get them to stay*, UCL European Institute, 2023.

Another young person expressed more uncertainty:

> *After finishing my bachelor's and master's studies in law, I will see if I can find stable work here. If I can, I will stay, but if I do not, I will leave the country.*

For young people without higher education or stable jobs, migration often feels like the only viable path to better opportunities. They highlight challenges such as unemployment, low wages, and limited prospects as key reasons for leaving but also express a deep attachment to Albania, saying they would stay if conditions improved. However, the pull of opportunities abroad often outweighs these doubts. As one returnee shared:

> *I have been here for three years, and not a day goes by that I don't say, 'Oh God, if only I could go back to France again.'*

During the focus group, young people shared that while parents often do not want their children to migrate illegally, the lack of opportunities and the sense of hopelessness compel them to see precarious journeys as the only viable option. In nearly all cases, it is the parents who take on the financial burden, borrowing money to support their children's migration. This decision often involves significant risks, as many young people endure dangerous travel conditions, such as hiding in trucks, to reach the UK, or face precarious living situations abroad. Additionally, the study found that the absence of legal pathways sometimes leads people to rely on false asylum claims, guided by instructions they receive from smugglers upon arriving in the destination country. This situation leaves individuals and families highly vulnerable and exposed to significant hardship.[60]

A Collective Decision-Making Process

The culture of migration in Albania is driven by collective decision-making, where the interests of the family often outweigh individual preferences. Albanian families may finance their children's migration, but expect remittances in return, thus creating an implicit contract within the household. In such cases, migration is framed not as an individual choice but as a familial obligation that aligns with broader cultural expectations.[61]

Families often act as both a push and pull factor. Many families encourage and support their children to migrate to escape the country's economic hardship, viewing migration as the sole path to financial stability.

---

[60]   *Ibid.*

[61]   *Ibid.*

> *Of course, I support him because I cannot meet the conditions in my home. I do not want him to go through the same suffering that I went through, and I want him to be comfortable for himself. When the child stays here and has no future… because abroad, I think, there is a future and employment opportunities. (Parents' Focus Group)*

However, under the current inhumane anti-migration policies in both the UK and Europe, migration often comes with deep personal sacrifices. Families may be separated for long periods, and children can face distressing conditions while seeking legal status. In some cases, families resort to extreme measures, such as placing their children in institutional care to improve their chances of obtaining residency documents. The emotional toll of these decisions can last well beyond the migration process itself. One young person explained that her family left Albania and travelled to France. Because she and her sister were minors and had no legal documents, they were placed in an orphanage while their asylum claims were being processed. She explained that, due to the absence of legal pathways, the children had to claim asylum while their parents remained in the country illegally, leading to their forced separation. She described the emotional toll of this experience:

> *We had to live apart from our parents for a year and a half, which was a great sacrifice. During that time, I only saw them once. Looking back, it was not the right decision because we were alone, without our parents, and it still hurts me today when I remember [it].*

This account highlights how families often balance economic necessity with emotional hardship. While migration is seen as a means to a better future, the process can be fraught with instability, loneliness, and long-lasting emotional scars, especially for young migrants who experience separation from their parents. This further aligns with previous studies[62] that have shown how migration decisions in developing countries are often made by family heads or elders who exert significant influence over individual members. At the same time, parents frequently support their children's decision to migrate, believing it will offer a better future.

> *My son was 17 years old when he decided to leave for Germany and asked us for LEK 30,000 [approx. USD 310]. At home, he suffered a lot and worked in the black market since he was a minor. (Parents' Focus Group)*

At the same time, the focus groups revealed that while families often play a key role in encouraging migration, this is not always the case. Some young people shared that their families initially resisted their decision to migrate, which added

---

[62] Nisa, 1986.

emotional strain to the process. Others noted that the impacts of unsuccessful migration, such as financial difficulties or returning home without achieving the expected success, can lead to feelings of shame and tension within families. These complexities highlight the mixed dynamics between familial encouragement, resistance, and the individual experiences of young people as they navigate decisions about their future. As one young person said:

> *My parents never agreed with my decision to go to England and I discussed it with them every night. I knew they were afraid for me, but I had realised that I had nothing to look forward to in Albania and I had to take risks. It took a lot of money that I would never be able to raise, not even through my friends, so my family remained my only hope. It took time to convince them and then they sacrificed for me taking huge debts for me to go there. Debts which have not yet been fully repaid because I was caught there after six months and ended up in prison for another six months and then returned to Albania. It was very difficult at the beginning here.*

The Role of Extended Networks

The study also underlined the role of extended networks in shaping migration decisions. Many Albanian migrants are influenced by relatives or acquaintances who have already migrated and established themselves abroad. This creates a chain effect, where the success of one family member in a destination country encourages others to follow. As noted in the literature, networks can influence cultural and social attitudes toward migration, as each migration event reshapes the socioeconomic context of individuals, households, and communities, thereby influencing future migration decisions. Over time, migration flows may become more heavily driven by network dynamics than by the original factors that initiated migration.[63] This phenomenon is evident in Albania, where nearly half of Albanian households have experienced some form of international migration since 1990, a phenomenon of 'almost exodus proportions'.[64] The involvement of the family and the broader community is thus multifaceted: they provide financial support for the journey, exert pressure to conform to cultural expectations, and serve as a support network once the individual reaches the destination country.

> *My son was a minor, only 14 years old, when he emigrated to my sister in Belgium. He suffered a lot, but it was worth it. He went to school there; he is 21 years old today. (Parents' Focus Group)*

---

[63] D S Massey *et al.*, 'Theories of International Migration: A Review and Appraisal', *Population and Development Review*, vol. 19, issue 3, 1993, pp. 431–466, https://doi.org/10.2307/2938462.

[64] Carletto *et al.*

The precarious journeys occur as a result of attempts at family reunification, or because they have relatives there and want to go to stay with their relatives. (Stakeholder SLE)

The entire family becomes involved in finding financial resources for the journey, gathering information, identifying if they have relatives or acquaintances in the destination country, and finding intermediaries. (Stakeholder SLE)

As evidenced by these quotes, the chain migration is reinforced by the existing ties in the destination country, which offer not only practical support, like accommodation, financial assistance, or guidance, but also emotional and psychological support. Family reunification has in fact been very prominent in Albanian emigration, with male members of the household leaving first, followed by female members.[65]

These networks can provide critical information and resources that help reduce the uncertainties and risks associated with migration. For instance, family members who have already settled abroad may offer valuable insights into job opportunities and local customs, enabling newcomers to navigate their new environments more effectively. However, this flow of information is not always comprehensive or accurate. In many cases, the information shared is limited or skewed, creating 'illusions of success' that can distort the perceptions of potential migrants. A lack of awareness in Albania about the actual conditions in destination countries often leads individuals to migrate with unrealistic expectations.

In Albania, people are not informed about the reality of Albanians in the UK; they are unaware of the difficulties. Therefore, Albanians who leave thinking that life there is very easy become disappointed when they face reality… (Stakeholder SLE)

When faced with harsh realities, these migrants may experience profound disappointment or, in some cases, exploitation. Yet, due to the shame, stigma, and intense societal pressure to portray migration as a success, many are reluctant to return or to share honest accounts of their struggles and hardships abroad. This reluctance further perpetuates misinformation and sustains the cycle of precarious migration. Consequently, family members may fail to recognise the underlying issues.

---

[65]   *Ibid.*

Traditional Family Norms and Stigma around Migration

Finally, our findings show that cultural norms of the family significantly influence pre-migration, migration decision-making, and return. For instance, those who are unable to settle in their intended destination country and are subsequently sent back to their country of origin are often labelled as 'failed migrants'. As mentioned earlier, this stigma is particularly evident among men, as migration is frequently associated with masculinity in Albania. In this sense, our study expands on the more recent, growing literature on masculinity in migration,[66] by exploring how masculinity is constructed and enacted within the family in forced migration.[67] Family-level pressures and stigma linked to migration serve to better understand the fact that many returned Albanians from the UK, under the two countries' joint communiqué of late 2022, have attempted to re-emigrate.[68]

> *Emigrants choose not to return even when things are not going well, because once they have left, they feel they must stay there. (Stakeholder SLE)*

Moreover, gender dynamics in migration decisions critically increase individuals' vulnerability to human trafficking. For instance, sons often face immense pressure to migrate in order to send remittances and support their families, significantly increasing their risk of exploitation.

> *Gender expectations should also be considered. The family is okay with the son being involved in illegal work as long as he makes money and is a provider. (Stakeholder SLE)*

Conversely, women may migrate to join their spouses in an attempt to reduce their dependence on their parental households. However, this can further restrict their freedoms, if they find themselves in abusive or exploitative relationships. Due to men's precarious migration status, some enter marriages for legal purposes rather than genuine partnerships, which can leave women in vulnerable and uncertain positions.

---

[66] K Charsley and H Wray, 'Introduction: The Invisible (Migrant) Man', *Men and Masculinities*, vol. 18, issue 4, 2015, pp. 403–423, https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15575109.

[67] M Palillo, '"Now I Must Go": Uncovering the Relationship Between Masculinity and Structural Vulnerability in Young African Men's Stories of Forced Migration', *International Migration Review*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231185124.

[68] B Shala, 'Repatriated Albanians Find New Routes Back to Britain', *Balkan Insight*, 14 February 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/02/14/repatriated-albanians-find-new-routes-back-to-britain.

> *Men create marriages in England for documentation purposes and establish two parallel families. This can create problems for the women, who are not aware of this situation. (Stakeholder SLE)*

Our findings resonate with both migration and trafficking studies on the role of emotions in mobility, and the figure of the 'failed migrant'. Family and community pre-migration pressures are mirrored in the shame and stigma that 'unsuccessful' returnees face in a vast array of contexts and also along gender lines.[69] In trafficking literature, return stigmatisation has been explored in relation to trafficking for sexual exploitation.[70] For example, a recent article exploring challenges faced by Albanian victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation and for forced begging upon their return to Albania found that family exclusion and stigmatisation are significant.[71] However, while victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation faced family rejection, victims of forced begging did not. Furthermore, returning to their families was not a positive solution for these victims because of parental neglect and the participation of family members in the trafficking network. Additionally, many migrants returned involuntarily.[72]

Recommendations

Despite the implementation of stricter migration policies and the threat of immediate deportation to unsafe countries, migration flows to the UK and the European Union have not decreased; rather, it has increased migrants' vulnerability to exploitation. In this context, it is crucial to understand and implement culturally competent, evidence-based interventions to support families and individuals both in their countries of origin and during the migration decision-making process. The role of the family in migration decision-making requires further investigation to inform more effective policies and practices aimed at mitigating the family's

---

[69] N Constable, 'Migrant Motherhood, "Failed Migration", and the Gendered Risks of Precarious Labour', *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia*, vol. 3, issue 1, 2015, pp. 135–151, https://doi.org/10.1017/trn.2014.13; A M Fejerskov and M Zeleke, 'Return Migration, Masculinities and the Fallacy of Reintegration: Ethiopian Experiences', *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, vol. 17, issue 4, 2023, pp. 575–593, https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2023.2322195.

[70] N Laurie and D Richardson, 'Geographies of Stigma: Post-Trafficking Experiences', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 46, issue 1, 2021, pp. 120–134, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12402.

[71] K Ramaj, 'The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 3, 2023, pp. 408–429, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823.

[72] *Ibid.*

role as a facilitator of precarious migration. Prevention interventions, such as awareness-raising and education, are becoming increasingly critical, alongside culturally competent trafficking aftercare that focuses on trauma-informed approaches to prevent re-trafficking and further exploitation. These family-oriented and culturally competent interventions should be accompanied by larger systemic changes toward migration governance which supports more regular migration pathways, simplified asylum procedures, and easier family reunification processes for trafficking survivors. Changes to UK laws and regulations are needed which would take into account the fact that Albanians often migrate to the UK under pressure from the family.

Culturally Competent Service Provision

Given the family's central role in Albanian migration, service providers, especially in destination countries like the UK, need to develop culturally competent interventions that acknowledge familial obligations, cultural expectations, and the broader socio-economic context. Practitioners require training and increased awareness of the role of family and cultural norms in shaping migration decisions and the reintegration challenges faced by survivors in this context. Survivors of trafficking, and those labelled as 'failed migrants', frequently face stigma and shame upon returning to their home communities, where they may be ostracised or blamed for their circumstances. To address this, practitioners should actively engage families as a supportive influence in rebuilding survivors' individual and cultural identity.[73] Thus, acceptance by the family, and community (re)integration, can act as protective factors against the risk of re-trafficking.

For example, culturally competent interventions[74] may include engaging families and respected community figures to facilitate dialogues with communities affected by precarious migration and the risks posed by it. It may also include offering gender-sensitive counselling that acknowledges traditional gender roles, or developing reintegration programmes that provide alternative livelihoods aligned with local socio-economic realities. By incorporating culturally relevant practices, service providers can ensure that their support is not only effective but also meaningful within the migrants' cultural framework and reduces the risks of further exploitation.

---

[73] K Marburger and S Pickover, 'A Comprehensive Perspective on Treating Victims of Human Trafficking', *The Professional Counselor*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2020, pp. 13–24, https://doi.org/10.15241/km.10.1.13.

[74] See Appendix A in Murphy *et al.*

Integrating Family-Oriented Interventions in Migration Policies

Policymakers should incorporate family-related considerations into migration policies. As highlighted above, the choice to migrate often follows a collective decision-making process, driven by familial obligations, cultural norms, and socio-economic pressures. By adopting culturally competent strategies, such as family-oriented reintegration programmes, and prioritising knowledge exchange between countries, stakeholders can design more effective interventions to prevent precarious migration that may lead to trafficking and exploitation. Additionally, the adoption of the perspective of harm on a continuum is advocated. This perspective encourages an understanding of risks and promotes culturally informed strategies in combating abuse and exploitation, especially within the context of vulnerable migration scenarios. By integrating these recommendations, stakeholders can create more effective, nuanced, and culturally competent frameworks for supporting Albanian migrants and other foreign survivors of trafficking and addressing the broader challenges of migration and exploitation.

Conclusion

Our study has responded to the need for more academic research in the field of precarious migration and human trafficking in Albania. Our findings expand on the existing literature on familial pressure and norms as primary drivers of migration for many Albanians and set the family as central, rather than as one of many other factors, that can lead to precarious migration and trafficking. However, further research would be necessary to explore the dynamics of gender roles and cultural norms in migration-related decisions and unpack patriarchal influences on family decision-making. Additionally, given the recent increase of irregular Albanian migrants in the UK, the article's recommendations focus on the need for enhanced cultural competence in the UK anti-modern slavery and human trafficking sector. This would help to encompass and address familial cultural norms within the unique case of the Albanian culture of migration and ensure that both the academic community and frontline practitioners are better equipped to support Albanian migrants and trafficking survivors in the UK with culturally responsive and effective interventions.

Crucially, our findings suggest that the precarious nature of these journeys is not an inevitability, but rather a direct consequence of the restrictive migration policies, the lack of safe and legal pathways, and the divisive narratives that criminalise movement rather than addressing its root causes and protecting migrants' human rights. These challenges are further exacerbated by the absence of a robust human rights framework in current migration governance, which fails to protect migrants and uphold their dignity. While cultural competency is essential in future service and policy design, it is equally important to recognise the diverging narratives surrounding Albanian migration, that highlight broader

systemic failures. Acknowledging these complexities allows for a more informed and constructive approach, rather than one that reinforces harmful policy responses that may further endanger migrants.

Acknowledgments

Anta Brachou is a post-doctoral researcher at the Bakhita Centre for Research on Slavery, Exploitation and Abuse, with parallel experience as a practitioner in the modern slavery sector in the UK. Email: anta.brachou@stmarys.ac.uk

Runa Lazzarino is an anthropologist of migration and health. She has published widely in the fields of human trafficking, gender migration, transcultural and global health, and advanced technologies in health. Email: r.lazzarino@ymail.com

Carole Murphy is Professor of Sociology and Applied Research at St Mary's University and Director of the Bakhita Centre for Research on Slavery, Exploitation and Abuse. Email: carole.murphy@stmarys.ac.uk

Eva Karra Swan completed her MA in Human Trafficking, Modern Slavery, Migration and Organised Crime at St Mary's University, London with a thesis on professionals' vicarious trauma of professionals that work with human trafficking survivors. Email: evangeliakarra2@gmail.com

The Importance of the Family Environment of Trafficking Victims in Peru, Before and After Exploitation

Andrea Querol and Antonia Lerner

Abstract

This article analyses the importance of the family environment of victims of human trafficking in Peru, before and after exploitation. Based on interviews with 30 victims and 10 family members, it demonstrates that families, primarily mothers, can play a powerful role in both preventing victimisation and assisting victims to recover from human trafficking experiences. Family structure and background can increase victims' vulnerability, yet the families are also the ones that protect and take care of victims. However, government officials often blame parents and family members for victims' exploitation, leading to revictimisation of both victims and their families. Understanding families' role in victim reintegration is crucial for improving the quality of social inclusion. Protection and care services workers must involve victims' families as part of their recovery process and receive further training to safeguard survivors' physical and mental integrity.

Keywords: human trafficking, family, Peru, access to justice, protection, vulnerability, revictimisation, reintegration.

Introduction

Families play a crucial, complex, and, at times, contradictory role in each stage of the trafficking process. Family background characteristics, such as a history of violence or abuse, financial needs, unhealthy family dynamics, migration background, and discrimination,[1] can create vulnerability to exploitation. Traffickers may take advantage of these vulnerabilities,[2] and in some cases, family members may directly participate in the trafficking process.[3] Conversely, families can also assist victims: for example, they can report exploitation to the authorities and aid the search process to locate trafficked family members.[4] Family members can also be crucial in offering safety and facilitating victims' healing and reintegration into the community,[5] and they can play a key role in helping victims to access justice.[6] For example, they can significantly influence victims' decisions and may also be a part of the justice process themselves. Research by anti-trafficking non-government organisation CHS Alternativo has identified that during the justice process, family members can be stigmatised and victimised as they attempt to render assistance to victims. For example, parents are often

1   J Greenbaum, 'Introduction to Human Trafficking: Who Is Affected?', in M Chisolm-Straker and H Stoklosa (eds)., *Human Trafficking is a Public Health Issue*, Springer, Cham, 2017, pp. 1–14; J Greenbaum *et al.*, 'Multi-level prevention of human trafficking: The role of health care professionals', *Preventive Medicine*, issue 114, 2018, pp. 164–167, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.07.006; K Marburger and S Pickover, 'A Comprehensive Perspective on Treating Victims of Human Trafficking', *The Professional Counselor*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2020, pp. 13–24, https://doi.org/10.15241/km.10.1.13; R Surtees, *After Trafficking: Experiences and Challenges in the (Re)integration of Trafficked Persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, UNIAP/NEXUS Institute, Bangkok, 2013.

2   A Querol, *El intento de las víctimas y sus familias por acceder a la justicia. Trata de personas, violencia y explotación: 40 testimonios*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2020.

3   Greenbaum; Marburger and Pickover.

4   *Ibid.*; A Pascual-Leone, J Kim, and O-P Morrison, 'Working with Victims of Human Trafficking', *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, issue 47, 2017, pp. 51–59, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-016-9338-3.

5   Marburger and Pickover; L A McCarthy, 'Life after Trafficking in Azerbaijan: Reintegration Experiences of Survivors', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 105–122, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218107; N M Twigg, 'Comprehensive Care Model for Sex Trafficking Survivors', *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, vol. 49, issue 3, 2017, pp. 259–266, https://doi.org/10.1111/jnu.12285.

6   UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), *Brasilia Rules about Access to Justice for Persons in a Condition of Vulnerability*, 2008. We refer to 'access to justice' as a fundamental right beyond legal procedures, as has been recognised and developed by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights jurisprudence. See: H Ahrens, F Rojas Aravena, and J C Sainz Borgo (eds.), *El acceso a la justicia en América Latina: Retos y desafíos*, Universidad para la Paz, San José de Costa Rica, 2015; A Cançado Trindade, *El derecho de acceso a la justicia en su amplia dimensión,* Librotecnia, Santiago de Chile, 2012.

not kept informed of authorities' decisions concerning their children.[7] Despite legislative efforts, victims and their families still face challenges in receiving assistance due to a lack of specialised and adequate services. Additionally, there is limited research on families' experiences and perspectives of assisting victims in the trafficking process.

This article addresses this gap by highlighting families' significant role in victims' recovery, access to justice, and reintegration. It demonstrates that for family members, the human trafficking situation begins when they confirm the victim is missing, become aware of the risks, and seek help from the authorities. It details the revictimisation and trauma experienced by family members through interacting with authorities and the need for a different approach and support model for families, tailored to victims' specific needs. It concludes that the families of victims may contribute significantly to these processes, if service providers set aside certain prejudices and include family members in the journey to access justice.

Context: The role of family and human trafficking in Peru

In Peru, nuclear households are the most common, followed by extended and single-parent households.[8] Family composition has recently changed, with more women as heads of households and an increase in single-parent households.[9] Family structure is highly dependent on income level, and poorer families are more likely to be extended and composite.[10] Factors such as the number of family members, the level of education of the head of the family, and the area of residence play a role in families' poverty level.[11] Inequality is also negatively related

---

7   A Querol, *Testimonios de las sobrevivientes de trata de personas. Brecha entre las necesidades de atención y los servicios recibidos después del rescate*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2015; A Querol, *Más allá del rescate de las víctimas. Trata de personas: buenas y malas prácticas en la protección de sus derechos*, 1st Edition, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2013; A Querol, *Rescate, Atención y reintegración. Buenas y malas prácticas en la atención a víctimas de trata de personas 2013–2017*, 2nd Edition, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2019.

8   Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI), *Perú. Tipos y ciclos de vida de los hogares, 2007*, INEI, Lima, 2010; IPSOS, El hogar peruano 2021, 10 December 2021.

9   U Torrado, 'Nueva dinámica en las familias peruanas', *Datum Internacional*, Lima, n.d.; U Torrado and C Pennano, *Familias Peruanas. Más familias de las que imaginas*, Fondo Editorial Universidad del Pacífico, Lima, 2020; C Ramos, 'La idea de familia en el código civil peruano', *Themis*, issue 30, 1994, pp. 97–107.

10 I Arriagada, *Familias latinoamericanas. Diagnóstico y políticas públicas en los inicios del nuevo siglo*, CEPAL, Chile, 2001.

11 R Castro, R Rivera, and R Seperak, 'Impacto de composición familiar en los niveles de pobreza de Perú', *Cultura-Hombre-Sociedad*, vol. 27, issue 2, 2017, pp. 69–88, https://doi.org/10.7770/cuhso-v27n2-art1229.

to intergenerational mobility.[12] Leaving poverty is strongly impacted by parental level of education, family income, and families' demographic composition.[13]

The Family: Vulnerability and protection

Families of victims of trafficking may play different roles at various stages of the trafficking process. Several family-based risk factors contribute to the vulnerability to human trafficking, including a history of violence or abuse, dysfunctional family dynamics, discrimination, poverty, migrant status, and homelessness, among others. Families' lack of awareness of human trafficking is another important factor as traffickers may encourage families to place victims into exploitative situations to ease extreme poverty. Individuals may be manipulated into entering sex work to support their families, but consequently be subjected to exploitative situations. Caretakers, parents, close acquaintances, or other relatives can also be traffickers or part of the trafficking network.[14] Traffickers can also coerce victims by threatening the safety of family members.[15]

While family dynamics and involvement can increase vulnerability, families can also play a protective and supportive role throughout the trafficking process, including at the prevention stage. For example, families can actively look for their missing family member or report the situation to the police. After the trafficking situation, the family is also fundamental to victims' recovery and reintegration.

For victims of trafficking, reconciliation with a supportive family may offer substantial protection against re-trafficking throughout their recovery.[16] However, reconciliation may necessitate special support measures due to, for example, shame, problematic family dynamics, the complexity of trauma, and families' direct involvement in victims' trafficking.[17] Reintegration demands a thorough

---

[12]   F Torche, 'Intergenerational Mobility and Inequality: The Latin American Case'*, Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 40, 2014, pp. 619–642, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071811-145521.

[13]   R Morán, T Castañeda, and E Aldaz-Carroll, 'Family Background and Intergenerational Poverty', in R Morán (ed.), *Escaping the Poverty Trap: Investing in children in Latin America*, Inter-American Development Bank, 2003, pp. 15–58.

[14]   J Greenbaum *et al.,* 'Global Human Trafficking and Child Victimization', *Pediatrics*, vol. 140, issue 6, 2017, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-3138; Greenbaum; Marburger and Pickover.

[15]   Greenbaum; Pascual-Leone, Kim and Morrison.

[16]   Marburger and Pickover; McCarthy; Twigg.

[17]   P T D Le, '"Reconstructing a Sense of Self": Trauma and Coping among Returned Women Survivors of Human Trafficking in Vietnam', *Qualitative Health Research*, issue 27, 2017, pp. 509–519, https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316646157; K Juabsamai and I Taylor, 'Family Separation, Reunification, and Intergenerational Trauma in the Aftermath of Human Trafficking in the United States', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue

comprehension of the environment and contextual factors to which the individual returns, the complexities of family relations, and the consequences of the trafficking situation on the individual.

Support from families for the reintegration process might vary, making it a complex dynamic.[18] Each family member may participate differently, and their emotions and responses toward the victim are varied and frequently contradictory.[19] During reintegration, victims are also vulnerable due to the return to a scenario similar to the one that gave rise to the trafficking process. This is aggravated if victims are stigmatised by their family and community, compromising returnees' support networks,[20] which is particularly common when they are female and victims of sexual exploitation.[21]

For several years now, survivors of trafficking in Peru have reported how essential their families' support has been, from their rescue to their reintegration.[22] In 2018, the Regulation of Legislative Decree 1297 was approved to prevent separation from victims' families or provide the necessary protection to achieve family reintegration.[23] However, victims' families are often seen as responsible for what happened, and authorities do not consider their needs.[24] This can lead to secondary victimisation and trauma for family members caused by their interactions with authorities during the justice process. This situation can subsequently contribute to the difficulties and stigma experienced by victims.[25]

10, 2018, pp. 123–138, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218108.

[18] R Surtees, *Moving On. Family and Community Reintegration Among Indonesian Trafficking Victims*, NEXUS Institute, Washington D.C., 2017.

[19] R Surtees, *Stages of Recovery and Reintegration of Trafficking Victims. A Reintegration Guide for Practitioners*, Different and Equal (D&E) and NEXUS Institute, Washington D.C., 2022.

[20] E Paasche, M-L Skilbrei, and S Plambech, 'Vulnerable Here or There? Examining the vulnerability of victims of human trafficking before and after return', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 34–51, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218103.

[21] C Blanco and C Marinelli, 'Víctimas de trata de personas versus migrantes en situación irregular. Retos y lineamientos para la atención y protección de las víctimas de trata de personas extranjeras en el Perú', *Revista de La Facultad de Derecho PUCP*, issue 78, 2017, pp. 173–198, https://doi.org/10.18800/derechopucp.201701.007.

[22] Querol, *Testimonios*.

[23] Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP), *Reglamento del Decreto Legislativo N.º 1297 'Decreto Legislativo para la Protección de las niñas, niños y adolescentes sin cuidados parentales o en riesgo de perderlos'*, 2019.

[24] Querol, *El intento*.

[25] Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP), *Problemática de la explotación sexual contra niñas, niños y adolescentes. En las cuencas de los ríos Napo, Morona y Putumayo en las regiones de Loreto y Puno, en el período (2014–2015)*, MIMP, Lima, 2017.

Human Trafficking in Peru: Structural elements of vulnerability

Victims of trafficking in Peru are usually young women, 16 to 25 years old, and most commonly trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation.[26] In 2023, the Public Ministry recorded 3,179 victims of trafficking, of which 72% were women and 27.4% were children.[27] Until 2018, almost all victims were Peruvian, but with increasing Venezuelan migration and the arrival of criminal organisations from other Latin American countries, foreign victims have increased by 500% since 2014.[28]

In 2007, Peru adopted its anti-trafficking legislation, National Law 28950 (aligned with the Palermo Protocol), and began reporting cases and taking steps to prevent and prosecute the crime and protect victims. Since then, a multisectoral task force against trafficking has been created, along with specialised police units and prosecutors' offices, though there are only 14 prosecutors' offices in the country's 27 regions. A limited budget has been allocated, covering just 11 of the 42 services that, according to the National Policy, should be operational to combat human trafficking and support victims.[29] The National Policy of Action against Trafficking in Persons, in effect until 2030, establishes prevention, protection, prosecution, and reintegration actions. However, it does not include families or communities in its objectives.[30]

There are several structural elements that contribute to people's vulnerability to trafficking before recruitment or exploitation. Educational inequalities, for example, are particularly pronounced, and many factors, such as rural living, poverty, and gender, reduce opportunities to access primary education.[31] Gender inequity, gender roles, forced unions, and forced pregnancy limit women's access to education.[32] Lastly, illiteracy remains disproportionately higher among women

---

[26]   Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI), *Estadísticas de Seguridad Ciudadana No. 2,* 2020.

[27]   Public Prosecutor's Office, Information collected from the 14 prosecutors' offices specialising in human trafficking, requested June 2024.

[28]   *Ibid.*

[29]   CHS Alternativo, *IX Informe Alternativo*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2024.

[30]   Ministry of Interior (MININTER), *Política Nacional frente a la Trata de Personas y sus formas de explotación – Versión Amigable*, 1st Edition, MININTER, Lima, 2021.

[31]   A Sánchez, 'Trayectorias educativas a lo largo del ciclo de vida: El rol de la pobreza, el área de residencia y las brechas de género', in M Balarin, S Cueto, and R Fort (eds.), *El Perú pendiente: ensayos para un desarrollo con bienestar*, GRADE, Lima, 2022, pp. 179–202.

[32]   Plan Internacional, 'Brecha de educación en el Perú: Esta es la población más afectada', 22 June 2022.

and lower socioeconomic groups.[33] Moreover, women are made disproportionately responsible for care and household tasks.[34]

Other risk factors are domestic violence, emotional deprivation, and family crises. According to studies, 63.2% of women have been victims of domestic violence.[35] Six out of ten children and teenagers have been beaten in their homes, 70% have suffered psychological violence, and 35% have suffered one or more forms of sexual violence in their homes or at the hands of close relatives.[36] Most victims of trafficking and other types of exploitation were also victims of gender-based violence (GBV) in the past, and these crimes occur within a broader social context of tolerance for GBV.[37]

Method

This article is based on research conducted in 2019 and 2020 with 30 victims assisted by CHS Alternativo,[38] who are survivors of domestic trafficking for sexual exploitation (24) and labour exploitation (6). Of the 30 survivors, 21 were adult women, 2 were adult men, and 7 were underage women. This composition reflects the gendered nature of trafficking in Peru. In addition to survivors, the researchers interviewed 10 family members of survivors. This included 8 mothers of victims participants in the study, 1 grandmother of a victim of child sexual abuse material, and one father of a victim killed in captivity. Most relatives (7) had incomplete primary or secondary education, and only three had completed secondary education.

---

[33] Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI)*, Perú: Indicadores de Educación, según departamento, 2012-2022,* INEI, Lima, 2023.

[34] Pulso PUCP, 'Familia y roles de género en el Perú', *Pulso PUCP*, 3 August 2023, https://pulso.pucp.edu.pe/reportes-estadisticos/familia-y-roles-de-genero-en-el-peru.

[35] Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI), '63 de cada 100 mujeres de 15 a 49 años de edad fue víctima de violencia familiar alguna vez en su vida por parte del esposo o compañero', INEI, 25 November 2019.

[36] UNICEF, 'Cifras de la violencia hacia los niños, niñas y adolescentes en el Perú', UNICEF, 2019.

[37] A Querol, *Buscando justicia. Trata de personas, violencia y explotación: 40 testimonios*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2020; Defensoría del Pueblo, *Balance sobre la política pública contra la violencia hacia las mujeres en el Perú (2015–2020), Serie de Informes Defensoriales – Informe no. 186*, Defensoría del Pueblo, Lima, 2021.

[38] Since 2005, CHS Alternativo has had a support centre for victims of trafficking and their families, offering legal and psychological guidance and assistance in the processes of reporting, searching, accessing justice, and reintegration.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in five regions: Loreto, Puno, Tacna, Lima, and Callao. They were conducted by female psychologists who have experience dealing with trauma clients and providing care for victims of trafficking. They were familiar with data collection tools and the research ethics principles, which were approved by Pontificia Universidad Católica del Peru. The interview questions revolved around survivors' and their relatives' experiences with the legal system, from the moment they were rescued or escaped until their reintegration, and the role their families played during these processes.

In this article, we analyse the experiences of survivors in relation to the role of families in their trafficking experience and analyse how it may prevent or contribute to victims' vulnerability. We also analyse the perspectives of families, essentially mothers, who were spokespersons for their families' experiences.

The goal of the study was to understand the needs and experiences of victims and their relatives as they navigated the legal system, from the moment of rescue until reintegration. The qualitative approach allowed us to delve into their perspectives and understand the meanings they gave to their experiences.[39] Once the interviews had been transcribed, a matrix was drawn up to analyse the information, organising it into thematic areas.[40]

Findings

The findings demonstrate that families play an important role in processes related to prevention and victim recovery. Socioeconomic conditions, family functioning, and existing bonds within the family environment can contribute to rescue and recovery following a trafficking situation. Despite this, the system often blames parents and family members for victims' experiences, disregards their concerns, and in some cases, prevents family reunification, leading to revictimisation of the victims and secondary victimisation of their families.

The following section examines how family situations can contribute to victims' vulnerability to trafficking, the role family members play in the search and reporting process during the trafficking situation, and families' interactions with the State in the process of accessing justice.

---

39   J W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches,* SAGE Publications, London, 2013.

40   V Braun and V Clark, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 1, 2006, pp. 77–101, https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.

Family Factors Contributing to Vulnerability

Research in Peru has found that domestic violence and extreme poverty, often linked to a lack of education, can increase vulnerability to trafficking.[41] This study confirms these findings.

<u>Violence</u>

Eight of the thirty victims (approx. 27%) had suffered an episode of violence within the family or inflicted by third parties. The father, uncle, or brother of five female victims used physical violence in the household, and three of these women were also victims of sexual violence before they were recruited: in one case, it was the father who raped her; in another, it was the neighbour; and in the third, it was the parents who sexually exploited the child, with the aunt being the one who reported the situation and protected her. Additionally, three of the minors interviewed were raped (and then extorted) by their traffickers, which marked the beginning of their exploitation.

These experiences were diverse and had differing impacts on the victims and their families. It is important to differentiate between violence perpetrated by immediate and extended family members, as one family member's actions do not render the entire family dysfunctional.

This is reflected by the case of a 14-year-old research participant. She was happy with her family, but a cousin who had recently moved into their house abused her, threatened to do the same to her younger sister if she told anyone, and finally, when he suspected he had been discovered, kidnapped her and held her for months against her will, repeatedly raping her and forcing her to serve him.

The testimonies show that in some cases, it was violence that prompted the victims to leave their homes, thus increasing their vulnerability to being trafficked or manipulated. For example, one participant, a 12-year-old girl who lived with her siblings and cousins at her uncle's house while her mother worked as a live-in domestic worker, was psychologically and psychically abused by her uncle, until she ran away. She explains:

> *One day when my uncle got upset, he grabbed me by force and cut my hair with his scissors. I screamed... That's when I decided to run away.*

---

[41]   A Querol, *Buscando Justicia*; J Jabiles, *'Víctimas ideales' y discursos victimológicos en la persecución del delito de trata de personas en la ciudad de Lima*, PUCP, Lima, 2017; P Astete and R Guerrero, *Informe sobre la situación y contexto del delito de trata de personas y la explotación sexual en las regiones de Madre de Dios y Piura en el marco del proyecto 'No más mujeres invisibles: contra la trata, explotación sexual y violencia sexual en zonas de minería informal de Madre de Dios y Piura'*, PROMSEX, Lima, 2021.

She was subsequently captured by traffickers while she was travelling on a bus.

Some of the victims that suffered violence before the trafficking situation returned to their families, but in most cases, the family cut ties with the aggressors, and in a few cases, the victims were able to protect themselves and change the dynamics. Four participants who suffered violence by a close family member did not return to their homes.

Economic Disadvantages and Needs

Traffickers often take advantage of people's economic needs and exploit their desire to financially support their families.[42] The low educational level of most participants (21 of 30 with incomplete schooling at the time they were trafficked) puts them at a higher risk due to a lack of information and the financial need for continuing their studies. Nine participants (30%) were deceived by traffickers because they wanted to generate income to support their families. Three of the six victims who were trafficked for labour exploitation also expressed their desire to help their families and were recruited by a member of the extended family. In another case, a young woman intending to financially support her parents accepted a job offered by an aunt and travelled to a mining area, where she was exploited by traffickers. Weeks later, she was murdered by the traffickers, and although the investigation is ongoing,[43] it appears that the in-laws were involved with the traffickers.

The intersection of domestic violence and economic hardship significantly heightens the vulnerability to trafficking, as evidenced by victims' testimonies and the manipulative tactics employed by traffickers who prey on these factors.

Family Members Reporting Trafficking Cases and Participating in the Search Process

Out of thirty victims, twenty-three (excluding seven who were directly exploited by or suffered violence at the hands of their parents) mention their families as vital in their escape or return processes. For families, the process of accessing justice usually starts when they report a family member's disappearance, a time during which they expect to receive immediate help from the authorities.

Nine of the ten family members interviewed shared that they started reporting, searching, or asking for help as soon as they became aware that their family members were being exploited. Cases in which victims were exploited while still living in their homes were harder to detect. Some victims said that their relatives

---

42   Greenbaum.

43   As of November 2024.

were unaware of their situation and often only learnt about the exploitation once they escaped or were rescued, which could lead to delays in reporting.

One parent mentioned that they only became aware that something had happened to their daughter when her aunt told them that she had disappeared. The family immediately went looking for her, but the daughter was eventually found dead. It was later revealed that the aunt was the trafficker.

Another victim, a minor from a remote jungle community, was deceived by a man who made her a false job offer and took her and her son to another city, where he sexually exploited her. Her father began to search for her through the radio where he worked and reported her disappearance. When she managed to escape, she called him to ask for help:

> *I go to a public phone and dial my dad's number [...] and I tell him that it was a big lie that I'm fine and everything, right? And I started to tell him everything that I was going through, that they were taking me, that they were using me for this, and that when I wanted to leave, they wanted to beat me... [...] when my family found out what I was going through, they contacted the police...*

Family members often persist in their search, interacting with authorities and becoming key actors in rescue efforts. This cycle of anguish and pain is exacerbated by uncertainty, as families feel powerless due to a lack of trauma-informed responses and authorities' passivity. For example, the father of a survivor went immediately to the police to file a report, but the police held him and his wife responsible for letting their daughter leave and warned them that in that place, there were no work opportunities but only human trafficking.

Five family members felt they were not helped by the police, one mother expressed ambivalence, and only three felt supported. Six felt mistreated and reported that the police questioned their daughters' disappearances and implied that they intentionally left their homes, probably with their partners. Participants reported experiencing recrimination and victimisation by the authorities, as these placed the blame on them or their families, such as assuming an existing close relationship between the victims and their traffickers. The following testimonies from mothers reflect this:

> *It's not easy when you go and file a complaint. No, no, they don't treat you well, there's a lack of attention from their side, you know? 'No, your daughter is... young, people are like that, ma'am, they go to bad things now'. [...] The policeman who leaves you sitting for two or three hours doesn't treat you well.*

> *'...but what do we do, madam, maybe she has gone with her partner, with her lover and you are thinking badly' [...] Of course, because they are not their children, right? [...] I started to look for my daughter, I didn't have police help [...] and I did the work myself because I was the one who started to investigate [...] until I found my daughter.*

One 14-year-old girl was rescued thanks to the intervention of her parents. Her mother was repeatedly mistreated and disbelieved by authorities. The family filed multiple reports of her disappearance and sought help for months, but they were ignored, although the daughter was being extorted and sexually exploited. Finally, the police held the family responsible and prosecuted them for neglecting their daughter. In addition, the accused, responsible for kidnapping, holding, rape, and sexual exploitation, blamed the family for mistreating their daughter and claimed to have been fostering her in his home. The family's attempt to find their daughter ended up criminalising them:

> *Well, it didn't help when the police reported me to the district attorney's office for abandoning my daughter, that I was a bad mother, and also my husband. They [social workers] told [my daughter] that if she… that we were supposedly not fit to be her parents, she was going to a shelter…*

Families' efforts to start the search for their relatives are frequently met with victim-blaming and indifference from authorities. Besides feeling mistreated, they are accused of negligence and do not feel they receive the expected support.

New Forms of Recruitment

The growing use of social media and new information and communication technologies pose challenges for families, as children may be sexually exploited while at home. Four victims in this study were extorted and forced to have sex under threat while still living at home. Although such victims are not displaced, they are coerced and subdued by their exploiters, fearing that their loved ones may suffer retaliation if they do not comply.

Despite the difficulty in identifying this type of exploitation, families remain key in detecting behavioural changes in their children who are experiencing exploitation while at home. Four mothers reported that their daughters were exhibiting signs of isolation, emotional lability, or anxiety, or were unexpectedly absent. They sought dialogue and asked professionals for help (state or school psychologists) but were told that these were typical adolescent behaviours. These minors were being extorted, and two of them were later abducted. In several cases, these were concerned, seemingly well-constituted families who feared for their children and suffered with them.

She had a drastic, noticeable change. Psychologically I saw her in a bad way: she cried; she didn't sleep. I have a daughter who sleeps with her, she also told me that her sister cried all night [...] The day the events happened, my daughter disappeared for many hours and that's when it all started.

A mother always has a hunch, right? So, I [...] started to ask her what was going on. I would go straight to school, follow her, or drop her off at school. I would ask her 'What's wrong with you, what's wrong with you, what's wrong with you?'

The moment after victims escape or are rescued, or the family realises that their family members are being exploited, should mark the beginning of the restitution of rights (including reparation).

Families' Experiences with Access to Justice and Reintegration

Once the victim is identified, a new stage begins in which families' presence and participation varies. Like Surtees,[44] we found that the involvement, emotional experience, and understanding of the circumstances are particular to each family member and depend on the context. Apart from families involved with traffickers, the families in the survivors' immediate environment often feel relieved by their return, but this does not exclude other conflicting emotions. These feelings include guilt for not having protected the victims; anger and a desire for the perpetrators to pay for what they did; fear of the suffering and emotional impact of the trafficking experience that affect both the victims and themselves; and fear that the situation may be repeated, or that the traffickers may carry out their threats.

Experiences of Separation and Reunification

During the post-trafficking situation, victims are expected to make decisions about their immediate future, such as whether to participate in the judicial process and whether to return to their families. After a trafficking situation, victims, especially minors, are temporarily housed in shelters during preliminary proceedings. In our study, only twelve victims (40%) felt that they were able to participate in the decision to return to their families. Similarly, only four mothers were consulted about whether their daughters should be sheltered (in four cases, they were involved in the abuse, so they could not participate in the decision). Fifteen were sheltered in a specialised residential care facility (in the case of minors) or a temporary shelter home (for adults). Some did not know they would have to remain there for years:

[F]   Surtees, *Stages of Recovery*.

I felt alone, I had no one to help me, no one to come and see me [...] I saw that they were visiting other girls and I thought 'I'm never going to have a visitor, I don't know when I'll get out of here.' I said I'll stay until when?... I didn't know that at 18 you get out of there, I didn't know anything…

I wanted to talk to my mother because I was worried [...] I wanted to see her as soon as I got there and they wouldn't let me. They sent me straight there and they didn't tell me I was going to go to a shelter [...] they didn't tell me I was going to go to a home where it is permanent [...] you can stay for months, years.

Peruvian trafficking policy prioritises children's best interests and the relationship with their families. Following Legislative Decree 1297, the Special Protection Units for Children and Adolescents (UPEs), under the Ministry of Women, are responsible for determining whether victims' families are involved in the exploitation or can care for them. However, there is a tendency to criminalise parents. If a child's disappearance is not immediately reported, this may be interpreted as a lack of interest or, worse, as an indication that the parents are part of the exploitation structure.[45] Government officials tend to presume that families are involved in the trafficking situation and may or may not receive economic benefits. However, family members may fail to report their children's disappearance for various reasons, including lack of information, financial resources, or lack of awareness of the trafficking situation.

The UPEs carry out a risk assessment where trafficking is usually understood as part of families' incapacity to protect their family members. They can impose a protection measure involving victims' temporary separation from their families, complemented by specialised support for the families. Even though Legislative Decree 1297 aims to prevent the separation of children from their families, it does not seem to fulfil this goal.

As a result, the sense of mistreatment and powerlessness often persists when parents find their children, only to feel like they lose them again because authorities shelter the children to 'protect' them from their parents. Five out of eight mothers said they were separated from their daughters for extended periods. A clear example of this was a 13-year-old girl, who was sheltered because the State concluded that by not reporting her disappearance, her mother was demonstrating disinterest and lack of capacity. Her mother was a domestic worker, had not finished primary school, had no money to respond to the State's requests, and was unaware of her rights. She did not report her daughter missing as she did not know how and was afraid of losing her job, as her boss denied her permission to leave to file a report. After quitting her job and scraping together the money

---

45   Querol, *El intento.*

needed to travel and pick up her daughter, she was informed that she must return to her hometown for more documents, and that she was not allowed to see her daughter. Not only was she misinformed, but her daughter was placed in four different shelters, and the mother did not know her whereabouts for over a year. They saw each other for the first time a year and a half later, and despite the mother's efforts, it took her three years to bring her daughter home. In the process, she was mistreated by various officials.

> *I did want to see her, but they [staff at the shelter] wouldn't let me, they shouted at me, they told me, 'You don't have to come in here to see her', 'Why are you only now getting worried', they told me. I didn't say anything, I had to look down.*

Another girl's mother agreed to her daughter's placement in a shelter because she required special care, but despite her involvement and concern, maintaining contact was difficult:

> *I had no contact. From there she was taken to another shelter. I demanded to see her. [...] After many requests, they allowed me to see her.*

When evaluating protection measures for victims, consideration should be given to the respective family settings, the family members' degree of knowledge and information, the psychological consequences for victims of prolonged periods of separation, or victims' decision-making capacity. It appears that these factors are not included when assessing families' ability to care for their children.

Accessing Justice

Family members' low socio-economic status and lack of education can influence state officials' decisions concerning their capacity to protect their relatives. One of the greatest difficulties for victims' relatives is the extensive paperwork necessary to move forward with the judicial processes. Often, these are families with limited resources that make great sacrifices and even go into debt to comply with the required legal procedures.

> *I alone have bought my ticket, I alone have searched, I have come all the way here, [...] to look for someone to lend me [money] to take her to the forensic doctor. [...] And the doctor never came.*

One family spent more than four years seeking justice for their daughter who was murdered during her trafficking situation. The parents had not finished primary school, but their son supported them to continue with the proceedings. They lost their house to pay for the legal process and were constantly threatened by the alleged traffickers.

> *We ask for justice, but as we are poor, there is no justice. [...] They kill*
> *and insult us! That man is free... his daughter studies in a public school...*
> *and they have killed my daughter. They should punish him forever!*

Parents' lack of awareness regarding their children's situation may raise concerns, but this does not justify authorities mistreating or undervaluing them. Instead, it highlights the need to improve their skills in handling complex situations and develop preventive competencies. A support model for families in the reintegration process is necessary.[46]

Families of trafficking victims frequently feel judged and like passive recipients of authorities' decisions due to prejudices and stigma involving the respective victims' environments.[47] Authorities frequently attribute responsibility for victims' circumstances to their families, associating them with environments that make victims vulnerable, unprotected, or subject to violence. This influences officials' attitudes and can affect victims' reunification with their families. Officials seem to have an 'ideal family' in mind, consisting of a nuclear family which can shield children from violent circumstances. It is essential to understand that victims' families are diverse, with different structures, and different feelings and needs.

Trauma and the Cycle of Revictimisation

A process of victimisation and revictimisation of both the victims and their families is created and begins by blaming the parents and the other family members. Recrimination and discrimination negatively impact victims' rights and recovery. In our research, several families had experienced public officials behaving inappropriately and making disparaging comments or accusations. For example, one victim stated:

> *[the policeman] said [to her and her parents], that we [the victims] are*
> *already used to that [being forced to have sex with men]. [...] Another*
> *time he told my dad that there are girls who are to blame [because they*
> *know] what they are getting into...*

This blaming and revictimisation can worsen post-traumatic stress disorder for victims.

---

46   Blanco and Marinelli.

47   N Roca *et al.*, 'Rompiendo cadenas entre estigma y enfermedad mental. La deconstrucción del estigma desde la acción comunitaria', *Investigación Cualitativa En Ciencias Sociales*, issue 3, 2016, pp. 86–96.

One participant described how, when she managed to escape with help from her parents and they all went together to file a report, the police questioned the kidnapping and exploitation:

> '*But how do you know it's the man's fault? Surely that girl has provoked him'. I mean, how [can] they say that to my mum? [...] And they were all in the back, listening to what I said [in the Gesell Chamber].*[48]

As these quotes demonstrate, families may face disbelief because the victims are young women. There is a recurring assumption among some justice officials that women leave voluntarily with their partners. This speaks of a gender bias, as there is a tendency to blame mothers (fathers too, but less often) for not taking adequate care of their daughters and to hold them responsible for their children's disappearance and exploitation.

Survivors perceive that they are mistreated and have little credibility, feeling revictimised.

> *It was like an insult and a mockery of me because I kept telling him that he was not my partner and that he had kidnapped me. Even on paper, they recorded it as if he was my partner. It was very painful...*

Participants expect the justice system to respond to their demands and treat them with respect, and question the lack of empathy and the little help they receive. This is aggravated by bad practices and revictimising interventions not only towards victims but also towards their mothers.

> *I didn't like the way he [police officer] treated me… he asked me if I had anal sex, oral sex… and for me, it hurt me… the tone he used, I didn't like it. I felt it as a mockery.*

Revictimisation is exacerbated when the parents' level of education is low, or when they are unaware of the laws and protection mechanisms to which they are entitled. They experience frustration when authorities do not provide the expected help, leading to passivity, inaction, and indifference, and generating mistrust and unease due to long waits, delays, and labyrinthine processes.

> *I don't believe in justice because justice is now based more on believing the aggressors than the victims. And there is no justice, they are not interested in people's pain.*

---

[48] The use of the Gesell Chamber is part of the protocol, ensuring a single interview with underaged victims of any kind of violence to avoid revictimisation.

All the families interviewed (as well as the victims) hope that justice will be served. Their motivation to continue collaborating with the authorities is the fear that the traffickers/exploiters remain free and could harm them, and the conviction that they must pay for their crimes:

> *For me, justice is that he pays for all the damage he has done, not only to my daughter, he hurt my whole family, because by messing with my daughter he did it to all of us.*

Many family members experience a lack of listening, collaboration, and support throughout the process of obtaining justice, and felt victimised by its length and bureaucracy. Many female victims and their mothers feel mistreated by male justice officials. However, while they often feel more comfortable with female officials, they report instances of mistreatment and a lack of empathy from women, too.

It is clear that family members are also affected by the traumatic experiences of their trafficked relatives. There are family members who have lost their jobs because they spent long periods of time tracing their missing children or relatives, even moving to other cities with destabilising consequences. The impact on family members could be classified as secondary or vicarious trauma, as they are indirectly impacted by experiences of violence both during and after the situation of exploitation.

Ten of the survivors interviewed received threats from traffickers to drop their complaints. The victims were the main target of these threats, but they also involved the possibility of harming family members. This shows the importance of families receiving support from the State. Only one participant reported that the State provided psychological support. Most did not receive it, or it was very limited. One mother put it bluntly:

> *The State didn't even give me a psychiatrist, the State didn't give my daughter any remedy, nothing...*

Importance of the Family upon Return

Several victims said that their mothers and families played a key role after their return and stressed the importance of the accompaniment and affection received.

> *I thought that they were not going to welcome me at home, that they were going to leave me aside […] when in fact […] everyone supported me, they gave me the support that [I] needed at that time and […] I felt more confident that I could talk, I could move forward with the case.*

> *The support of my mum. And my dad, which is the most important thing, he was always there.*

Families' support and involvement in reintegration are crucial for victims' well-being.[49] Reuniting with family also means readjusting and mending their bonds and finding solace from the trauma experienced.[50] Without romanticising families or ignoring their possible involvement or complicity in exploitative situations, we must recognise that they can serve as a refuge for survivors.

> *It was a sad reunion, but a happy one for me because I saw them again. [...] It wasn't easy [...] but I was always dependent on my mom because I was very scared.*

Reintegration with their families or substitute families requires a process of adaptation, as observed by this 14-year-old girl:

> *At first weird […] because I missed home. I missed the noise of the girls, the jokes, the pranks, and everything. [...] I'd say I'm finally home, calm, but I'd start crying […] then it was normal, I was adapting.*

Some victims return to environments similar to the ones that gave rise to the trafficking situation. In short, to the same social, economic, or personal vulnerabilities. For example, one girl shared how she felt upon returning home, where her abusive uncle—who had prompted her to escape years earlier—still lived. She spent three years in a shelter, during which time her mother could not find the financial resources to move elsewhere, and the State offered no alternative.

> *I came here, I felt happy, I hugged my little brothers, I started to cry, it was a lot of mixed feelings, really, [...] I'm fine with my mum, I'm fine with my little brothers, I don't need anything else. I don't care if he [the uncle] looks at me badly or tells me why have I reported him.*

The situation is more complex when the victim is stigmatised by the extended family or community.

> *...before I felt bad because my mum felt bad because of the comments that others made [...] from my uncles, from my aunts, they would say: 'oh, your daughter is like that' and my mum, sometimes she didn't talk to me and that made me feel bad.*

---

49   A Querol and A Lerner, 'The Vulnerability of Minors after a Child Trafficking Situation', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2024, pp. 103-120, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1996126.

50   Greenbaum; Juabsamai and Taylor; R Surtees, 'At Home: Family Reintegration of Trafficked Indonesian Men', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 70–87, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218105.

Thus, family members often provide protective environments for survivors. They may support the recovery and facilitate reintegration into the family and wider community. However, they may also contribute to revictimisation, which highlights the critical need for families to receive counselling.

Conclusions

This article explored how the family environment can contribute to vulnerability to human trafficking and the needs and experiences of family members during and after the trafficking situation. It demonstrated the challenges that families face, first in their desperation to find their missing children, and then while coping with the legal and emotional aftermath of their surviving children.

It also revealed that victims and their families mistrust the criminal justice system and, by extension, the State, due to mistreatment and lack of guidance from the moment the complaint is received to the conclusion of the criminal justice process.

Without idealising families, or denying that there are families who are exploitative or complicit in abuse, the state must take a different approach and recognise the importance of victims' families in victims' recovery and restoration of rights. Understanding the complex role of the family in victim reintegration is critical for improving the quality of social inclusion.

Including the perspective of victims' families in research is necessary as their experiences are often ignored. Survivors and their families face daily challenges and difficulties when trying to access medical and psychological services, which should be provided by the State. A family-centred approach should be part of the principles to be considered in the National Anti-Trafficking Policy.

Research on the profile of the families of victims of trafficking is crucial to gain a better understanding of their difficulties. For example, it is important to acknowledge that an absent father does not necessarily mean that a family is dysfunctional, or that a violent relative does not render an entire family an unsuitable environment for children. The concept of an ideal family is a fictional representation, and each approach to family must be grounded in reality to prevent biases and prejudices. Approaching families' needs must be based on the real-life circumstances of each victim.

The family members interviewed for this article recommend, among other things, improved quality of care from professionals in shelters, greater efficiency in identifying high-risk areas and activities for better prevention, increased proactivity from the police in investigating cases, and stronger collaboration between NGOs and state institutions.

Contexts of violence, low educational levels, lack of awareness of their rights, and limited financial resources are factors that exacerbate families' vulnerabilities. These issues also hinder their ability to act or demand appropriate responses from authorities, being often revictimised through either mistreatment or exclusion from decision-making. A paradigm shift is needed regarding the care of at-risk populations with limited resources to protect themselves. It is essential for the design of public policies to incorporate education and violence-related initiatives.

The State must go beyond setting norms and protocols and also allocate adequate human and financial resources to prevent trafficking and provide comprehensive care for victims and their families. This should include investing in education (including university-level education) and the specialisation and training of justice and service officials, ensuring that gender perspectives and their relationship with violence prevention are actively incorporated into training curricula. In addition, further research into these factors is essential to tailor effective prevention strategies.

Andrea Querol is president of the board and a researcher at the NGO CHS Alternativo. Email: aquerol@chsalternativo.org

Antonia Lerner is a researcher at the NGO CHS Alternativo. Email: alerner@ chsalternativo.org

Experiences of Families Separated across Borders Following Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking

Rebecca Treadaway

Abstract

Within the United Kingdom's system for identifying survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking, survivors coming from overseas account for nearly 75%. This data indicates that many survivors are separated from family in the process of trafficking, yet little is known about the impact this separation has on them and their families. This article addresses this gap by analysing case data and twelve interviews with anti-slavery practitioners. The findings demonstrate that separation from family can hamper survivors' recovery, due to the distress caused by the separation and an ongoing need for survivors to provide for family overseas. The process of family reunification is unnecessarily lengthy and complex, and survivors receive limited support for this aspect of recovery. The impact of separation on families is significant, and a 'family-oriented' approach to survivor support should be developed alongside measures to address the structural issues that create extended periods of separation and precarity for migrants.

Keywords: modern slavery, human trafficking, transnational families, family reunion

Introduction

In 2023, 17,004 potential victims of modern slavery were referred to the UK's National Referral Mechanism (NRM), with nearly 75% of those coming from overseas.[1] These survivors often left behind family members when they came to the UK, with their experiences of modern slavery causing prolonged separation from family, which can cause significant distress for them. The experiences of families separated across borders following modern slavery is largely absent from literature and survivor support policies in the UK. The Salvation Army's international Anti-Trafficking and Modern Slavery (ATMS) team in the UK has been responding to this gap in service provision through its Beyond Programme. The Beyond Programme aims to use the Salvation Army's presence in 134 countries and its global anti-trafficking structure to connect survivors and their families with information and support where needs go beyond borders. The service focuses on supported return and reintegration, and on connecting separated family members to support overseas.

This article explores the impact of family separation following modern slavery. It argues that the period of separation increases risks to survivors and their families overseas, and that the processes to reunify them are complex and lengthy. It concludes that a family lens should be incorporated into support services, that protocols to protect separated family overseas should be developed, and that the complexity, costs, and delays of routes to family reunification should be reduced.

Transnational Family Separation in Literature and Policy

Transnational family separation is rarely the focus of modern slavery research. A study by Juabsamai and Taylor explores family reunification following the trafficking of one male survivor in the USA,[2] and many studies explore family reunification after survivors are returned to their home countries.[3] Research has

---

[1]   Home Office, 'Modern Slavery: NRM and Duty to Notify Statistics, End of Year Summary 2023', GOV.UK, 7 March 2024.

[2]   K Juabsamai and I Taylor, 'Family Separation, Reunification, and Intergenerational Trauma in the Aftermath of Human Trafficking in the United States', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 123–138, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218108.

[3]   A Brunovskis and R Surtees 'Coming Home: Challenges in Family Reintegration for Trafficked Women', *Qualitative Social Work*, vol. 12, issue 4, 2012, pp. 454–472, https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325011435257; L A McCarthy, 'Life after Trafficking in Azerbaijan: Reintegration Experiences of Survivors', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 105–122, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218107; R Surtees, 'At Home: Family Reintegration of Trafficked Indonesian Men', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 70–87, https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218105.

also explored the parental needs of survivors and the impact of modern slavery on their children, but the primary focus remains on children residing with the parent and less on the separation period itself.[4] Similarly, within the UK, key resources for practitioners on survivor support do not focus on the separation of family members. For example, the Slavery and Trafficking Survivor Care Standards contain only one reference to survivors' families, stating that survivors may be 'cut off from a family network'.[5] Further, the Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set (MSCOS), which was developed to improve the practice, assessment, and evaluation of the recovery, makes no reference to family relationships in the eight core outcomes it identifies as requisites for the recovery, well-being, and integration of adult survivors.[6]

While there is little research on the separation of families with experiences of modern slavery, one area of relevant research which is further developed can be found in the concepts of 'transnationalism'[7] and 'transnational families' within labour migration research and refugee studies. Parreñas defines transnational families as 'households with core members living in at least two nation states'[8] which encompasses a range of contexts. This research highlights that some families experience positive outcomes from transnational separation, such as increased school attendance in children who receive funds for school fees from a parent working overseas.[9] Despite these potential benefits, the experience

---

4   V Brotherton, *Time to Deliver: Considering Pregnancy and Parenthood in the UK's Response to Human Trafficking,* The Anti-Trafficking Monitoring Group, 2016; N Bush-Armendariz, M Nsonwu, and L Heffron, 'Human Trafficking Victims and Their Children: Assessing Needs, Vulnerabilities, Strengths and Survivorship', *Journal of Applied Research on Children: Informing Policy for Children at Risk*, vol. 2, issue 1, 2011, pp. 1–19; N Chazal, K Raby, and E Spasovska, '"I'm All About My Child": Supporting Modern Slavery Survivors as Parents', *Journal of Human Trafficking,* 2023, https://doi.org/10.1080/23 322705.2023.2279875; Hestia, *Underground Lives: Forgotten Children, the Intergenerational Impact of Modern Slavery*, Hestia, 2021, p. 12; K Hutchison, Olly, and B Mullan-Feroze, *One Day at a Time; A Report on the Recovery Needs Assessment by Those Experiencing it on a Daily Basis*, Anti-Slavery International, 2022.

5   K Roberts, *The Slavery and Trafficking Survivor Care Standards*, Human Trafficking Foundation, 2018, p. 96.

6   'The Modern Slavery Core Outcome Set', retrieved 3 June 2024, https://www.mscos. co.uk/core-outcomes.html.

7   S Vertovec, *Transnationalism,* Routledge, Oxon, 2009.

8   R S Parreñas, 'Mothering from a Distance: Emotions, Gender, and Intergenerational Relations in Filipino Transnational Families', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2011, pp. 361–390, https://doi.org/10.2307/3178765.

9   G Valtolina and C Colombo, 'Psychological Well-being, Family Relations, and Developmental Issues of Children Left Behind', *Psychological Reports*, vol. 111, no. 3, 2012, pp. 905–28, https://doi.org/10.2466/21.10.17.pr0.111.6.905-928; D Yang 'International Migration, Remittances and Household Investment: Evidence from

of separation can involve many negative aspects for children. Children with a parent overseas often experience feelings of abandonment, rejection, distress, anger, and perceived lack of care,[10] the long-lasting effects of which can include depression, anxiety, and insomnia.[11] Parents often migrate to provide opportunities for their families,[12] and research emphasises that children associate money, or remittances, sent from a parent's earnings overseas with love,[13] with children feeling that separation is more justified when they receive money.[14] This mitigation of the negative effects of separation can be particularly difficult for survivors of modern slavery who may be unable to send remittances due to their situations of exploitation. Migrants can consequently experience feelings of guilt, anxiety, and

Philippine Migrants' Exchange Rate Shocks', *Economic Journal of Royal Economic Society*, vol. 118, 2006, pp. 591–630, https://doi.org/10.3386/w12325; R S Parreñas, *Children of Global Migration: Transnational Families and Gendered Woes*, Manila University Press, Manilla, 2006.

[10] R Marsden and C Harris, *"We started life again": Integration Experiences of Refugee Families Reuniting in Glasgow*, British Red Cross, 2015; I Abdirashid, '"I Live in Agony": The Everyday Insecurity of Rejected Somali Asylum-seekers in Finland', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, vol. 24, 2023, pp. 1917–1937, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-023-01048-2; J R Delagado *et al.*, 'Community-based Trauma-informed Care Following Immigrant Family Reunification: A Narrative Review', *Academic Paediatrics*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2021, pp. 600–604, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2021.02.005.

[11] C Rousseau *et al.*, 'Remaking Family Life: Strategies for Re-establishing Continuity among Congolese Refugees during the Family Reunification Process', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 59, issue 5, 2004, pp. 1095–1108, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2003.12.011; A Nickerson *et al.*, 'The Impact of Fear for Family on Mental Health in a Resettled Iraqi Refugee Community', *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, vol. 44, issue 4, 2010, pp. 229–235, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2009.08.006; B Wilmsen, 'Family Separation and the Impacts on Refugee Settlement in Australia', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 48, issue 2, 2013, pp. 241–262, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2013.tb00280.x.

[12] A Fresnoza-Flot, 'Migration Status and Transnational Mothering: The Case of Filipino Migrants in France', *Global Networks*, vol. 9, issue 2, 2009, pp. 252–270, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2009.00253.x; H Lutz and E Palenga-Mollenbeck, 'Care Workers, Care Drain, and Care Chains: Reflections on Care, Migration, and Citizenship', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, vol. 19, issue 1, 2012, pp. 15–37, https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxr026; Parreñas, 2001; E Zontini, *Transnational Families, Migration and Gender: Moroccan and Filipino Women in Bologna and Barcelona*, Berghahn Books, New York, 2010.

[13] L Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders,* Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2014; Juabsamai and Taylor; Fresnoza-Flot; S Horton, 'A Mother's Heart is Weighed Down with Stones: A Phenomenological Approach to the Experience of Transnational Motherhood', *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, vol. 33, 2009, pp. 21–40, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-008-9117-z.

[14] Abrego.

powerlessness,[15] and an inability to provide financially can contribute to families' perceptions of survivors as 'failed' migrants.[16] Relationships can become further strained when migrants detach from family in an attempt to hide the reality of life in the new country.[17]

The literature on transnational families emphasises the ways in which bureaucratic practices control mobility,[18] and how immigration processes, such as reunification policies, can impact not just survivors but whole families. Home Office data shows that between January 2015 and March 2023, the refugee family reunification process was the third most accessed legal humanitarian route to the UK, after the Ukraine scheme visa and the British National Overseas Hong Kong visa, with over 46,215 family reunification visas granted.[19] This is relevant for some survivors of modern slavery, as Home Office data from January to September 2022 shows that 7% of those claiming asylum were referred into the NRM.[20] This means that some survivors may be eligible to apply for the family reunification visa upon a grant of protection, such as refugee status.

The Migration Integration Policy Index rates the degree of difficulty for family reunifications amongst 38 countries worldwide, and the UK ranks second from the bottom.[21] The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration argued that the performance in family reunions has 'deteriorated', with long delays and

---

[15] Parreñas, 2001; J White and L Hendry, *Family Reunion for Refugees in the UK: Understanding Support Needs*, British Red Cross, 2011; Marsden and Harris; C Rousseau, A Mekki-Berrada and S Moreau, 'Trauma and Extended Separation from Family among Latin American and African Refugees in Montreal', *Psychiatry*, vol. 64, no. 1, 2001, pp. 40–59, https://doi.org/10.1521/psyc.64.1.40.18238.

[16] Juabsamai and Taylor; Surtees; C Murphy *et al.*, *Cultural Influences and Cultural Competency in the Prevention and Protection of Survivors of Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking: Insights from the UK and Albania*, St. Mary's University, 2024.

[17] L Hoang and B Yeoh, 'Sustaining Families across Transnational Spaces: Vietnamese Migrant Parents and Their Left-Behind Children', *Asian Studies Review*, vol. 36, issue 3, 2012, pp. 307–325, https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2012.711810.

[18] L Näre, 'Family Lives on Hold: Bureaucratic Bordering in Male Refugees' Struggle for Transnational Care', *Journal of Family Research*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2020, pp. 435–454, https://doi.org/10.20377/jfr-353.

[19] Home Office, 'How Many People Do We Grant Protection To?', GOV.UK, 2023.

[20] Home Office, 'Annex: Analysis of Modern Slavery NRM Referrals From Asylum, Small Boats and Detention Cohorts', GOV.UK, 2023.

[21] 'Migrant Integration Policy Index', retrieved 3 June 2024, https://mipex.eu/family-reunion.

an inadequate response to the complexity and number of ongoing applications.[22] The issues surrounding the reunification process in the UK are well documented by the refugee sector and include the restrictive definition of 'the family', the ineligibility of children to sponsor parents within the immigration rules, the consequences of delays in the asylum process, the removal of legal aid in 2012, and the heavy financial costs to applicants.[23] Less explored is the intersection of these processes with survivors of modern slavery.

Research from labour migration and refugee studies highlights the emotional toll on families during separation, feelings which can be exacerbated by the immigration processes described above. Whilst these themes may be relevant to survivors of modern slavery, there is a gap in current research and a need to focus specifically on this issue in relation to adult survivors of modern slavery in the UK and their families overseas. It is this gap in the research that this article seeks to address.

Methodology

This research was undertaken through the Salvation Army in the United Kingdom and Ireland (UKI) territory by the coordinator of the Salvation Army's Beyond Programme and using data from the Beyond Programme. The Salvation Army is a global church, which offers charitable services. Its Anti-Trafficking and Modern Slavery (ATMS) department in the UK supported over 10,000 survivors in 2023[24] through its partners, delivering services through the government-funded Modern Slavery Victim Care Contract (MSVCC). The Beyond Programme works outside of the MSVCC and uses the Salvation Army's extensive global networks to connect survivors and their family members with overseas organisations, services, helplines, and the local Salvation Army church where appropriate. It focuses on the supported return and reintegration of survivors, and locating in-country support for separated family members overseas.

[22]   D Neal, 'A Reinspection of Family Reunion Applications September–October 2022', Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration, 2023, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-reinspection-of-family-reunion-applications-september-october-2022.

[23]   Marsden and Harris; A Beesley *et al.*, *Together at Last: Supporting Refugee Families Who Reunite in the UK*, The British Red Cross, 2022; Safe Passage and the Refugee Council, *Families Belong Together: Fixing the UK's Broken Family Reunion System*, 2024, p. 5; S Borelli *et al.*, *Refugee Family Reunification in the UK: Challenges and Prospects*, University of Bedfordshire*, 2021; S Holden, *Cuts That Cost: The Impact of Legal Aid Cuts on Refugee Family Reunion*, The British Red Cross, 2020.

[24]   The Salvation Army, *Modern Slavery Report*, The Salvation Army, 2023, p. 4.

The researcher and author of this article is the coordinator of the Beyond Programme, and may, accordingly, be termed a 'pracademic', which Powell *et al.* describe as a single person who is engaged as both practitioner and researcher.[25] This straddling of both worlds can be seen as a subjective position in terms of the pre-existing value placed on the service being provided and the subject matter. The researcher, however, takes a transformative worldview which Mertens describes as consciously focussing on 'addressing inequities and providing a platform for transformative change'.[26] The involvement of direct service providers in research is considered good practice, as it can bridge the gap between the world of academic research and service provision. Furthermore, the ability to draw from experience in support services and an academic evidence base allows the researcher to understand both worlds to bring about impactful change.

To provide depth and context to this quantitative data, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted between April 2022 and April 2024 with practitioners working with survivors of modern slavery. Practitioners were selected for the research using convenience and snowball sampling. The researcher started by identifying participants from those who were known to have experience of working on family reunification cases, or those who had made referrals into the Beyond Programme and then asked them to suggest others who fit the criteria. This method allowed the researcher to swiftly expand the number of participants for the study, in a group of individuals who may otherwise be difficult to access.[27]

A range of practitioners were purposively selected to ensure a diversity of scenarios and perspectives. Practitioners were selected from three organisations based in different regions in England. They include three caseworkers who provide free support to refugees applying for family reunifications; two caseworkers who provide long-term support to adult survivors of modern slavery when government-funded support ends; and seven support workers from organisations that provide support to adult survivors of modern slavery through the MSVCC. Interviews were conducted virtually, with transcriptions of the interviews generated for analysis. The focus of the interviews was on respondents' experiences of working with survivors of modern slavery who are separated from family overseas or going through the family reunification process.

[25] E Powell, G Winfield, A M Schatteman, and K Trusty, 'Collaboration Between Practitioners and Academics: Defining the Pracademic Experience', *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2018, pp. 62–79, https://doi.org/10.18666/JNEL-2018-V8-I1-8295.

[26] D M Mertens, 'Transformative Research Methods to Increase Social Impact for Vulnerable Groups and Cultural Minorities', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, vol. 20, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211051563.

[27] S J Tracy, *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*, Wiley-Blackwell, London, 2012.

The interview data was analysed thematically using a grounded theory approach.[28] The researcher used thematic analysis as a means to 'interpret patterns of meaning' from the data[29] and draw broad themes.[30] The interview data was firstly organised into broad categories focussing on three key areas: the impact of separation from their families on survivors in the UK; the impact on the separated families overseas; and experiences with the process of seeking reunifications. Within each category, themes were developed, for example the emotional distress or precarity caused by the separation. Informed consent was sought prior to the interviews and anonymity and confidentiality was maintained. Practitioners are not identifiable by their organisation, which protects their anonymity and the examples from which they drew.

The key limitation of this research is that it does not include the perspectives of survivors and family members separated through human trafficking and modern slavery. Survivors were not interviewed, given that the focus of the research was likely to cause distress and may be seen as unethical. In the literature on cross-cultural research, Liamputtong also explains that marginalised individuals may 'feel too powerless to express their concerns or to resist the power of researchers'.[31] The researcher was conscious of this power dynamic and did not want survivors to view their participation in the research as a requirement for receiving support. Thus, a key limitation is that practitioners can only comment upon issues which fit within their remit, and aspects that survivors chose to present to them. The study places the focus on experiences presented and reported by survivors, not by their families overseas, due to the lack of access to them. However, in selecting a range of practitioners, a broad range of issues were included, which is suitable for such exploratory research.

Findings

The Beyond Programme received 40 referrals from survivors seeking support for their separated families overseas. As Table 1 demonstrates, the three most common concerns of survivors were: tracing family members overseas following a loss of contact (30%); seeking support for family members overseas who were

---

28   B Glasner and A Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Routledge, London, 1999.

29   V Clarke and V Braun 'Thematic Analysis', *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, vol. 12, issue 3, 2017, pp. 297–298, https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613.

30   B Matthews and L Ross, *Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social Sciences,* Longman, London, 2010.

31   P Liamputtong, *Performing Qualitative Cross-Cultural Research*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010.

receiving threats or experiencing violence from a person related to their trafficking (22.5%); and supporting the care arrangements of children under 18 who lived overseas (20%).

Table 1: Referrals by Type of Concern

Primary concern of survivor noted in referral into the Beyond Programme (February 2023 to April 2024)	Referrals (number)	Referrals (percentage)
Tracing family members overseas following loss of contact	12	30%
Seeking support for family members overseas who are receiving threats or experiencing violence from a person related to their trafficking	9	22.5%
Supporting the care arrangements of children under 18 who live overseas	8	20%
Supporting the basic needs of family members overseas (such as food and schooling)	5	12.5%
Seeking support for family members living in conflict zones	3	7.5%
In-country support to unaccompanied children overseas	3	7.5%
Total	40	100%

It must be acknowledged that there is significant diversity in family experiences. As Practitioner 11 observed, there is a 'split' amongst survivors who are 'really worried and concerned' about their families' safety and those whose families 'pose a risk' to them. The latter, and the feelings of shame and stigma, are well-documented within the literature, particularly upon being returned home.[32] The quantitative data above represents only those survivors choosing to seek some support or connection with their families. However, it was noted that in some cases, this was as a result of the risk posed by family overseas, as seen in the referrals regarding support around the care arrangements for children.

---

[32] McCarthy; K Ramaj, 'The Aftermath of Human Trafficking: Exploring the Albanian Victims' Return, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration Challenges', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 9, issue 3, 2023, pp. 408–429, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1920823; S Pandey, H R Tewari, and P K Bhowmick, 'Reintegration as an End of Trafficking Ordeal: A Qualitative Investigation of Victims' Perceptions', *International Journal of Criminal Justice Sciences*, vol. 13, issue 2, 2018, pp. 447–460, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2658088.

Referral data also indicated the type of family relationship for which survivors sought support, as demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Referrals by Relationship Type

Relationship Type	Number of Referrals*	Percentage
Concern for a child	27	54%
Concern for a parent	7	14%
Concern for a sibling	6	12%
Concern for a spouse	2	4%
Unknown	8	16%
Total	50	100%

*A total of 40 referrals were received. However, each of these referrals may relate to more than one family member or relationship type.

Of all referrals, 54% were related to concern for a separated child. Practitioners also observed that the most pressing concern for survivors was often for their children:

> *I mainly have seen concern for children as like the primary stress, like there's absolutely concern for like spouses, parents, but I think when people are in, like pure distress, it's normally to do with … wanting their children to be safe, cared for. (Practitioner 11, Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Other forms of family separation were also observed, with concerns for parents making up 14% of referrals into the Beyond Programme and concern for siblings accounting for 12%.

This data is contextualised by the qualitative research, which can be separated into three distinct areas: the impact of separation on survivors; the impact of separation on family members overseas; and the processes and experiences associated with reunification attempts. These areas are now explored in more depth.

Impact of Separation on Survivors

The key themes surrounding the impact on survivors include significant distress caused by family separation and the continued need to provide financially for their families overseas.

<u>Distress</u>

All practitioners described survivors they worked with as experiencing distress, in the form of worry or fear for the welfare of separated family members, as outlined by Practitioner 11:

> *Every…conversation we'd have, they would, like, cry in distress for their family members back home. (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

This distress for survivors with children overseas is also noted by Chazal *et al.*[33] Distress was common for those without contact with their families but fearing for the their welfare, as documented in other studies.[34] Similarly, practitioners observed that most survivors had lost contact with their families, often during situations of exploitation when their communication was controlled. Most practitioners worked with survivors who did not know if their families were alive or dead. Boss terms this type of 'loss without confirmation' an 'ambiguous loss', which is associated with prolonged grief.[35] It is well-documented in research with refugees who may be unsure of the welfare of their families, which can negatively impact their mental health.[36]

Practitioners noted that the distress associated with separation is a significant obstacle in recovery. Practitioner 11 said they could not begin to help one survivor with his mental health issues whilst he was anxious that his children were about to be killed. Similarly, Practitioner 8 observed how supporting a survivor to reconnect with her children appeared very influential on her recovery:

> *to be able to be back in touch with her two boys… that was more than anything that we've been able to do for her in the last three years… (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

This quote highlights how there may be a disconnect between the perceived priorities of psychological recovery that many service providers in the Global North place and the benefit that family support and connection could bring in some cases. Scholars have documented that the primary need of many survivors is

---

[33]   Chazal *et al.*

[34]   E Beaton *et al.*, *Safe but Not Settled; The Impact of Family Separation on Refugees in the UK*, The Refugee Council and Oxfam, 2018.

[35]   P Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

[36]   A Renner *et al.*, 'Traumatized Syrian Refugees with Ambiguous Loss: Predictors of Mental Distress', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, issue 8, 2021, pp. 3865-3878, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18083865.

to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their children or families.[37] Thus, responding to the needs of a survivor who is a parent in turn promotes their individual recovery more effectively than a solely 'person-centred' therapeutic approach. For example, Murphy *et al.* advocate for the incorporation of a 'family-oriented' approach in support provision.[38]

Among practitioners working within the MSVCC, there was no clear consensus if support around transnational family separation was within their remit. Most referred to their remit of support as detailed in the 'Journey Plan', which is the support plan they make every 28 days, outlining specific goals. Some referred to the remit of 'dependents and maternity' as the area in which they could discuss the wider family, whilst others thought this related only to family in the UK. Practitioner 6 explained that, 'it's regarding dependents you have here', whereas Practitioner 10 explained that in relation to family separation it was 'our role to support them with that and help establish that connection'. Without the wider family being acknowledged in support systems, the remit surrounding family separation is open to interpretation, a situation that does not recognise the significance and impact that the wider family can have on survivors' recovery.

Providing for Family

Practitioners observed that many survivors felt the need to continue providing for family during the separation. Practitioner 8 described the initial migration of a survivor who sought short-term employment overseas to support herself and her child. However, when the situation turned exploitative and became a long-term separation without the anticipated salary, the benefits to the separation were not realised:

> *the purpose of her leaving was to make her daughter's life better. She didn't realise that it would end up making her life and her daughter's life worse. (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

The purpose of migration in providing opportunities for family members is well recognised in the literature on transnational families.[39] However, when opportunities become exploitative, the anticipated benefits of providing for family members may not be realised. This can create considerable feelings of guilt for survivors.[40] The inability to provide for one's family and the subsequent feelings of guilt was observed by all practitioners. Several noted that this led to

---

[37] Bush-Armendariz *et al.*; Chazal *et al.*, p. 11.

[38] Murphy *et al.*

[39] Fresnoza-Flot; Lutz and Palenga-Mollenbeck; Zontini.

[40] Surtees.

survivors not eating, with Practitioner 11 relaying how a survivor felt 'selfish' when she was eating, at a time when her children were starving, even though the survivor's physical health was declining due to lack of food. The pressure to provide financially was identified as common for those in contact with family. Practitioner 6 described common perceptions from family overseas. When they hear that their family member is in the UK, for example, family members may say:

> *'OK, he's going to start working, he's going to start getting a lot of money, he's going to send us a lot of money', so they don't really know what's going on. (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Most practitioners were working with survivors within the asylum system who were unable to work legally. Scholars have highlighted the tensions that asylum-seeking mothers face when responsible for family in a system that excludes them from working, or being reunited.[41] Studies show that this context increases the likelihood of exploitation, as workers lack legal protections,[42] something Hodkinson *et al.* describe as 'state-facilitated compulsion to enter precarious work.'[43] Policy-related pressures and constraints therefore contribute to a continuation of exploitation.

This conforms to research which identifies the precariousness experienced by asylum seekers whilst waiting for a decision[44] and the added pressure to provide for family.[45] Similarly, Chazal *et al.* note that a consequence of survivors being

---

[41] See, for example: G Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2018; R Madziva and E Zontini, 'Transnational Mothering and Forced Migration: Understanding the Experiences of Zimbabwean Mothers in the UK', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 19, issue 4, 2012, pp. 428–443, https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812466609.

[42] E Flint and H Muggeridge, *At Risk: Exploitation and the UK Asylum System*, UNHCR and the British Red Cross, 2022.

[43] S N Hodkinson *et al.*, 'Fighting or Fuelling Forced Labour? The Modern Slavery Act 2015, Irregular Migrants and the Vulnerabilising Role of the UK's Hostile Environment', *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 41, issue 1, 2021, pp. 68–90, p. 71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320904311.

[44] J Butler, 'Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation', *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, pp. 134–151, https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.26.2.0134; L Shobiye and S Parker, 'Narratives of Coercive Precarity Experienced by Mothers Seeking Asylum in the UK (Wales)', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 46, issue 2, 2023, pp. 358–377, https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2079383; UNHCR and the British Red Cross.

[45] Murphy *et al.*

unable to meet parental needs was an increased risk of further exploitation.[46] As Practitioner 5 explained, the efforts to provide for family were 'the whole reason that they got into that situation' of exploitation in the first place and into the precarious situation they find themselves in again. Practitioner 11 (Support Worker, MSVCC) explained that, despite the risks associated with illegal work, survivors 'just don't really care because they kind of like weigh the risks and would much rather their family have food to eat.' Therefore, the need to provide can add to the precarity experienced during recovery and the risk of re-exploitation.

The Impact on Separated Family Members

The second key finding of the research explores the impact of transnational separation following modern slavery on separated family overseas, with the data primarily relating to children. This section will focus on the key themes of abandonment and precarity in the context of parental separation from children.

Abandonment and Fractured Narratives

Most practitioners noted the distress relayed from child to parent, as detailed by Practitioner 10 who explained that she often heard the child crying on WhatsApp calls:

> '…*where are you, mummy? Are you coming home, mummy?' (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Practitioner 6 also reported hearing children crying 'terribly' and 'non-stop' when on the phone with their mothers. Studies on separated children in transnational families highlight that they experience higher levels of stress, feelings of abandonment, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression, which can affect their development.[47] Manyeruke *et al.* found that distress may be exacerbated if children are younger, as those who were under five when the parent migrated had lower scores when it came to 'positive outlook' and 'psychological wellbeing'.[48] The ages of separated family members were not collected in this study.

---

[46]   Chazal *et al.*, p. 11.

[47]   Valtolina and Colombo.

[48]   G Manyeruke *et al.*, 'Attachment, Psychological Wellbeing, and Educational Development among Child Members of Transnational Families', *Alpha Psychiatry*, vol. 22, issue 1, 2021, pp. 49–55, https://doi.org/10.5455/apd.106486.

These feelings may be compounded by confusion around why the parent cannot help. The role of caregivers in helping children understand their parents' absence is noted in the literature on separated children.[49] However, as Practitioner 11 explained, 'stories' about the absence of their parent may be circulated in the community, which can lead to confusing narratives for children. Practitioner 11 explained that in one case the child became 'upset' and started 'lashing out' in anger at their father from the pain of perceived abandonment. For those impacted by modern slavery, practitioners observed that narratives may be shaped by those complicit in the exploitation, as noted in the literature,[50] which may lead to children's rejection of their parents.

All practitioners presumed that survivors did not share much with their families about the reasons for their absence, often due to shame.[51] They suggested this is to protect the family from the truth, as documented by Hoang and Yeoh in regard to mothers who hide the harsh realities of their lives overseas.[52] Without an alternative, this may be confusing, as noted by Practitioner 8,

> *I've seen messages that she [the survivor] has sent her mum… 'I just want you. I need you. I want you to come back.' (Support Worker, MSVCC)*

Without a clear narrative, children may feel abandoned, and practitioners raised concerns about how these conversations could be approached with children. Practitioner 3 reflected that such skills were not covered in their training:

> *I don't quite know how to manage those conversations because I think a lot of parents would seek advice and it's not advice that I could give.*

They explained further:

> *I think it would be really, really helpful if there [would be] support tools and resources for parents around preparing them for what happens when the child arrives, and I don't mean practically, I mean more around kind of like piecing back together family narratives. We've had situations before in our team where the parent might not have seen the child since they were a baby. So, the baby, the child, is in effect meeting a stranger. (Caseworker, Post-NRM)*

---

49 M Poeze, E K Dankyi, and V Mazzucato, 'Navigating transnational childcare relationships: Migrant parents and their children's caregivers in the origin country', *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs*, vol. 17*,* issue 1, 2017, pp. 111–129, https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12135.

50 Brunovskis and Surtees; McCarthy; Pandey, Tewari, and Bhowmick.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Hoang and Yeoh.

In the context of adoption, Watson *et al.* argue that having no coherent narrative is associated with mental health problems later in life, and that 'life-story' work can support children.[53] However, Dalgaard and Montgomery argue that disclosure of trauma to children under 12 can lead to increased anxiety, whereas for adolescent girls, a lack of communication can lead to 'internalizing symptoms'.[54] Most practitioners reflected that they felt ill-equipped to deal with such complex dynamics. There is little research on how families communicate a narrative to children when a parent has experienced modern slavery. Research by Hestia similarly describes survivors' need to have a 'story about their family makeup'.[55]

Precarity

The second key theme raised by practitioners was the precarity associated with family overseas. Twenty-four out of 40 (60%) referrals into the Beyond Programme indicated that a family member was at risk in some way. The literature on separated children highlights the increased vulnerability to drug abuse, pregnancy, violent behaviour, dysfunctional eating habits, and dangerous lifestyles.[56] In referrals to the Beyond Programme, threats or violence linked to modern slavery was the second most frequently cited primary reason for referrals, with 22.5% of survivors citing this as their primary concern. Practitioner 3 noted the impact of trafficking on a separated child overseas:

> *they [the traffickers] threatened to kidnap the son, and to traffic him…*
> *And as a result, he is not registered at any school, he's not registered with*
> *a doctor, he's basically been in hiding for the last two years. (Caseworker,*
> *Post-NRM)*

Practitioner 11 described how debt bondage can impact families, providing the example of one survivor who was trafficked to pay off a debt that the family owed. After her exit from exploitation, she was fearful of the impact this would have on her family, as the family still owed the money and may be harmed if it was not repaid.

---

[53] D L Watson *et al.*, 'Adopted Children and Young People's Views on Their Life Storybooks: The Role of Narrative in the Formation of Identities', *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 58, 2015, pp. 90–98, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.09.010.

[54] N T Dalgaard and E Montgomery, 'Disclosure and Silencing: A Systematic Review of the Literature on Patterns of Trauma Communication in Refugee Families', *Transcultural Psychiatry*, vol. 52, issue 5, 2015, pp. 579–593, p. 585, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461514568442.

[55] Hestia, p. 10.

[56] Valtolina and Colombo.

Debt bondage is defined as a situation 'when someone is forced to pay off a loan by working for an agreed-upon or unclear period of time for little or no salary. The work performed to pay off the debt greatly exceeds the worth of the initial loan'.[57] The risk posed by debt bondage on the wider family, when one family member exits exploitation, should be explored to contribute to a more holistic approach to safeguarding that considers protection of the whole family.

Seeking Reunification

Practitioners noted that most survivors concerned about their family sought to be reunited in the UK via the refugee family reunion visa. In brief, those eligible within the British immigration rules are those with protection status, seeking to bring a partner or child that satisfies the eligibility requirements. For children, eligibility criteria include being under 18 at the time of application; otherwise, this is only considered under 'exceptional circumstances'.[58] Family reunification is relevant to survivors of modern slavery, who may claim asylum, given there is no automatic permission to stay in the country following identification through the NRM, but who may face risk on return or other Refugee Convention reasons. The issues surrounding the reunification process are documented by the refugee sector, and practitioners corroborate the findings around the restrictive definition of 'the family'; the ineligibility of children to sponsor parents within the immigration rules; delays in the asylum process; the removal of state-funded legal aid in 2012; and the prohibitive financial costs.[59]

Delays

Delays within the asylum process were identified as impacting survivors and their family members. Asylum decisions resolved between 2018 and 2019 with an associated NRM referral were seven times more likely to have taken longer than one year than those without.[60] Furthermore, in the first nine months of

---

57   Q Kepes *et al.*, *The Role of Recruitment Fees and Abusive and Fraudulent Recruitment Practices of Recruitment Agencies in Trafficking in Persons*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2015, p. 28.

58   Home Office, 'Immigration Rules Appendix Family Reunion (Protection)', GOV.UK, 2024, retrieved 21 June 2024, https://www.gov.uk/guidance/immigration-rules/immigration-rules-appendix-family-reunion-protection.

59   Marsden and Harris; Beesley *et al.*; Safe Passage and the Refugee Council.

60   Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, *Asylum Decision Times for Potential Victims of Modern Slavery (October 2021)*, 2021, https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1687/iasc-paper_nrm-and-asylum-decision-times-for-potential-victims-of-modern-slavery_october-2021.pdf.

2023, women in the NRM waited twice as long as men for an initial decision.[61] A consequence of such prolonged delays is that separated children may turn 18 prior to the application being submitted. Practitioner 3 observed that this 'puts stress where there is already tons of it, and makes the need for a decision so much more important'.

Processing time for family reunion applications was noted as increasingly long, with a lack of prioritisation based on risk. The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIB) explains that there was a backlog of 8,000 cases, which means the standard service time of 12 weeks has doubled.[62] Consequently, the ICIB observed that, 'applications sat in a pile and would only be expedited as a result of MP [Member of Parliament] correspondence, threat of litigation or sheer luck'.[63] Practitioner 2 outlined the emotional impact of this on one survivor:

> *The decision-making times have gone so awfully long they've lost trust and she … says 'I feel like no one's doing anything in this for me'. (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion)*

This leaves survivors unable to focus on their recovery and may lead to families seeking reunification via precarious routes to safeguard their children. Practitioner 5 explained that one mother in their care, whose asylum claim was 'massively drawn out', was re-trafficked when she returned to her country to look for her children.

The excessive delays also contribute to risks for family members. For example, Practitioner 3 described how a survivor's daughter 'died trying to cross the Mediterranean' following the separation. Such precarity, stemming from family members overseas seeking routes to safety and reunification, is well documented within the sector.[64]

Complexity and Lack of Legal Aid

In 2012, the UK government removed state-provided legal aid for family reunification applications.[65] During a parliamentary debate on the bill in 2011, Jonathan Djanogly, the former parliamentary under-secretary of state for courts

---

[61]   International Organization for Migration (IOM), 'Updated Analysis of the National Referral Mechanism data', IOM, 24 January 2024, https://unitedkingdom.iom.int/news/updated-analysis-national-referral-mechanism-data.

[62]   Neal.

[63]   *Ibid.*

[64]   Safe Passage and the Refugee Council; Neal; The Refugee Council and Oxfam.

[65]   *The Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.*

and legal aid, described such applications as 'generally straightforward',[66] an aspect refugee charities have disputed.[67] Interviewed practitioners stressed that family reunion cases linked to modern slavery were complex to argue, as observed by Practitioner 2:

> *I have never heard a trafficking victim whose case was straightforward. Never. (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion)*

The lack of legal aid also contributes to increased precarity and risk to exploitation through the process, as identified by Holden.[68] Practitioner 11 worked with a survivor who was considering to 'sell his organs to pay for a solicitor', placing him at great risk of exploitation and harm for the purpose of safeguarding his at-risk children. Practitioner 1 (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion) explained that in applications, families must prove that they have had continued contact, which is, 'particularly challenging for survivors of modern slavery who have often been cut off'. Similarly, evidence in the form of remittances may be limited, as Practitioner 3 explained: '…she can't send them anything directly' as they are in hiding. Practitioner 1 stated that the Home Office needs to be 'continually told' why a survivor of modern slavery 'might be totally cut off…' even if they have already been identified as a victim of modern slavery. This leads to survivors having to justify why they have limited proof of communication and financial support, which can cause great distress for them.

Practitioners emphasised the beneficial role of practical and emotional support throughout the process, which was also noted in research on reunification of survivors in Australia.[69] Practitioner 4 (Caseworker, Refugee Family Reunion) detailed the benefit of cooperation with support workers, explaining that in one case, the narrative around the separation was 'jumbled-up' but the support worker helped piece together the information required by the authorities.

However, no practitioners interviewed working under the MSVCC had supported someone through the family reunion process. A possible explanation is that

---

66 *Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill*, Hansard of the House of Commons, 31 October 2011, https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2011-10-31/debates/1110315000002/LegalAidSentencingAndPunishmentOfOffendersBill.

67 J Beswick, *Not So Straightforward: The Need for Qualified Legal Support in Family Reunion*, The British Red Cross, 2015, https://www.redcross.org.uk/-/media/documents-indexed/not-so-straightforward-refugee-family-reunion-report-2015.pdf; UNHCR, *UNHCR Submission to the Post-Implementation Review Evidence Gathering Exercise of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012*, 28 September 2018, https://www.unhcr.org/uk/sites/uk/files/legacy-pdf/5bb70cea4.pdf.

68 Holden.

69 Chazal *et al.*

survivors of modern slavery would only be eligible to apply for family reunions once they have been granted specific types of permission to stay in the country, and by then, they may have exited the NRM and its support entitlements. The government-funded post-NRM 'Reach-in' service may encounter such cases. Since 2021, 'Reach-in' support, a post-NRM service providing transitional support to confirmed victims of modern slavery, has been available to survivors with a positive 'Conclusive Grounds' decision.[70] However, Practitioner 3 did not believe family reunions were within the remit of 'Reach-in' and so they were doing it as an 'add-on'. Without detailing this as a key outcome of Reach-in support, or support under the MSVCC, this leaves it open to interpretation and may lead to survivors being prevented from reunification and the period of uncertainty for the family being prolonged.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article highlights the impact of separation following modern slavery on families. The emotional and financial strain of separation on survivors is evident, with significant impact on their recovery. The stress for separated families is also notable from perceived abandonment and an incoherent narrative to explain the separation and risks from perpetrators. While reunification is often key for survivors' recovery and families' safety, the legal routes for reunifications are lengthy and complex, with a lack of legal aid leading to survivors and family members resorting to risky reunification strategies.

Based on these findings, there are three key areas of recommendations to improve the experiences of families separated following modern slavery.

A 'Family-Oriented' Approach

The family is hugely influential in determining outcomes for survivors in terms of recovery, decision-making, and priorities. This is not comprehensively catered for in support services, which primarily focus on individual survivors. Chazal *et al.* argue that the family should be a focus to ensure that survivor support is trauma-informed and holistic.[71] Therefore, a 'family-oriented' approach,[72] which recognises the impact of the welfare of family overseas on survivors, should be incorporated into support services. There is also a need for more guidance on how families impacted by modern slavery can articulate helpful and age-appropriate narratives.

---

[70] The Salvation Army, 'New 2021 Victim Care Contract', 2021, retrieved 24 June 2024, https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/modern-slavery/new-victim-care-contract.

[71] Chazal *et al.*, p. 14.

[72] Murphy *et al.*

An International Safeguarding Lens

The findings highlight UK service providers' lack of knowledge of appropriate responses to disclosures of family overseas being at risk, such as family members receiving threats from traffickers. UK service providers should develop international safeguarding protocols to respond to the risks faced by separated families. This could include a guide to appropriate overseas organisations, services, or helplines, as well as the challenges, risks, and best practices involved. Prevention programmes in source countries could also attempt to identify and support family members who may be at risk.

Processes: Asylum, the NRM, and Family Reunifications

This article reiterates recommendations by the refugee sector regarding the delays, barriers, and complexity of immigration processes. Survivors waiting for an NRM decision can be impacted by longer delays to decision-making on their asylum claims, which subsequently delays the eligibility to apply for family reunifications. For those eligible to apply, families face delays to processing even in cases where children are at risk. For many, legal family reunifications are not possible, due to the high costs associated with the application and the lack of legal aid, which can leave families at risk during the separation. The prohibition on working while awaiting the asylum decision can lead to further exploitation and abuse. The interconnectedness of these systems and the impact on families should be acknowledged, and the barriers addressed by the UK Home Office.

Rebecca Treadaway is Coordinator of the Beyond Programme in the Anti-Trafficking and Modern Slavery Department at the Salvation Army, United Kingdom and Ireland (UKI) territory. Email: Rebecca.Treadaway@salvationarmy.org.uk

Forced Marriage and Family Relationships

Jacqueline Nelson and Jennifer Burn

Abstract

Forced marriage was criminalised in Australia in 2013 and is considered a form of modern slavery and, less consistently, of family violence. Reports to date indicate that family members, particularly parents, are commonly responsible for coercing their children into marriage. Within a criminal framework, families are perpetrators, but this framing obscures complex family relationships, and the love, mutual care, and sense of duty that is often present within families affected. We interviewed eight women with experience of forced marriage and explored the histories of families as well as communication practices within families where coercion into marriage takes place. We reflect on what happens after an experience of coercion to marry, discussing both the resilience of the women as well as the reconfiguration of familial relationships that occurs when decision-making about marriage takes place. Interviews showed that ties between parents and their adult children can be enduring, even when difficult and requiring significant effort.

Introduction

This article explores experiences and histories, communication practices and relationships within families where forced marriage takes place. Forced marriage was criminalised in Australia in 2013 and is considered a form of modern slavery and, less consistently, of family violence. Within Australian law, a forced marriage is defined as one that occurs without the free and full consent of both parties.[1] Consent is critical within the legal definition, with an absence of consent from either party involved being a key characteristic of forced marriage.[2] Simmons and Burn[3] argue that forced marriage exists on a continuum of coercive practices, and where a case might fall on this continuum depends on numerous factors that affect an individual's ability to fully and freely consent to marriage. While forced marriage is the term used in the legal definition and policy discussions, alternatives such as pressure to marry[4] and coercion into marriage[5] have also been used to describe behaviour that impacts an individual's ability to freely consent to a marriage. We use the term 'forced marriage', but also pressure to marry or coercion into marriage, as this language captures the continuum of coercion that is experienced by those affected[6] and better reflects the way those with lived experience describe it.[7]

---

[1]   Under Australian law, a forced marriage is defined as one that occurs without the free and full consent of one or both parties because they have been coerced, threatened, or deceived; because they were incapable of understanding the nature and effect of the marriage ceremony; or because they were under the age of 16 years and are presumed not to have consented to the marriage. (*Criminal Code Act* 1995, section 270.7A).

[2]   In Australia, a marriage will be invalid if the consent of either of the parties is not a real consent because it was obtained by duress or fraud (*Marriage Act* 1961, sections 88D(2)(d) & 23B (1)(d)).

[3]   F Simmons and J Burn, 'Without Consent: Forced Marriage in Australia', *Melbourne University Law Review*, vol. 36, issue 3, 2013, pp. 970–1008.

[4]   J Nelson and J Burn, 'Forced Marriage in Australia: Building a Social Response with Frontline Workers', *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 34, issue 1, 2024, pp. 89–109, https://doi.org/10.1177/09646639241242125.

[5]   H Zeweri, *Between Care and Criminality: Marriage, Citizenship, and Family in Australian Social Welfare*, 1st Edition, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 2023.

[6]   Simmons and Burn.

[7]   K Chantler, G Gangoli, and M Hester, 'Forced Marriage in the UK: Religious, Cultural, Economic or State Violence?', *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 29, issue 4, 2009, pp. 587–612, https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018309341905; C Villacampa and N Torres, 'Forced Marriage: What Do Professionals Know?', *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice*, vol. 67, 2021, p. 100506, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijlcj.2021.100506.

This article emerges out of our work on Speak Now, an Australian forced marriage prevention project. Forced marriage most commonly affects young women but can be experienced by people of any age, gender, religion or cultural group.[8] Family members are typically responsible for coercion into marriage, but family relationships themselves have seldom been studied as a focal point. This article seeks to build the knowledge base of coercion into marriage by focused study of family relationships and forced marriage. The aims of this article are (1) to explore histories and experiences of families affected by forced marriage; (2) to develop greater understanding of communication and decision-making practices within families affected by this issue; and (3) to highlight individual and, sometimes, familial resilience, when navigating decision-making about marriage. In doing so, we draw on a thematic analysis of interviews with eight women who were in or at risk of forced marriages. In our conclusion, we reflect on the implications of our observations for forced marriage policy and practice responses.

Forced Marriage, Families, and Conflict: Key concepts and literature

Background to the Issue of Forced Marriage and the Response in Australia

Forced marriage in Australia is considered a form of modern slavery and is included in criminal law as a 'slavery-like offence'.[9] There is debate within academic literature and policy discussions around the framing of forced marriage. For example, writing in the UK, McCabe and Eglen argue that forced marriage can itself be considered modern slavery, and that a forced marriage can lead those affected into a situation that may constitute modern slavery, but also note that survivors' experiences within forced marriages indicate that 'not *every* forced marriage is, or becomes, a form of modern slavery'.[10] Others advocate that forced marriage is more productively viewed as 'a specific manifestation of the

---

8   S Lyneham and S Bricknell, *When Saying No Is Not an Option: Forced Marriage in Australia and New Zealand*, Australian Institute of Criminology, 2018.

9   *Criminal Code Act* 1995 (Cth), sections 270.7B (Forced marriage offences); S J Tan and L Vidal, *Forced Marriage as a Form of Family Violence in Victoria*, Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Melbourne, 2023.

10   H McCabe and L Eglen, '"I Bought You. You Are My Wife": "Modern Slavery" and Forced Marriage', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, 2022, pp. 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2022.2096366, p. 2, emphasis in original.

wider problem of gendered and patriarchal violence'.[11] These discussions were reflected in a July 2024 national consultation in Australia on civil protections for those affected by forced marriage, which sought to gather views on recognition of forced marriage as a form of family and domestic violence.[12]

The initial policy response to forced marriage in Australia was primarily concerned with legal reform, including criminalisation of the practice. We have argued elsewhere that there is a need for a stronger *social* response that engages with the social drivers of forced marriage,[13] such as gendered violence[14] and Australia's migration system, where intense border control policies may render marriage one of few available migration pathways into Australia.[15] Within a criminal framework, families are most often seen as perpetrators, but this framing obscures complex family relationships, and the love, mutual care, and sense of duty that is often present within families affected.[16] In this article, we move away from the view of families as perpetrators. Like others,[17] we see the victim–perpetrator binary—which characterises young people experiencing coercion as victims, and their parents, siblings, extended family members, etc. as perpetrators—as reductive and argue that there is value in increasing understanding of family dynamics, experiences, and histories.

---

[11]   See, for example, S Anitha and A Gill, 'Coercion, Consent and the Forced Marriage Debate in the UK', *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2009, pp. 165–84, p. 48, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-009-9119-4; C Patton, 'Racialising Domestic Violence: Islamophobia and the Australian Forced Marriage Debate', *Race & Class*, vol. 60, issue 2, 2018, pp. 21–39, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396818792182.

[12]   Attorney General's Department, *Enhancing Civil Protections and Remedies for Forced Marriage*, Canberra, ACT, 2024.

[13]   Nelson and Burn; see also F Simmons and G Wong, 'Learning from Lived Experience: Australia's Legal Response to Forced Marriage', *The University of New South Wales Law Journal*, vol. 44, issue 4, 2021, pp. 1619–1662, https://doi.org/10.53637/YJYS9724.

[14]   See M Segrave and S Vasil, *The Borders of Violence: Temporary Migration and Domestic and Family Violence (Edition 1)*, Taylor & Francis, Oxford, 2025, p. 119.

[15]   H Zeweri and S Shinkfield, 'Centring Migrant Community Voices in Forced Marriage Prevention Social Policy: A Proposed Reframing', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 56, issue 3, 2021, pp. 427–442, https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.153.

[16]   C Villacampa, 'Forced Marriage as a Lived Experience: Victims' Voices', *International Review of Victimology*, vol. 26, issue 3, 2020, pp. 344–367, https://doi.org/10.1177/0269758019897145.

[17]   For example, Tan and Vidal; Zeweri.

Support for those affected by forced marriage has largely been designed in a way that is individually oriented. There is growing recognition, however, that both prevention of and responses to forced marriage will benefit from an approach that closely attends to family contexts. Historically, the use of family mediation in forced marriage cases has been a divisive issue in the United Kingdom in particular,[18] with those who oppose mediation concerned about the possibility of further harm for those being coerced to marry. However, the possibilities for carefully managed family mediation for particular low-risk families are now being considered in the Australian context. For example, in response to advocacy from support services, the Forced Marriage Specialist Support Program,[19] which commenced on 1 January 2025, will broaden support frameworks, including considering the role of family mediation. Good Shepherd Australia was funded to undertake a pilot family mediation programme through the National Action Plan to Combat Modern Slavery 2020–2025, based on the Danish model developed by Farwha Nielsen.[20] Those with lived experience of forced marriage are deeply embedded within families and communities, and they often strongly value these connections.[21] In the Australian Red Cross' *Community Voices* report,[22] communities affected by forced marriage advocated for the provision of whole family support. The Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights recommended that strengths-based parenting programmes that engage with decision-making around marriage be provided as a preventative activity.[23]

---

[18] Documented in C Dauvergne and J Millbank, 'Forced Marriage as a Harm in Domestic and International Law', *The Modern Law Review*, vol. 73, issue 1, 2010, pp. 57–88, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2230.2009.00784.x; A Gill and T Mitra-Kahn, 'Modernising the Other: Assessing the Ideological Underpinnings of the Policy Discourse on Forced Marriage in the UK', *Policy & Politics*, vol. 40, issue 1, 2012, pp. 107–122, https://doi.org/10.1332/147084411X581763.

[19] Australian Government Department of Social Services, 'New Supports for Victim-Survivors of Modern-Day Slavery in Australia', 3 December 2023, https://ministers.dss.gov.au/media-releases/13356.

[20] See L Vidal, 'The Art of Helping: Lessons for Australia in Taking a Mediation Approach to Forced Marriage', *The Power to Persuade*, 19 March 2019, https://www.powertopersuade.org.au/blog/the-art-of-helping-lessons-for-australia-in-taking-a-mediation-approach-to-forced-marriage/18/3/2019, for discussion of the approach.

[21] Villacampa.

[22] Australian Red Cross, *Forced Marriage: Community Voices, Stories and Strategies*, 2019.

[23] G Prattis and J El Matrah, *Marrying Young: An Exploration of Muslim Women's Decision Making around Early Marriage*, Australian Muslim Women's Centre on Human Rights, 2019.

Families and Decisions about Marriage

Decisions about marriage are always made within particular social contexts. Women's agency in regards to marriage has always operated within structural constraints, such as social norms, financial need, and pregnancy.[24] Supporting those affected by coercion into marriage requires sensitivity to both the cultural specificity of the issue and the universality of this form of gender violence; 'all women located within a matrix of structural inequalities can face social expectations, pressure and constraint in matters of marriage'.[25]

Decision-making practices differ amongst (and within) families, from individually oriented to more collective practices. Smart and Shipman make an important distinction between individual choice, where individuals are solely responsible for making decisions, and relational choice, whereby one attends to the views and needs of others. The degree to which marriage decision-making invokes individual and relational choice varies widely. Smart and Shipman observe:

> *…for many people getting married may actually be partly or primarily about forging alliances between kin, or the outcome of negotiations between competing interests of family members.*[26]

Within the UK context, Shariff observes that marital decision-making amongst many young British Asians is characterised by consensus, rather than consent.[27] Shariff cautions that while consensus provides space for negotiation within families, it can also be a means to shore up existing power structures within families. Analyses of pressure to marry should attend to the power dynamics within families and motivations of different family members. Shariff sees 'the heavily individualist model of consent inherent in the debate in the West'[28] as markedly different to the marriage process within South Asian communities in the United Kingdom, where marital decision-making is seen as a familial responsibility. Kaur, in work on families in India, notes the discursive importance of *duty* as

---

[24] S Anitha and A Gill, 'Coercion, Consent and the Forced Marriage Debate in the UK', *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 17, issue 2, 2009, pp. 65–184, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-009-9119-4.

[25] Patton, p. 23.

[26] C Smart and B Shipman, 'Visions in Monochrome: Families, Marriage and the Individualization Thesis', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, issue 4, 2004, pp. 491–509, p. 495, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2004.00034.x.

[27] F Shariff, 'Towards a Transformative Paradigm in the UK Response to Forced Marriage: Excavating Community Engagement and Subjectivising Agency', *Social & Legal Studies*, vol. 21, issue 4, 2012, pp. 549–565, https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663912453848.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 557.

a binding force within Indian families and the network of mutual obligations between family members.[29]

Familial involvement in decision-making about marriage is similarly a feature within some Australian families. Zeweri and Shinkfield see the negotiations that occur around marriage as potentially transformative of familial relations, even in the presence of very real social pressures.[30] According to Morgan, families are constituted and reconstituted through the ways they both create and respond to problems.[31]

Some families affected by forced marriage have migrated to or sought asylum in Australia.[32] Family dynamics shift and change markedly post-settlement. Individual experiences differ post-migration, depending on people's age, gender, and position within their family; family structures; and other such factors. Remaking family life following migration or seeking asylum can be challenging for all members of a family. Research more commonly explores the experiences of young people, while the perspectives and challenges for parents can be overlooked.[33] The interculturation gap, whereby young people adapt more rapidly to a cultural transition than their parents or older family members, can create significant tension within families.[34] This can occur within families who may already face challenges,

29   R Kaur, 'Family Matters in India: A Sociological Understanding', in P N Mukherji, N Jayaram, and B N Ghosh (eds.), *Understanding Social Dynamics in South Asia: Essays in Memory of Ramkrishna Mukherjee*, Springer, Singapore, 2019, pp. 147–159.

30   Zeweri and Shinkfield.

31   D H J Morgan, 'Family Troubles, Troubling Families, and Family Practices', *Journal of Family Issues*, vol. 40, issue 16, 2019, pp. 2225–2238, https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X 19848799.

32   Lyncham and Bricknell; Zeweri and Shinkfield.

33   K Lewig, F Arney, and M Salveron, 'Challenges to Parenting in a New Culture: Implications for Child and Family Welfare', *Child Welfare and the Challenge of the New Americans*, vol. 33, issue 3, 2010, pp. 324–332, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprog-plan.2009.05.002; A M N Renzaho, N Dhingra, and N Georgeou, 'Youth as Contested Sites of Culture: The Intergenerational Acculturation Gap amongst New Migrant Communities—Parental and Young Adult Perspectives', *PLOS ONE*, vol. 12, issue 2, 2017, p. e0170700, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170700.

34   L C Koh, P Liamputtong, and R Walker, 'Burmese Refugee Young Women Navigating Parental Expectations and Resettlement', *Journal of Family Studies*, vol. 19, 2013, pp. 297–305, https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.2013.19.3.297; C McMichael, S M Gifford, and I Correa-Velez, 'Negotiating Family, Navigating Resettlement: Family Connectedness amongst Resettled Youth with Refugee Backgrounds Living in Melbourne, Australia', *Journal of Youth Studies*, vol. 14, issue 2, 2011, pp. 179–195, https://doi.org /10.1080/13676261.2010.506529.

such as dealing with displacement and trauma, experiences of racism, securing employment, and navigating a new language and environment. Individuals 'carry with them their own personal, biographical histories, as well as the social and cultural history of their lives', with young people moving forward with their parents' values and experiences, alongside and changed by their own.[35] The challenges or 'troubles' a family experiences during resettlement, and responses to these experiences, are constitutive of family relationships.[36]

Family Work and Conflict Work

Family work is a core sociological concept that captures the efforts made to maintain family life, originally motivated out of a desire, by feminists, to reframe duties carried out in the home as 'work'.[37] Erickson argued for including 'emotion work' within family work, referring to the energy put into supporting the emotional well-being of other family members.[38] Reczek and Bosley-Smith build further on the concept of family work,[39] observing the significant work that goes into maintaining parent and adult–child relationships when there is a serious conflict. They term this 'conflict work' and assert that the efforts to maintain family relationships when under strain is an important part of family work.

In their study with LGBTQ adults in the United States, Reczek and Bosley-Smith highlight the endurance of parent–child relationships even under very difficult circumstances—in their case, when a parent does not accept an adult child's sexual or gender identity.[40] They introduce the idea of compulsory kinship to conceptualise the intense social forces that bind parents and adult children

---

[35] V L Bengtson, T J Biblarz, and R E L Roberts, *How Families Still Matter: A Longitudinal Study of Youth in Two Generations*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2002, cited in Smart and Shipman, p. 502.

[36] Morgan.

[37] A K Daniels, 'Invisible Work', *Social Problems*, vol. 34, issue 5, 1987, pp. 403–415, https://doi.org/10.2307/800538.

[38] R J Erickson, 'Reconceptualizing Family Work: The Effect of Emotion Work on Perceptions of Marital Quality', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 55, issue 4, 1993, pp. 888–900, https://doi.org/10.2307/352770.

[39] R Reczek and E Bosley-Smith, *Families We Keep: LGBTQ People and Their Enduring Bonds with Parents*, New York University Press, New York, 2022; R Reczek and E Bosley-Smith, 'How LGBTQ Adults Maintain Ties with Rejecting Parents: Theorizing "Conflict Work" as Family Work', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 83, issue 4, 2021, pp. 1134–1153, https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12765.

[40] Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

together. Their interviewees had three rationales for maintaining parent–child bonds, including 'love and closeness, parental growth, and parents as unique social ties'.[41] The endurance of family relationships in spite of intense conflict is relevant to our work on family relationships and forced marriage. Experiences of duress within these relationships can transform familial and social relations.[42]

While family relationships have not yet been a core focus, existing Australian literature touches on family relationships in the context of forced marriage. Simmons and Wong reported that four of the seven participants in their study had had positive relationships with family members before they experienced coercion into marriage.[43] The other three indicated they had previously experienced family violence. Two participants reported that their family members had eventually acknowledged the harm caused by the forced marriage. There were varied outcomes for relationships with family after avoiding or leaving a forced marriage. Contact ranged from returning to live in the family home and living independently with some family contact to complete estrangement from family. Lyneham and Bricknell state that of the thirteen experiences of forced marriage they analysed, only one survivor re-established a full relationship with her family.[44] She described being able to restore her family honour through success in education and employment. Three women maintained a relationship with one parent, but there continued to be a risk of violence, coercion, or ostracism from the other parent. Most of the others affected by forced marriage lost contact with family when they left the forced marriage situation, with some participants indicating their families had completely ostracised them.

In this paper, we explore the utility of the concept of conflict work for understanding family relationships and forced marriage. In doing so, we observe the nature of conflict work amongst the women we interviewed. We also reflect on the costs that conflict work can have for young women who experienced coercion to marry.

---

41   *Ibid.*, p. 23.

42   Zeweri and Shinkfield.

43   Simmons and Wong.

44   Lyncham and Bricknell.

Method

This article draws on eight interviews with women with lived experience of forced marriage, that is, they had previously been at risk of or in a forced marriage. Four of the women were forced to marry, two were engaged but not married, and two were able to avoid a forced marriage. Interviews were undertaken in 2023, with participants residing in three Australian states. Five of the interviews were conducted in English and three in community languages.[45] The former were undertaken by the first author; they were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A research assistant undertook the interviews in community languages and provided detailed notes, with conversations translated into English.[46]

Recruiting people with lived experience of forced marriage was challenging. These challenges have been found in other studies with a similar number of participants.[47] Three participants were recruited through organisational contacts and five through the researchers' community and professional networks. Organisations who provided support for those with lived experience of forced marriage assisted with recruitment of three participants, using a flyer to share with potential interviewees. Prior to giving consent, all participants were provided with information about the research and what participation involved. Approximately half of those approached to participate either did not respond or declined to take part, citing a desire to move on and not revisit this difficult experience. Importantly, at least half of the young women we spoke to had not engaged in formal support when experiencing coercion into or leaving a forced marriage. This was a marked difference between our participants and those in previous studies, who were recruited through support organisations.[48] The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured way, and the interviewers gave participants scope to talk about their experiences in a manner and sequence that was most comfortable for them. Topics covered in the interviews included talking (1) about themselves, (2) their family, (3) family dynamics and decision-making, (4) pressure to marry, (5) support, (6) their current family relationships, and (7) support for families. Interviews lasted approximately 60–90 minutes and participants were

---

[45] Participant locations and languages spoken are intentionally kept general, in order to protect the anonymity of interview participants.

[46] For this reason, the excerpts provided from the translated interviews are not in quotation marks, as they are based on notes rather than a verbatim transcript. Interviews were conducted in accordance with approval from the human research ethics committee at the University of Technology Sydney.

[47] M M Idriss, 'Key Agent and Survivor Recommendations for Intervention in Honour-Based Violence in the UK', *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, vol. 42, issue 4, 2018, pp. 321–339, https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2017.1295394; Simmons and Wong; Villacampa.

[48] Lyncham and Bricknell; Villacampa.

given a gift voucher to thank them for their involvement. Participants were given the opportunity to review any quotes that were used from their interviews and provide feedback; they were also invited to review this article in full.

All eight participants were women. Seven were raised in Muslim families, while one, Hanit,[49] was Hindu. Forced marriage occurs within families from a range of different religions. As we discuss in our findings, we need to bear in mind that our interviews were primarily with women who had been raised in Muslim families, and thus do not reflect the full breadth of experiences of coercion into marriage. While forced marriage largely affects women and girls, people of any gender can experience it,[50] so we also note that our findings relate specifically to women. One of the women was married as a child, another was engaged at 15 and married mid-way through her final year of school. For four participants, discussions about marriage commenced towards the end of high school, with the expectation to marry after finishing secondary schooling. The remaining two women were coerced to marry at 18 and 20, respectively.

Interview transcripts and notes from both sets of interviews were analysed thematically, with the qualitative data analysis software NVivo used to organise materials. A coding framework was developed to categorise interview transcripts and notes into main themes. This article draws on the themes around personal and family backgrounds, communication and decision-making, and family relationships.

Research Findings

Understanding the Histories and Experiences of Families

Interview participants described challenges they, and their families, faced, including histories of migration, asylum-seeking, and resettlement, alongside experiences of trauma and violence. All eight participants were born outside Australia, with some arriving at a young age with their families, and others, such as Hanit, arriving independently as a young adult. The fathers of four participants had travelled to Australia by boat ahead of other family members to seek protection, and likely experienced Australia's punitive mandatory detention system, which has been in place since 1992.[51]

---

[49]   Pseudonyms used for all participants.

[50]   Idriss.

[51]   L Taylor, 'Designated Inhospitality: The Treatment of Asylum Seekers Who Arrive by Boat in Canada and Australia', *McGill Law Journal/Revue de Droit de McGill*, vol. 60, issue 2, 2015, pp. 333–379, https://doi.org/10.7202/1029211ar.

Most participants spoke about personal and family trauma, including experiences of childhood sexual abuse; mental health difficulties; loss; and sexual, family, and domestic violence. In this section, we provide three examples of the types of experiences that were raised within the interviews. Nabila explained that her parents' relationship went through periods of strain. She also described the effects of childhood sexual assault for her mum and the continued impacts of that trauma on Nabila's mum and family.

> *It's hard for any child to see that kind of breakdown in their parent's relationship... in our community mental health is so stigmatised, and we don't really talk about it. And it became really difficult, because both parents were dealing with mental health issues, and there's a lot of trauma there as well... My mum had experienced childhood sexual assault and... those issues were ongoing and are ongoing.*

Nabila talked about the stigma associated with mental health in her community. Research indicates that stigma can be a barrier to accessing mental health support,[52] and that family and faith leaders may be preferred sources of support.

Zahra described the cycle of trauma that occurred for her when her parents were forced into marriage at a young age, along with her father's own experiences of loss and trauma, and the way that this impacted on their parenting.

> *...my dad, he lost his father when he was nine years old. And he started working to support his whole family, his brothers, even their wives. And he had quite a hard life.*
>
> *We grow up in this collective culture where your family is your lifeline. They're so significant to you. I've been in situations with my dad where he nearly choked me to death. I had those really scary experiences. And I saw him abuse my mum. And that was really hard for me. But when I grew up, I started to have a different relationship with him. And I started to understand him more. Both of my parents, that's the kind of environment that they grow up in, it's like this cycle of you don't know how to parent because you are forced into a marriage at an extremely young age, you're a child learning how to deal with life. And obviously, you don't know how to deal with it. You do all these bad things, and then you continue that.*

---

52   P W Corrigan, B G Druss, and D A Perlick, 'The Impact of Mental Illness Stigma on Seeking and Participating in Mental Health Care', *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 15, issue 2, 2014, pp. 37–70, https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100614531398; J Youssef and F P Deane, 'Factors Influencing Mental-Health Help-Seeking in Arabic-Speaking Communities in Sydney, Australia', *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, vol. 9, issue 1, 2006, pp. 43–66, https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670512331335686.

So that's why I'm really proud of the fact that I left, because I feel like I broke that cycle, at least for me and my children. If I have kids in the future.

Zahra made observations about her parents' early lives, speaking about the loss and economic precarity that her father experienced, and the pressure he was under to provide for his wider family from the age of nine. She recognised that her mother and father parented under difficult circumstances. Zahra's father eventually sought asylum in Australia. While he coerced her into marriage, she also saw him as 'a trailblazer in the sense that he had a really shitty and hard life. My dad is the hardest working man that I've ever seen. I love him and I respect him for that'. Zahra acknowledged experiences of intergenerational trauma within her family, an issue which is well documented within academic literature.[53]

Julianna was the only participant who did not want a continued relationship with her family. She reported experiencing significant abuse and violence within her family prior to being forced to marry, including an experience of childhood sexual assault by a family member. Julianna described her sister forcing her into a marriage as a way of dealing with Julianna's experience of sexual assault.

pretty much my family knew that I was raped by [a family member]. [My sister] went overseas for a wedding, and that's when she accepted the proposal from my ex, and pretty much gave me away. So they organised the whole engagement like that. I was 15 at the time...'

The women we interviewed and their families had complex histories and traumatic experiences, both as individuals and families. We can see the way they carry their own histories, as well as social and relational histories,[54] and it is not possible to understand coercion into marriage without this context. Attending to the structural issues facing families impacted by forced marriage directs us towards experiences of displacement and sometimes mandatory detention, economic precarity and pressure to provide, experiences of sexual assault, and barriers to accessing mental health and other types of support.

Communication Practices and Decision-making

This research aimed to extend understanding of communication practices within families affected by forced marriage. As discussed earlier, family mediation is

---

[53] C C Sangalang and C Vang, 'Intergenerational Trauma in Refugee Families: A Systematic Review', *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, vol. 19, issue 3, 2017, pp. 745–754, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-016-0499-7.

[54] Smart and Shipman.

being explored as an option within the response to forced marriage in Australia.[55] Extending our understanding of communication practices within families affected by forced marriage provides important context for consideration within family mediation. Communication practices varied across the participants' families. Three women shared that their families broadly had a practice of open communication.

> *We live together and always talk and discuss things within our family. (Jasmin)*

> *…if something worries me I'd talk to my mum. I love my mum. (Sanaya)*

While they characterised their families generally as providing a safe space for communicating about concerns, they simultaneously described limits and boundaries around the topics discussed. For example, Sanaya, who was monitored closely by her mother, would not always disclose to her that she was spending time with her boyfriend. Nabila said that love was never discussed in her family when she was growing up:

> *I don't even think you'd be able to speak about it with family, to be honest, because of the taboo and stigma around… just talking about love itself.*

Most participants reported that there was little space for disagreement, and sometimes discussion, within their families. Maryam said that in more conservative families in her community young people are not allowed to raise concerns or talk about their wishes for a partner. It was not until Shehzeen was planning suicide that her family initiated a conversation about her well-being:

> *…very rare that female members of the family would have any uncomfortable conversations, especially disagreements with your father. I think if I had not planned to commit suicide, my family would have never asked me about what was going on and why I was so unhappy and depressed about my life.*

In Maryam and Shehzeen's families, conflict work,[56] that is, work to facilitate family functioning, appears to require them to accept the lack of space for discussion and not initiate conversations that they anticipate would be uncomfortable. It is important to highlight that this type of conflict work appears to have been highly detrimental to the women's well-being and sense of self.

---

55   Australian Government Department of Social Services; Vidal, 2019.

56   Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

Zahra and Julianna were conditioned from an early age into acceptance of their parents' dominance. Zahra speaks here on the notion of relational choice,[57] indicating that the choices she made were shaped by her conditioning within her family.

> *[About having challenging conversations] No, you would get slapped. We experienced a lot of physical abuse. That's one of the reasons you don't even question whether you have a choice or not, … because you're literally conditioned from the moment that you're born to grow up like this... Your parents say do this, you go, okay. Do that. Okay. And then you have this very, in a sense, toxic relationship with your family. You love them, you can't live with[out] them, because they're all you've ever known. (Zahra)*

> *The household that I grew up [in] was where my father was more religiously strict. More like a dictatorship. Like Kim Jong Un. He was just like, it's my way or the highway... You do as you're told... It was a very strict upbringing. If we ever talked to a boy or anything or if we ever had a handshake with a man. Big no, no, we got told off. We got beaten at, we got slapped. I was abused quite a lot in my childhood. (Julianna)*

In Zahra and Julianna's families, the threat of violence and experiences of violence were used to control the behaviour of family members, creating a home environment that prohibited open or challenging communication. Shariff discusses power dynamics within families and their implications for consensus decision-making around marriage.[58] For our interview participants, power was strongly concentrated within fathers. Zahra reflected on the conflicting feelings that she has for her parents, perhaps feeling the pull of compulsory kinship.[59] She simultaneously loves her parents *and* recognises the abuse she experienced during her childhood. Julianna described her home environment growing up as violent and toxic. The lack of support Julianna received from family, when she sought justice for her experiences of sexual abuse as a child, led her to cease contact with all of her immediate family members. The power of compulsory kinship, which makes parent–child relationships appear natural, inevitable and enduring, comes under strain in circumstances as harmful as those experienced by Julianna.

We also heard about how challenging conversations with parents were shut down. After she had been forced to marry, Sanaya tried to communicate to her mother, to whom she was very close, that her husband was not treating her well:

---

[57] Smart and Shipman.

[58] Shariff.

[59] Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

> *I tried to tell her one day it was bumpy, he's not treating me well. I tried, I tried and she's like, 'No, you're married now'. And it was so bumpy, but it was like 'You're married now'.*

Like Zahra, Sanaya felt strongly connected to her mother, and at the time of the interview, she continued to struggle to reconcile her love for her mother and the betrayal she felt when she was coerced into marriage. Prior to being coerced into the marriage, one of the reasons that Sanaya delayed seeking support for her situation was the hope that her mother would ultimately not force her to marry. Sanaya delayed contacting authorities, 'because I was trying to convince myself that I'm better than this and she's better than this', but her mum was too 'hard-headed'. Sanaya was committed to doing this family conflict work,[60] in order to try and find a way through the pressure to marry, while preserving her relationship with her mother. Like the participants in Reczek and Bosley-Smith's work, we can see Sanaya using similar rationales for maintaining her relationship with her mum: the love and closeness she feels, as well as the possibility of parental growth, that is, that her mum would ultimately realise that proceeding with the marriage would be detrimental to Sanaya's well-being.

Family communication practices that we learnt about during our interviews differed, but we observed some broad commonalities. Three participants described communication with their parents as open and supportive in general, but identified areas where communication was more constrained, particularly around intimate relationships and sex. For the other young women, communication was described as more top-down, where parents communicated *to* children and there was not much space to challenge their views. We use the idea of family conflict work[61] to demonstrate how family relationships were managed and what was done in the service of family functioning. We note that conflict work is a concept used to understand the efforts that go into maintaining family relationships, and we are not positing that conflict work is necessarily productive in other ways, such as in managing mental health or individual well-being.

Decision-making: 'I'm doing this for you guys'

Most participants reported there was a view in their families that adults, mostly parents, were best placed to make decisions on behalf of young people. As shown below, participants often reflected that their parents believed they were doing what was best for the family in making these decisions.

---

[60] *Ibid.*

[61] *Ibid.*

Being the oldest and being a girl is tough because my family wanted me to be married at the age of 20 years old. Having a very religious and conservative family, my parents made decisions on their own without getting us involved. When we asked questions about what is going on, they were responding 'It is an adult issue, you don't need to get involved and it is not for you because you don't understand these things'. This is accurate for a lot of families in our community. (Jasmin)

[About her involvement in the decision to migrate] No, we didn't talk about it at all. My mum's like, 'I'm doing this for you guys yada yada yada'... It's never that, oh, do you want to be included in the decision, but it's always like, it's for your own good. (Sanaya)

While Jasmin, Shehzeen, and Sanaya highlighted their parents' good intentions, they also expressed dissatisfaction about being excluded from decision-making. Jasmin was explicitly told by her mother that they did not need Jasmin's approval for her engagement; Jasmin's mother was just passing on information about the decision they had made.

Participants described family practices that were patriarchal, with fathers or other male relatives being key decision-makers. Nabila said her grandfather would have a decision-making role in the family, if he were still alive. Maryam and Shehzeen said that their parents and older brothers were decision-makers, noting that Maryam's brother was an ally when it came to marriage, as he had himself been forced to marry. Julianna's father was the decision-maker in her household: 'Just the father does whatever he seems right… doesn't ask the mother's opinion, the daughters', the sons', no, no, no.' When reflecting on disagreements between her parents, Hanit said that 'Last call will be my father's. He is the decision-maker... Mum has to follow, otherwise she will not have anywhere to go.' Zahra's father was both a decision-maker and responsible for his family's economic well-being.

My dad was like, just the boss. And he is quite an assertive man. Even his siblings would come and ask him for his opinions and other things. He was kind of like the leader amongst his siblings, and amongst a lot of people. (Zahra)

While it was difficult to find space, at times the women we interviewed challenged their parents' decisions about important matters. Nabila experienced significant emotional costs when refusing to go ahead with the marriage her parents proposed.

When I experienced that freeze, I think it was the scariest response... I couldn't get any words out. And … even though I wanted to say no, and tell them how I was thinking or feeling, I'd just cry. This is when I truly felt my voice had been taken away from me.

The conflict work that Nabila performed in her family was taxing and detrimental to her mental health.

Decision-making practices within families can be entrenched, at times rigidly structured, and highly personal. Nonetheless, support around familial decision-making is an area worthy of consideration within forced marriage prevention and family mediation. Exploring decision-making practices with families must be done in a manner that is sensitive to differences across individuals, families, traditions, and so on. Fathers, and sometimes brothers, held significant power (and responsibility) over decision-making. Communication and decision-making practices within the families of our interviewees demonstrate that awareness-raising and prevention initiatives need to be thoughtfully designed and responsive to particular family contexts. In Zahra and Julianna's family contexts in particular, encouraging young people to communicate their wishes for the future to their parents would not, in their situations, be a meaningful or effective strategy, and may in fact be unsafe. For other families, however, support that builds capacities to engage in open communication may be more fruitful.

Resilience and Renegotiating Familial Relations

In this section, we discuss the women's lives and their familial relations after an experience of forced marriage or coercion to marry. While experiencing coercion to marry has profound impacts, the women we interviewed were resilient across many areas of their lives. The stories of what happens after people experience coercion to marry are seldom told in academic research, reports, or media discussions. We reflect here on the women's strengths and how family relationships are renegotiated over the short and longer term, during and following pressure to marry or leaving a forced marriage.

Five of the eight women were either at university or had completed university degrees. The other three had plans or hopes to study in the future. All were working at the time of the interviews; four were employed in community services and others in administration and retail roles. Nabila was passionate about her work and social change: '…my dad is one of those people who always instilled in us that idea if you've got two hands and two feet, you should be doing something with them'. Many participants were juggling numerous responsibilities—across multiple jobs, study, and care for children, or a combination of these. At least two women made ongoing financial contributions to their parents or families, or towards mortgages and other living expenses, reflecting mutual care and duty towards family.[62]

---

62 Kaur.

Looking at intimate relationships, five of the women were currently single, two were married, and one had a boyfriend she hoped to marry in the future. Nabila avoided a forced marriage and then married a man whom she described as her 'best mate': 'We get along so well'. Zahra was forced to marry, left the marriage, and was later able to get 'married to someone whom I love'. One of the women who was forced to marry had her marriage annulled, the other three were divorced. The two participants who experienced broken engagements were currently single.

We introduced the idea of familial conflict work earlier in this article.[63] Reczek and Bosley-Smith highlight the endurance of parent–adult child relationships even amidst serious conflict, as well as the work that goes into maintaining what can be very difficult relationships.[64] It is important to highlight some of the costs of conflict work that we observed, including not feeling heard (e.g. Nabila, Sanaya), feeling unable to discuss concerns (Maryam), impacts on personal well-being (Shehzeen), or mistreatment by her husband (Sanaya). Nonetheless, seven of the eight women expressed a desire for continued relationships with their families, and most also reported that they currently had relatively positive relationships with their parents. For example, Nabila talked to her parents 'pretty much every day', and Zahra discussed how important it was for her that her parents pray for her. Zahra strategically involves them in parts of her life, such as her current marriage, but makes other decisions without consultation. Ongoing relationships with parents were more common amongst our participants as compared to those observed in previous work,[65] perhaps as a smaller proportion of our participants were recruited through formal support services.

> *...my parents pray for me a lot, which is very special for me. Like, I want my parents to be happy with me. But of course, I don't want to like compromise my own values. So I'm always dancing with it. (Zahra)*

Familial relations are continually in flux, and families are at least partly constituted by how they engage with 'trouble'.[66] Jasmin reflected that over time, she has not only repaired her relationship with her parents but expressed that their views about marriage have also shifted. Zahra reflects on the way that she forced her parents to think differently.

---

[63] Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

[64] *Ibid.*

[65] Lyncham and Bricknell; Simmons and Wong.

[66] Morgan.

> *Our relationships have repaired, and my parents are much closer to me now than before because they feel guilty for not listening to me and playing a strong role in this. They know that even the engagement has a negative impact on my life too especially when the next proposals I might get as this would limit my options. My parents have apologised to me and have said to me they leave the choice in my hands this time. They said 'we will agree to whoever you want if it is done properly and within our traditions'. (Jasmin)*

> *Now we're like best friends. And it's incredible. Such a long journey to get there. But it was extremely important for me. And it's a fine balance, you have to respect yourself. You have to honour your own safety, security, your own independence, and your own right to a life that is not toxic and abusive. But at the same time, I want to honour my relationship with my parents. Last year, my dad and my mum told me they respect me… in that time that I left them and I grew up, they also grew up, in a way I forced them to think differently. (Zahra)*

Maryam was protective of her parents and did not want others to know what they had done. Her family expressed regret, wished they had listened to Maryam's objections, and told her fiancé's family they would not proceed with the marriage. Conflict work was undertaken within the families of Jasmin, Zahra, and Maryam. Zahra talked about the 'long journey' and emotional work she devoted to her relationship with her parents. The desire for parental growth, as observed in Reczek and Bosley-Smith's work,[67] was realised within these families. These discussions highlight the way that family relationships are continually negotiated and renegotiated over time, and support Zeweri and Shinkfield's assertion that navigating an experience of coercion into marriage can be transformative of family relationships.[68]

Shehzeen moved back into her family home after her divorce, but under very strained circumstances. She communicated to her parents that she would have to move out if the situation did not improve.

> *My relationship with my family has got better now. However, initially, when I got my divorce, no one was willing to talk to me because they believed what I did was completely wrong… I was hoping for the situation to get better, but it was not happening. I had to sit down with them and tell them that if this behaviour continues with me then I will leave their home. This changed the whole situation… they are accepting me with my past.*

---

[67] Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

[68] Zeweri and Shinkfield.

> *It's good now, it was really bumpy at the start. After I moved back in with my mum after I got a divorce, it was very, very bumpy, like really bad. Even now sometimes my mum brings it up, she's like 'you're divorced', and it's like, okay, and who got me married? (Sanaya)*

Sanaya similarly describes a period of tension, when she returned to living with her mother after divorce. The tension eased, but her mother still chides her for being divorced, which Sanaya reminds her mother is her fault. We see the renegotiation of familial relationships in the confrontation between Shehzeen and her parents, and the playful but powerful banter that Sanaya reflects on between herself and her mum.

As discussed earlier, Julianna did not seek out a continued relationship with her immediate family. At the time of our interview, she had not had contact with her family for about two years. One of the last contacts Julianna had with her parents was when they brought her ex-husband to see her, in violation of a court order that was in place against him.

> *Last last contact I had with my younger brother, he was telling me, 'It's so sad to see you publicly shaming your family'. I said, 'I'm not publicly shaming anybody. I'm saying what's the truth...' I can't bring my childhood back, I can't bring my teenage years back, I can't bring my young adulthood back. But I take a stand, at least I'm fighting. Because today my kids will see me that way. (Julianna)*

Julianna takes an empowered position in moving forward with the experience of childhood trauma and forced marriage. Previously, Julianna engaged in family conflict work, seeking acknowledgement from family members of the harms she experienced, but, at the time of our interview, she had disengaged from conflict work. Julianna is driven to protect her children, and to model to them what she sees as good and moral. As noted before, we see the limits of compulsory kinship[69] in Julianna's situation; she has ceased contact with family in an effort to protect herself and her children from further harm.

Reflections for Forced Marriage Policy and Practice

Individuals who experience coercion into marriage are embedded within familial and community relationships, within complex family lives. Smart and Shipman[70] point out that theorisations about family life need to somehow 'capture the

---

[69]   Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

[70]   Smart and Shipman.

complex tapestry of competing obligations and aspirations.' We set out to explore the histories and experiences of families affected by forced marriage, to look at communication practices, and to highlight individual resilience and the reconfiguration of family relationships that occurs when navigating forced marriage. In this section, we reflect on two areas where our findings can inform forced marriage policy and practice: (1) family mediation and (2) broad support for families as an important component of forced marriage prevention.

The young women we interviewed placed high value on their family relationships, and many made significant efforts to manage and retain their relationships despite their experiences around forced marriage. However, these efforts notwithstanding, the conflict work undertaken by these young women was at times taxing and detrimental to their mental health and well-being. Participants expressed anger, resentment, and feelings of betrayal towards family members, but also love, mutual care, and a strong sense of duty. Uncomfortably, love, duty, and connection were present alongside coercive, and at times violent and abusive behaviour. The discursive power of families is well captured by Reczek and Bosley-Smith's concept of compulsory kinship,[71] and this concept is useful in explaining, in part, the ongoing pull of families for the women we interviewed. Participants were committed to their families and expressed both connection and obligation to family members. The support that could be provided to those affected by forced marriage and their families through the process of family mediation may lessen this burden on survivors. Therefore, our findings support resourcing of family mediation by appropriately skilled professionals. Given the concerns about family mediation creating space for further coercion,[72] there is a strong need for monitoring and evaluation of family mediation programmes as they are established, and there will be families and circumstances where family mediation is not appropriate.

The second area of policy and practice this research speaks to is the need for support for families affected by forced marriage much earlier than when (forced) marriage is an imminent possibility. We heard about families in this research who had experienced trauma, displacement, sexual violence, and mental health concerns. Clearly broad support for families navigating these types of experiences is critically important. Our research highlights communication within families as one area that could be focused on within prevention activities targeted at families. Within some participants' families, not having space to communicate and contribute to decision-making was normalised from an early age. Communication and decision-making practices may be an important area for forced marriage prevention work, with consideration of the varied dynamics and

---

[71] Reczek and Bosley-Smith, 2022.

[72] Dauvergne and Millbank; Gill and Mitra-Kahn.

power relationships that are present within families. Our findings echo the call from the Australian Muslim Women's Centre for Human Rights for strengths-based parenting programmes that engage with familial decision-making practices.[73]

Life after a forced marriage or an experience of coercion into marriage is an area that we flag as important for further research, and we end this article by highlighting the strengths of the women we interviewed. Studies of forced marriage too seldom reflect on the resilience of those with lived experience. The women we interviewed were working, studying, and pursuing goals they considered worthwhile. In some situations, like Julianna's, resilience required separation from family. Compulsory kinship can break down in these circumstances, and estrangement can be protective, of oneself and one's young family. More commonly, though, we observed ongoing family connectedness, though familial relations were reconfigured through the process of negotiations around marriage.[74] Families are constituted and reconstituted through the ways they both create and respond to problems.[75] Some participants characterised their familial relations, at the time of our interviews, as mutually respectful.

This article has demonstrated the value of focused study of family relationships. Understanding familial histories, communication practices, and relationships is foundational in the design of effective approaches to prevent forced marriage. Our work also shows the utility of sociological concepts, such as family conflict work, compulsory kinship, and the ideas of individual and relational choice, for the study of forced marriage.

Acknowledgments

---

[73]   Prattis and El Matrah.

[74]   Zeweri and Shinkfield.

[75]   Morgan.

Dr Jacqueline Nelson is a Senior Research Fellow on the Speak Now project at Anti-Slavery Australia. Email: Jacqueline.Nelson@uts.edu.au

Prof Jennifer Burn is the Director of Anti-Slavery Australia and has led the development of Australian best practice anti-slavery initiatives since 2003. Email: Jennifer.Burn@uts.edu.au

Short Articles

The Family as a Protective Factor: Economic considerations of Bangladeshi labour trafficking survivors

Mary Caparas and Nadia Gapur

Abstract

Economic dependence often exists within trafficked immigrant families, both before the human trafficking situation and after family reunification in the United States. While economic dependence can deepen individuals' vulnerabilities to human trafficking, this article explores how the family unit can serve as a protective factor, especially for those who have recently experienced family reunification. Writing from the perspective of social service providers, we utilise a composite case study of several clients to exemplify how families can support and protect each other within their new environment in New York City and after reunifying with extended family members. This case study demonstrates that social service providers must adopt a family and community-centric approach to survivor support to ensure they strengthen the ability of the family unit to serve as a protective factor against further exploitation for trafficking victims in the US.

Introduction

Labour trafficking is often the result of multiple socio-economic risk factors that create cycles of exploitation and violence.[1] One of them is the social expectations on men as primary financial providers. In 2022, Womankind, a New York City-based non-profit providing services to survivors of all forms of gender-based violence, began experiencing a significant shift in the demographics of clients

---

[1]   International Labour Organization, *Profits and Poverty: The economics of forced labour*, ILO, Geneva, 2014, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---declaration/documents/publication/wcms_243391.pdf.

served within its anti-human trafficking programme. Within two years, the share of cisgender men climbed to a historic high of 43% of the programme's clients. Many of them were part of a larger group case of men from rural areas of Bangladesh trafficked to Saipan, the capital of the Northern Mariana Islands.[2] Many of them received their T visas (for victims of human trafficking) and eventually made their way to New York City; several began reaching out to the organisation for help as an entire family unit. As advocates worked with clients, we began to observe a complex reunified family dynamic and noted that the family structure within the United States was both a risk and protective factor in the lives of these labour trafficking survivors.

In this short article, we describe this dynamic through a composite case study of Bangladeshi men who migrated to Saipan for work, were identified as victims of trafficking, and reunited with their families in their new environment of New York City.

Rahim's Story

'Rahim' is a 43-year-old married man. He was initially recruited in Bangladesh with the promise of higher earnings at a retail warehouse in the Northern Mariana Islands. His recruiters demanded exorbitant recruitment fees and informed him that he needed to work a certain amount of time before he could return home. Thinking about his family and how he would be able to provide a better life for his children, Rahim decided to take the job and travelled to Saipan. His wife, Ria, then became the only parent left in Bangladesh and cared for both their children and their extended family members.

In Saipan, Rahim did not receive the work that he was promised, had to pay for his own accommodation, was subjected to physical abuse and verbal threats from his traffickers, and was told not to speak with other Bangladeshi workers.[3] Through word of mouth by other Bangladeshi community members in Saipan, Rahim connected with a social services agency who ultimately connected him and other workers to the US Attorneys' Offices. They assisted him with securing a T visa. As he considered his next steps, Rahim learnt from other formerly trafficked community members about anti-trafficking programmes in New York City that

---

[2]   United States Attorney's Office, District of Guam & the Northern Mariana Islands, 'Muksedur Rahman, Md. Rafiqul Islam and David Trung Quoc Phan Sentenced for Mail Fraud, Fraud in Foreign Labour Contracting, and Visa Fraud', 9 March 2018, https://www.justice.gov/usao-gu/pr/muksedur-rahman-md-rafiqul-islam-and-david-trung-quoc-phan-sentenced-mail-fraud-fraud.

[3]   *Ibid.*

could provide him with some economic and legal support. He connected with an organisation and sought social services. Rahim soon disclosed fearing that his family was in danger of being trafficked too due to threatening text messages they received. He thus wanted to reunify as soon as possible with his wife, three children, and at least one aging parent. Rahim's advocate and an intergovernmental organisation assisted him in bringing his family members to the United States.

Several months later, once they had been reunified in New York City, Rahim began to have problems financially supporting his family. Their former economic dependence on him and traditional Bangladeshi family structure posed a challenge; the same risk factors associated with a desperation for better economic opportunities for his family and the pressure for Rahim to earn enough income to support everyone was starting to grow once again. There was a possibility that the fraud and exploitation associated with his human trafficking experience could repeat as his family struggled to navigate life in the US.

With the help of his advocate, Rahim and his family applied for and received public assistance (PA).[4] Rahim's advocate continued to help him map out his existing resources, including the support of his neighbours and community in New York City. This provided him with more peace of mind that his family would not always need to rely on him to afford food or pay medical bills. It took Ria some time, but she learnt some English through the support of her neighbours and cousins who had immigrated from Bangladesh several years earlier. She also asked to be assigned her own advocate at the organisation and received emotional support to process her experiences. Through community connections and economic empowerment trainings from the organisation, she ultimately found employment. Their three minor children attend school and receive after-school care.

One day, Rahim suffered an injury as he was returning home and became temporarily unable to work. This created a short-term strain on the family's income. Although in Bangladesh, she was never the primary financial provider, Ria now stepped in to cover some of the family's financial needs. She utilised various services to secure financial support for utilities, winter clothes, and one month of rent, as well as after-school support for the children. Ria also became more aware of what constitutes poor labour practices and her rights as a worker. The family were able to navigate this challenge as they bridged the income gap together and averted a financial crisis.

---

[4]   Public assistance is temporary help distributed in the United States to families, children, or individuals in need. Programmes vary per state. In New York, eligible individuals or families can access programmes that provide cash assistance for food, rent, utilities, or other living expenses.

Rahim and Ria utilised this time to deepen their ties to their local community. They started identifying better work environments, learning more about legitimate financial resources such as safe temporary work with taxable income rather than uncertain and unstable gig work. Now, for the first time, the family depends on each other and works together instead of being solely dependent on Rahim as financial provider. It is far from a perfect life and every day brings new emotional and financial challenges, but they feel more prepared for life together in New York City.

Discussion

This composite case study highlights that family dynamics can play both a risk and protective factor in survivors' vulnerability to further labour exploitation. One risk factor is that the family relies solely on the husband to be the financial provider, which can cause the rest of the family to experience a financial crisis if he loses his job. Conversely, keeping the family unit together as immigrants to the United States actually allows for Rahim's wife to engage in paid employment and absorb some of the losses of income. Advocates noted that Bangladeshi men seek legal immigration help for their wives to receive their Employment Authorization Documents and Social Security Numbers in order to also find a job and help with high living costs. These services can ultimately give women more autonomy over their households and daily lives. They also become more involved in the household's decision-making. This dynamic can cause the family unit to become a protective factor for male trafficking survivors.

Another protective factor is the family unit's relationship to broader community ties and its integration into a network of support. Survivors, immigrants, and neighbours help each other not just through temporary housing and mutual aid, but also through referrals to and an informal vetting of support organisations. In Rahim's case, word of mouth was very important because it encouraged trafficking survivors and their families to seek and navigate social services in New York City. The community can help families to identify and contact a variety of resources to meet their respective needs, including legal immigration services, English language classes, employment, and informal support groups. The community additionally can re-construct more flexible norms and protect individuals and families from exploitative practices in their new country.

While navigating these new dynamics, a family-related risk factor is that men internalise the stigma of not being the financial provider and are left feeling that they failed their family's expectations. Men do not often self-identify as 'victims' or 'survivors' and may not seek counselling. Instead, as we saw in Rahim's story, they focus on tangible and practical needs, including housing, legal immigration assistance, food, cash assistance, and employment. As a result, not having

emotional outlets of support or even confirmation that they are experiencing some form of exploitation can increase vulnerabilities to risky employment and unhealthy relationships. Training case workers on public assistance (PA), such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, would help clients and their families access PA more quickly and with less likelihood of denials.[5] PA can allow family members to meet basic needs and alleviate financial stressors, leaving space to emotionally support each other. This could, in turn, serve as a protective factor for men to process their trafficking experiences and remove some of the stigma associated with being unable to provide for their families.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While economic dependence on men as the primary financial providers in the family can make them more vulnerable to labour trafficking or other forms of exploitation, the family unit itself can serve as a protective factor if the dynamics can be navigated after reunification in a new country. Rahim's story demonstrates some important implications regarding the risk and protective factors of the family's economic dependence on men. Social service providers can strengthen families and their communities through their services, reducing cycles of labour exploitation and trafficking. The community also plays a significant role in sharing resources and extending the web of support. The family itself would then have more opportunities and means to support each other and create positive changes in their communities.

To ensure that the family acts as a protective factor against further exploitation, we make several recommendations to social service providers in New York City. Firstly, as organisations continue to receive Bangladeshi labour trafficking clients, service providers should ensure that they have adequate capacity to handle their cases. This means having enough case workers and legal staff available to assist clients and their families. Secondly, capacity also implies that case workers are properly trained to provide trauma-informed care and meet the needs of the family as a unit, moving away from an individualistic focus on survivors. Since clients often come from a culture where traditional gender norms persist that see men as households' primary financial providers, staff should be trained on family dynamics within Bangladeshi communities layered with the challenges of being recent immigrants. Supervision of staff should also be used as a way to promote, respect, and celebrate cultural diversity. Providers could consequently create more

---

[5]   When clients and their families apply for PA, they are often denied help due to insufficient paperwork or PA staff's unfamiliarity with the Health and Human Services certification letter. The HHS certification letter allows the client's family to access benefits while they wait for their social security numbers and employment authorisation documents.

flexibility in services and build deeper rapport with clients by understanding the dynamics of family units.

Thirdly, social service programmes should seek survivors' feedback and suggestions to better understand which resources and processes were most helpful. Since Bangladeshi men and their families typically live within their own communities and with those who share similar experiences, it is possible to develop better rapport and ask how they are adjusting to life in their communities after receiving services. The information could demonstrate how clients utilised the resources and incorporated them into their lives, which would allow programmes to simultaneously refine and expand their work.

Providers should also support the establishment and development of new community groups and resources. Clients often refer each other to different organisations for help, and information spreads quickly. Clients are more inclined to seek services when they hear first-hand about positive experiences from other community members. Specific organisations are also coalescing around social service and advocacy issues affecting South Asian communities in New York City. Such groups can work alongside other organisations to extend the web of support.

Finally, providers must advocate for policy changes, such as the increase of federal and local funding to improve capacity and services for survivors and their families. They should also encourage the education and training for all public assistance offices, so that survivors can access critical benefits. Providers should also advocate for the creation of more comprehensive economic empowerment programmes that focus on long-term stability and better pay.

Acknowledgments

Mary Caparas is the anti-human trafficking programme manager at Womankind. In this capacity, she works with community members and provides tailored trainings, outreach, and advocacy on human trafficking. Mary earned her MSW from the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. Prior to joining Womankind, Mary spent over a decade working and attending degree programmes within medical and legal fields in New York City and in London, United Kingdom. Email: mcaparas@iamwk.org

Nadia Gapur is an anti-human trafficking advocate at Womankind. Her academic background is in the sciences; she has previously worked with various non-profits focusing on education and the arts in California, Washington DC, and New York City. Email: nadiagapur@iamwk.org

ANTI-TRAFFICKING REVIEW

Guidelines for Contributors

We welcome submissions from a diverse range of actors, including academics, practitioners, trafficked persons and advocates. The *Anti-Trafficking Review* particularly welcomes contributions from those with direct experiences and insights to share.

The *Anti-Trafficking Review* is aimed at a wide readership. It therefore encourages submissions that are in clear, jargon-free English with appropriate but not excessive citation.

Articles should be previously unpublished and should not be under consideration for publication elsewhere. All articles go through a rigorous double-blind peer review process.

Please refer to the journal's website (www.antitraffickingreview. org) for the journal's full style guide and guidelines for contributors.

GLOBAL ALLIANCE AGAINST TRAFFIC IN WOMEN
P.O. Box 36, Bangkok Noi Post Office
10700 Bangkok, Thailand
Website: www.antitraffickingreview.org

anti
trafficking
review

The Anti-Trafficking Review promotes a human rights-based approach to anti-trafficking. It explores trafficking in its broader context including gender analyses and intersections with labour and migrant rights. It offers an outlet and space for dialogue between academics, practitioners, trafficked persons and advocates seeking to communicate new ideas and findings to those working for and with trafficked persons.

AATW

Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women
www.antitraffickingreview.org