

Psychological Health Impact of Human Trafficking

Stakeholders' perspectives

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1. Introduction and Methodology

This chapter discusses the outcomes of the interviews held with stakeholders in the Netherlands. For this part, fifty stakeholders with a different professional background were interviewed (assistance and support (N=26), policy makers and lawyers (N=10), law enforcement (N=9), criminal justice (N=5)). Participants were recruited through the professional networks of the authors and by contacting relevant professionals via e-mail. No incentives were awarded for participation in the project. During the initial contact, participants were given information about the research project, on which they could base their decision to participate. Prior to the interview, participants were again provided with information regarding their participation in both verbal and written form. In order to guarantee full comprehension of the information and the purpose of the study, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form. Prior to the interviews, a list of topics had been created based on a literature study regarding issues that are found in practice when dealing with victims of sexual exploitation and interaction between victims and professionals. The overarching theme of the interview was the psychological health impact of human trafficking. The main topics that were discussed during the interviews were: identification of victims, the role of victims in criminal proceedings, assistance and support. For each topic, best practices and suggestions for improvement were explored during the interview. The structure of this chapter will broadly follow the structure of the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using ATLAS.ti. In the presentation of the results no systematic distinction between the different groups of stakeholders have been made because of overlap of the findings between these groups and different opinions within the groups. Therefore, only if findings are clearly different between the groups of stakeholders this is indicated.

2. Psychological consequences of trafficking

All stakeholders report that victims experience negative psychological consequences as a result of trafficking. However, it is generally stated that the degree to which victims experience psychological issues varies per individual.

Various stakeholders consistently mention the fact that many of the victims have dealt with early childhood trauma, have a (mild) intellectual disability or have other psychological issues. Vulnerabilities that existed prior to the trafficking cannot necessarily be separated from the psychological consequences of trafficking. According to a specialized victim lawyer, these exist almost without exception for all victims of human trafficking.

The mental health problems and symptoms that are mentioned by most stakeholders are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms. Stakeholders from various professions mention that victims suffer from symptoms such as general anxiety, sleeping problems, flashbacks, hypervigilance, and forgetfulness. Depression and depressive symptoms are most often mentioned by those in the assistance sector. Mental health professionals state that persistent PTSD symptoms are in fact the biggest risk for re-victimization. Therefore PTSD is considered to be both a psychological consequence and a risk factor for victims of human trafficking.

Victims do not only experience psychopathological symptoms such as those that correspond with a post-traumatic stress disorder, but they are also subjected to a tremendous amount of ongoing stressors in daily life. These ongoing stressors often entail issues such as housing, finances, fear of reprisal, residency, health care, and reunion with their family and children. Due to the pre-existing vulnerabilities, complex lives, and ongoing stressors that victims are confronted with it is seen in practice that victims of trafficking often do not have a single problem but rather experience a multitude of problems.

Impact of trafficker strategies

It is explicitly mentioned by law enforcement professionals that traffickers target vulnerable and uneducated women. The strategy that is commonly employed by traffickers starts with building trust. Traffickers make the victim believe that they understand the situation they are going through and that they can help get them out of the situation, thus creating a relationship of dependency. As soon as the victim starts realizing that her trust was misplaced, the trafficker will use fear to silence the victim. Traffickers tell their victims that the police will never believe their story and in the case of foreign victims they will say that they will be immediately sent back to their country of origin because they are in The Netherlands illegally.

Due to these trafficker strategies, victims often experience a lot of mistrust towards others. This mistrust as a consequence of being trafficked is seen with both Dutch and foreign victims. Regarding foreign victims, it is also observed that they develop a sense of mistrust towards their fellow nationals because they fear that this person may have contacts with the trafficker and that they will be found eventually.

In the first period after escaping the exploitation, victims experience a lot of fear of the trafficker. Victims are scared that they will be found and punished by their trafficker for running away. Continued fear causes some victims to completely isolate themselves from society.

Another consequence that is often seen as a result of sexual exploitation is (severe) addiction to medication, alcohol or drugs. A team leader from the migration and trafficking department of the Dutch police mentions that especially Dutch victims have been blackmailed by the use of drugs during the period of exploitation. Victims are given just enough drugs to keep them coming back to the trafficker.

Another public prosecutor also mentions that she notices that victims have a strong tendency to blame themselves for the situation they are in. She notices this self-blame in

victims with (mild) intellectual disabilities, but also in victims who are highly intelligent and well-educated. These victims often say that they autonomously decided to believe the trafficker and that it was not really his fault. This could be the vulnerability upon which the victim is targeted, or the result of the trafficker strategy used which manipulates the victim into making what is believed to be an autonomous decision. Mental health professionals mention that victims often struggle with a severely low self-esteem, which increases their vulnerability of being targeted by traffickers. In general, it can be concluded that the psychological impact of human trafficking is severe, especially in combination to the risk factors upon which they are targeted:

“In some moments you notice that the contact with victims becomes very minimal and that you cannot actually get through to them. It seems like their ‘system’ shuts down. She will then stop looking me in the eyes, she becomes restless, really closed off to the environment. These victims do not function well socially. They function very differently than other people.” – Social worker

3. Victim identification and initial contact

Most of the difficulties that are experienced in the victim identification phase have been reported by stakeholders in the law enforcement category. Although opinions vary between and within groups of stakeholders it is seen that there is an overlap in the reported difficulties. Generally, it seems that law enforcement professionals are aware of the possible negative effects of the interventions and interactions on victim’s well-being. However, these effects are not always sufficiently taken into account and applied in practice.

Self-identification

The strategies that are currently employed by traffickers complicate self-identification of victims and furthermore make it difficult to prove that the victim was deceived or performing

sexual services under coercion. In practice it is rarely seen that victims step forward to the police or assistance providers out of their own initiative or during prostitution controls. These barriers to contact with the police are often due to fear of the perpetrator and mistrust in the police as victims seem to experience a lack of confidence in the ability of the police to protect the victim.

For foreign victims future migration goals are an additional threshold to contact with the police. Especially non-European victims are aware of their illegal status and fear going back to their country of origin, having to disclose to their family that they've failed in reaching their goals in Europe. The fear of being deported increases the threshold to step forward to the police.

“The threshold to approach the police should be decreased. Especially women who come from countries where prostitution is illegal and who have been sexually exploited should be informed about how the police works in this country. They often already have a sense of mistrust toward the police. These women should know that they will not be looked at in a dirty way if you have worked in prostitution in the Netherlands, it is not illegal, you are not a criminal, and the police can indeed be trusted. - Victim lawyer

A public prosecutor mentions that when foreign victims are contacted by assistance providers who completely normalize prostitution as a source of income, these victims may think that the situation of exploitation they find themselves in is normal in The Netherlands as well. Consequently, it may be difficult for foreign victims to distinguish between prostitution being *legal* and sexual exploitation being illegal.

Furthermore, culture and background seem to play an important role in the identification of foreign victims. Due to a lacking comprehension of the Dutch language, often translators are used. However, as translators are often from a similar culture as the victim they can misinterpret a cross-cultural interaction in the same way as the victim.

“I simply asked the victim how she was doing. The translator then said ‘Pardon me?’ after which I asked him if he did not understand me correctly. He then replied ‘No. You just should not ask that. You’re a man and you don’t ask a woman how she is doing” -Specialized human trafficking detective

It appears that the group of West-African victims poses the greatest challenge with regard to identification and interaction according to stakeholders. According to various stakeholders, these victims often have very similar narratives that rarely seem to contain sufficient investigative indications upon which the criminal investigation can be continued.

“They come, in a giant white bird to the Netherlands, they have no idea what the flight attendants look like, they have no idea what the plane looked like. They always arrive at night, then they have driven around for a few hours, then they went to some apartment. There, they were exploited in a horrific manner, and at a certain point they could escape. On the streets they met some dark man who brought them to us. And then you go drive around and they can’t show or tell you anything. It could all be true, but I cannot do anything with that”- Public prosecutor

Another factor that complicates the identification of West-African victims is the practice of Voodoo, which is often used as a method of coercion. It is mentioned by law enforcement that in some cases a small amount of information is shared, which is followed by a panic attack or hyperventilation by the victim.

The group of Eastern-European victims are often in codependent relationships with the trafficker, which increases the threshold to report to the police and furthermore increases the likelihood that they will return to their trafficker and become re-victimized. Additionally, it seems like some of these victims do not consider their situation to be exploitation, as they earn more money than they would in their country of origin.

“I recently experienced that an Eastern-European victim entered our shelter and said: “I’m not actually a victim. Although the police may state that I do not get paid enough, in Hungary I had to work for €100, - per month. Here in

the Netherlands I get €100, - for working seven days in a week. You may not find that a lot of money, but I'm happy with that". – Assistance provider

With regard to Dutch victims it is seen that the willingness to report is notoriously low, which is possibly due to the fact that they do not receive the same incentives for reporting, such as residence, as foreign victims. Furthermore, Dutch victims of trafficking are often minors who have been exploited in underground settings. Therefore, Dutch victims over the age of 23 years old are often assumed to be working autonomously and voluntarily and thus do not get identified as victims.

Law enforcement controls

Law enforcement professionals mention that the way prostitution controls are currently conducted is mostly ineffective because they are conducted in a routine manner. Victims of trafficking are often encountered but are rarely identified as such because they refuse to provide information due to the circumstances of these controls, e.g. because other people are present, they don't trust the police or because the focus is on administrative control of the permit and not on criminal offences. Furthermore, they are afraid that if they come forward the police will not immediately take them out of the situation which will leave them with the traffickers who might know they have informed the police about their situation.

Another complicating factor is the fact that multiple organizations can be involved in the identification of victims and that they all have different roles, yet need to work together when picking up signals of trafficking. Currently there is insufficient contact between stakeholders that are involved within the same region, which makes it unclear which party is responsible for which actions.

Informative conversation & slightest indication

In the Netherlands it is protocol to have an informative conversation with victims of human trafficking. The purpose of the informative conversation is to gather indications of human trafficking and to provide the victim with information about procedures and assistance. After the informative conversation the victim can decide whether she wants to file charges or not. This means that law enforcement personnel have two formal roles during this conversation. It is mentioned by several stakeholders that the way the informative conversation is currently held is causing a lot of problems both for the victim and for the law enforcement professional. During the informative conversation law enforcement officials need to encounter signals that human trafficking is taking place and to provide the victim with information about assistance and residence. However, according to Dutch regulations, law enforcement personnel is officially obliged to act whenever they encounter the slightest indication of human trafficking. Therefore, when the victim talks about the conditions of exploitation, the informative conversation turns into the beginning of the criminal investigation. Hence, the distinction between the informative conversation and the hearing of a victim becomes blurred. Even when the victim chooses not to file charges, the information is there and the police are legally obliged to start an investigation. However, a criminal investigation is not necessarily in the best interest of the victim, as it may have negative consequences or may increase risk of retaliation by the trafficker as he will know he is under investigation.

“Imagine that you are a human trafficker and you have five women working for you. Suddenly, one of them does not show up the next day and you also find out that there has been charges filed against you. There is no point in allowing victims to file anonymous charges in that case because he will know who it was. Instead, we should be focusing on guaranteeing their safety.” - Public prosecutor

Regarding the informative conversation, contradictory opinions among stakeholders have been encountered. Various law enforcement stakeholders and assistance providers have mentioned that victims should receive more time to reflect upon whether they want to participate in the informative conversation and provide the police with information upon which an investigation can be started. Both law enforcement stakeholders and mental health professionals mention that victims are not sufficiently mentally stable in the period after escaping exploitation and should be given time to stabilize. Furthermore, some stakeholders suggest that mental health professionals, not the police, should determine whether a victim is psychologically able to provide information or file charges.

Currently there seems to be a lack of guidelines with regard to the content and procedures of the informative conversation. How the informative conversation is held seems to be dependent on the police department and employee. Policy stakeholders from the Ministry of Justice mention that they have been receiving signals that the informative conversation currently has too many elements of an interrogation. Various stakeholders mention that as a result hereof, the victim is often turned into a source of information.

“I want to hear her story, so I can have signals of human trafficking and offer information and assistance. But I also don’t want to hear anything because then I have investigative indications with which I officially need to do something” - Law enforcement

Trust, empathy and secondary victimization

Law enforcement professionals mention that it is difficult to establish trust between victims and police due to negative associations victims have with the police.

With regard to empathy towards victims, contradictory opinions were found among stakeholders. One group of law enforcement stakeholders mention that law enforcement

professionals should empathize more with the victim. This group of stakeholders also mentions that professionals should have more understanding of the psychological consequences of trafficking as well as the psychological consequences of interacting with law enforcement. The other group of law enforcement stakeholders mention that law enforcement professionals should remain neutral and objective and should avoid becoming too emotionally attached to the victim.

“I have seen police staff who empathized so much with the victim and placed themselves in her shoes completely. That is also not good.” – Public prosecutor

The latter group states that the police should always keep alternative scenarios in mind besides the narrative provided by the victim. Therefore, it is important to ask critical and thorough questions. Although it seems that there is general theoretical awareness of secondary victimization among stakeholders, it is said that this awareness is insufficiently applied in practice. Currently, issues such as inconsistent testimonies are often interpreted as signs of untruthfulness. However, more knowledge of the difficulties in sustaining attention and memory problems in traumatized victims would facilitate increased understanding.

Assistance stakeholders have mentioned that, in their opinion, law enforcement professionals too often pressure victims to report. Additionally, multiple stakeholders mention that victims are not given sufficient information and time to reflect to ensure an informed decision with regard to cooperation with the police investigation.

“Every single conversation victims have with authorities is a new brick being laid in the building of trust. This is something that needs to be done very delicately. Therefore there should be a screening to assess whether a victim is capable of providing a statement. Additionally, there is need for a risk assessment”. - Expertise center for human trafficking

Others mention that the informative conversation and filing of charges should happen as soon as possible after a victim has escaped exploitation. This way, the victim's memory has not been influenced by external factors such as therapy. A detective psychologist mentions that the police are well-trained to assess the psychological well-being and to conduct the interview. However, she suggests that detectives should have more knowledge about the effect of trauma on testimonies and how to deal with this in practice.

Lastly, it is said that law enforcement professionals should be critical as to what they can realistically expect from victims. These stakeholders argue that expecting victims to deliver a complete and detailed chronological testimony about traumatic and embarrassing events to a stranger is unrealistic.

4. Victims in criminal proceedings

It is complicated to untangle and distinguish where the identification phase ends and the criminal procedure begins. The issues that victims and stakeholders are confronted with during the criminal procedures are similar to those experienced during the process of identification discussed in the previous section. Problems arise due to inconsistent testimonies and persistent psychological symptoms as a result of victimization and interactions with stakeholders.

Inconsistent testimonies

Throughout the whole process from early victim identification to criminal proceedings victims are known to provide inconsistent testimonies. According to law enforcement professionals, this phenomenon is seen in victims from all cultural groups. Generally, there seem to be two categories of explanations for the inconsistent and partly truthful initial testimonies that are provided by victims.

The first category entails victims who knowingly tell a different version of the truth. These victims often behave according to the instructions they were given by their traffickers and tell law enforcement and assistance personnel that they are working voluntarily. However, other reasons include fear of the trafficker, embarrassment about their story, or certain cultural factors such as voodoo.

The second category entails victims who are unable to provide a consistent testimony that corresponds in detail with the actual facts that took place. Generally, human trafficking is a crime that takes place over a longer period of time which makes it more difficult to remember the sequence of events that occurred in that period of time. Contradicting opinions have been found within the group of law enforcement stakeholders with regard to the influence of trauma on the accuracy of a statement. Some mention that traumatic stress severely influences the ability to report whereas others mention that it depends more on the questioning techniques used by detectives. For the police report, the testimony has to contain as much details about the exploitation and violence as possible.

“When victims say that there was violence, we ideally need to know what the violence consisted of. Hitting? With bare hands or objects? Victims often ‘normalize’ the violence and are therefore not able to report the circumstances under which the violence happened and the details of how the physical harm was attributed to them”. – Specialized human trafficking detective

Ceasing collaboration with police

Even in cases in which initial contact is successful, barriers to collaboration are also experienced. During criminal investigations and procedures, some victims disappear or return to their trafficker and cease their collaboration. After an investigation is discontinued without finding the perpetrator, some victims who originate from unsafe countries or unsafe environments either or not related to the situation of trafficking, are unwilling to return to their

country of origin and also disappear. This in turn, results in victims of human trafficking becoming undocumented migrants.

Evidence and victim testimony

Due to modern trafficker strategies it is almost impossible for a victim to support her testimony with objective evidence. The current system seems to be too dependent on the victim testimony which consequently results in victims testifying without being in a state to do so.

Among all stakeholders it is mentioned that victims often file charges not because they genuinely want to themselves, but because residence and indirectly assistance are dependent on collaboration in the criminal procedures. Especially non-EU victims are often aware that their residence is dependent on collaboration with the police and therefore their participation in the investigation may not be completely voluntary. As there is much depending on the questioning, this increases pressure on the victims, which may also influence the truthfulness of the testimony.

Questioning

The filing of charges can be quite difficult for the victim which is partially dependent on the questions that are asked, the way in which they are posed and the knowledge and expertise of the police officer conducting the questioning. Due to the fact that victims of sexual exploitation often experience multiple problems, it seems that even specialized human trafficking detectives often lack expertise in working with this vulnerable group. Furthermore, culture also plays a role during this interaction.

“In practice it can be quite difficult to apply the theoretical knowledge from trainings. Especially with regard to some of the cultural aspects during the interaction with victims. The way some (Nigerian) victims interact with law enforcement, provide information, and attach value to certain concepts is

difficult for us to understand. Due to these strange stories they provide, you are easily inclined to think that they are lying. However, the more you learn about these cultural practices, the more you are able to put their answers into another perspective. Regardless of the knowledge it can still be difficult to empathize with the victim as they may give very frustrating answers due to trafficker strategies. If you only want to help a victim but she does not want to provide more information it can be really challenging to understand her behavior.”- Law enforcement: migration specialist

Various stakeholders seem to have the idea that victims are often able, yet unwilling to provide answers to a question. Due to low willingness to fully disclose about the exploitation to the police, the detectives are often inclined to ask suggestive questions that may be steering a victim into a certain direction. Furthermore, detectives may also be inclined to ask too specific questions, which increases the likelihood of incorrect answers. In addition, it seems that in some cultures it is better to fabricate an answer than to admit you do not know the answer, which contributes to inconsistencies in the testimony.

Due to the fact that many law enforcement stakeholders have the investigation in mind and try to anticipate on further stages in the proceedings, they try to eliminate all inconsistencies in the testimony. As they do not want the defense lawyer to encounter and abuse elements in the testimony that can be twisted, this sometimes leads to thorough and critical questioning.

“The questions that are asked often contain specific details and have to be told multiple times. When something happened three years ago, victims cannot precisely retell that story. However, this does seem to be expected of them.”
- Social worker

These critical questions are often interpreted by victims as a sign that they are not believed by the police and they feel as though they have to prove and defend their story.

A healthcare provider stated that a point of concern is the transition from being a victim, to participating in the criminal proceedings. This healthcare provider states that this happens too quickly and victims are not given sufficient time and space to develop the trust and stability needed to participate in the criminal proceedings. Moreover, it should also be considered that in some of the victims' country of origin, the authorities and police specifically, can simply not be trusted.

Length of the procedure and trauma

Healthcare providers outline that during the time when victims agree to press charges and participate in the criminal procedures, they are often in a very vulnerable position. Stakeholders among all groups question as to whether victims are genuinely aware of what the lengthy procedures will entail, and the significance of the impact it may have on their lives.

Generally it is mentioned that the procedures have a severe psychological impact on victims of human trafficking as they often relive their trauma by being continuously confronted with information related to their experience.

Furthermore, victims often need to provide evidence with the information while an opposing party aims to undermine this very information. A policy officer from the Ministry of Justice stated that in some cases the final sentence given to the perpetrator is shorter than the actual procedures themselves, which makes one question the value of that collaboration to the victim and whether this is genuinely proportionate to the final result.

“If it does lead to a conviction, the sentence is so low, that the victim says, I had to relive this hell through the procedure for two years, and the perpetrator receives a 1 year sentence. If I could do it again, I wouldn't file charges.”-
Policy officer Ministry of Justice

A public prosecutor mentions that the implementation of specialized human trafficking courts has been beneficial. This improvement is partly due increased knowledge among the specialized public prosecutors and judges regarding inconsistent testimonies and the role of pressure and trauma herein. However, problems arise when these cases are eventually taken to the Court of Appeal, where this specialization is lacking.

Ongoing stressors

A public prosecutor mentioned that it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a criminal investigation should be continued, given the impact it may have on the life of a victim. Especially when she has her life back in order. During the procedures victims feel a constant insecurity and lack of transparency as to what the next steps will entail. This is especially significant for those victims who have additional fear of returning to their country of origin due to the criminal procedures being linked to residency. During this period, it is difficult to stabilize and build up a new life post-victimization. Mental health professionals at Rena and Equator state that these ongoing stressors complicate the therapeutic process significantly.

Victims may also feel unsafe during the proceedings due to fear of the perpetrator. Many of the stakeholders have acknowledged that the police is currently insufficiently able to guarantee safety of victims. Furthermore, considering the previously mentioned sentences given for this crime, perpetrators may be released quite quickly.

Contact with defense lawyer

Course coordinators from the police academy explained that since the victim testimony plays such a significant role in the criminal procedure, the defense lawyer tends to attack it intensively. Defense lawyers appear to abuse the victims' vulnerabilities such as mental instability and (mild) intellectual disabilities to make the victim appear not to be trustworthy

and undermine the credibility of the testimony in the courtroom. This action is undertaken on behalf of their client and utilizes the rights of the suspect. Two prosecutors and a healthcare provider outlined that the interaction with the suspect's lawyer can lead to secondary victimization and be psychologically damaging in general. Public prosecutors state that the right not to be re-traumatized needs to be enforced better. Victims should be protected from questions that are too invasive and personal. Such questions may not be necessary for the procedure, yet have a profound psychological impact on the victim.

“What makes these kinds of cases difficult is that the suspect constructs a completely different image of himself. With that, they also label the victim as a liar and a fraud. That alone is very difficult for the victim to process. In addition to that, very hurtful questions are asked by the suspect's lawyer. Do you like anal sex? How often do you have sex? Did you have sex yesterday? Really, more shameful questions are not possible, so this also contributes to the idea of the victim that she is not believed.” – Public prosecutor

Discontinuation of proceedings

Stakeholders mentioned that when the investigation is ended without finding the perpetrator, this has significant consequences for the victim. As a healthcare provider explains, when victims' cases are discontinued, victims experience it as though the judge perceives their story to be untruthful. If victims are left severely disappointed by the procedures, they may refrain from filing charges in future instances. Furthermore, it is mentioned by stakeholders that these negative experiences with the criminal justice system may serve as a barrier to filing charges for other victims. Victims are often encouraged to file charges and consequently demand an explanation when their cases are discontinued. In addition, they are often left with the belief that police did not devote enough time to their case. Although care providers attempt to explain

the reasoning in a clear manner, this is often not enough for the victim. Victims want to talk to the person that made the decision.

5. Assistance and support

Stakeholders mentioned a variety of problems regarding the assistance and support provided to victims of human trafficking. The way in which assistance and support are experienced by victims is influenced by the psychological health impact of trafficking, culture, and a range of practical issues. Furthermore, problems regarding accommodation and the continuation of procedures seem to negatively affect the therapeutic progress.

Ongoing stressors, re-victimization, and multi-problem victims

One of the issues care providers mention is pregnancy among victims, which is particularly problematic in cases where the baby is conceived out of exploitation or rape. Regarding trauma therapy, pregnancy can result in dilemmas. Although it is preferred to commence trauma therapy, it is noticeable that such therapy can produce more stress within the mother-child relationship.

As previously mentioned, re-victimization is indeed an issue among victims of human trafficking. A mental health professional emphasized that it is important to realize that the biggest risk for re-victimization is in fact persistent PTSD symptoms. Social workers mention that in some cases where victims appear to be doing well and have improved significantly, contact is eventually made with another man.

A care coordinator mentions that working with multi-problem victims also has consequences on the interactions with care providers. It is difficult to make progress in treatment, as when you are facing one thing, another thing often interrupts. For example, you

might be making appointments to address a victim's financial situation, but then when addiction starts causing issues the financial problems are pushed back a few months.

Cultural influences on symptoms and treatment

Cultural aspects also have an influence on the manner in which PTSD is experienced and articulated. A therapist mentioned that some victims may attribute symptoms of PTSD, such as flashbacks, to other phenomena such as demonic possession. From the perspective of the victim, this is a logical explanation and interpretation of this experience and the therapist needs to be able to connect to that worldview. However, at some point the dialogue needs to shift towards therapy. In cases where victims will only accept the traditional treatment, it is difficult to make progress.

Mental health professionals mention observing distinctions between victims from different cultures. In some cultures, the whole concept of trauma and confronting relevant memories does not suit their world view. Furthermore, in some cultures psychiatric treatment is associated with significant stigma.

In the interaction between Dutch healthcare providers and non-Dutch victims culture plays a significant role. Mental health professionals and social workers state that more awareness needs to be created regarding cultural practices among certain groups of victims. Mental health professionals mention that the victims' perspective should be uncovered and that they aim to meet victims in the middle. At the same time they explain the steps that need to be taken whilst giving victims space to adjust to these types of interactions. Social workers outline that currently many mental health professionals are not familiar with human trafficking in general and that this is often the reason why victims do not receive suitable care.

Professionals from an institution that provides treatment to foreign victims mention that cultural sensitivity and awareness of previous experiences should not only be a part of the

development of the actual treatment but should also be present in daily interactions. Some habits and practices that are considered normal in a Dutch context may be misinterpreted by foreign victims.

“As we were dividing some of the tasks such as cleaning up the kitchen after dinner, we noticed that some clients were triggered by this because they interpreted this as forced labor. It came too close to their trauma. We did not even realize that, because it’s so normal here.” – Mental health professional

Background and symptomology

Mental health professionals from different institutions both mention the difficulty regarding the persistent coping mechanisms victims have built up during exploitation. Victims are in a sort of survival mode and it is very difficult to address this. In many cases, these coping mechanisms and the so called ‘survival mode’ is precisely what kept them standing during the period of exploitation. When victims are about to enter the procedures, which have a significant psychological impact also, these survival mechanisms can serve a purpose in order to get through the process.

Adequate assistance for (multi-problem) victims

One problem mentioned by two healthcare providers was the lack of availability of suitable care for multi-problem victims. In cases where there is addiction, (mild) intellectual disability, and psychological problems it can be difficult to find shelters. This means that often victims will be allocated a facility that addresses only one of the problems, such as addiction or psychological problems. A care-coordinator states that it is also more difficult to find shelter after charges are filed for Eastern Europeans and West African victims.

Another obstacle that has been mentioned is the ‘decentralization of care’, which means that victims need to receive care within their own municipality, otherwise they do not receive benefits. Therefore, the quality and type of assistance is dependent on what is available within the municipality.

After being referred to an institution, victims are often placed on a waiting list. Due to these waiting lists it is difficult to provide adequate treatment rapidly and this often worsen victims’ psychological well-being while waiting for treatment. Furthermore, mental health professionals raised the point that victims that are referred to them have often not been provided with sufficient information regarding therapy and what this genuinely entails. For this reason, victims often come in uninformed and anxious due to unclear expectations.

Additionally, mental health professionals mention that it is difficult to treat persistent PTSD symptoms due to a lack of stability regarding stable accommodation and victims being moved around quite frequently.

Revision of residence procedures

An expert from the expertise center for human trafficking mentioned that the regulations around the residence procedures need to be revised as they have remained the same since 2004. Although asylum procedures have changed including more holistic testing and careful screening as to whether victims are psychological able to endure questioning, similar changes have not been implemented in the human trafficking procedures. However, it is mentioned that authorities may be hesitant regarding the implementation of such regulations, due to fears of it becoming a pull force for migration, false testimonies, and abuse of privileges. However, a care coordinator states that those working at a policy level are often not as familiar with what genuinely happens in practice. Currently, many victims apply for residence via asylum procedures even though they are victims of human trafficking.

Functioning as a victim of trafficking

Assistance providers notice that their employees tend to easily underestimate the functional difficulties that victims experience in daily life. Seemingly easy tasks such as opening a bank account may prove to be problematic, not only due to being in a foreign country, but also due to the fact that they will be asked about their personal details at the bank. Furthermore, victims often have large gaps in their CV which may be difficult to explain to potential employers. Care providers have to find a balance as they want to avoid over-dependence of victims on assistance but at the same time to not want to burden them too much.

6. Best practice and suggested improvement

Comprehensive information provision and support

Various stakeholders have mentioned that for all stages of the process (identification, criminal proceedings and assistance and support) there is a need for more adequate and culturally comprehensive information for victims. It has been said that victims should be given more information about each step of each procedure which would allow victims to have a better idea of what to expect. Furthermore, it has been mentioned that there should be specialized information for foreign victims in their own language, but also for victims with (mild) intellectual disabilities and multi-problems.

Additionally, it has been mentioned that victims should more often receive support from a professional who can explain all steps with which victims are confronted. In many of the bigger cases, victims are appointed an advisor or specialized lawyer who provides assistance during the criminal investigations. Considering many of the procedures focus predominantly on the suspect, the appointment of such specialists has been beneficial in the well-being of

victims and in providing guidance and clarity.

Collaboration between stakeholders

Although numerous stakeholders have mentioned increased collaboration and exchange of information between organizations as best practice, stakeholders from several professions have mentioned that better collaboration between assistance providers and law enforcement is still needed. It is said that victims have a tendency to place more trust in assistance providers than in the police.

Furthermore, it is mentioned that assistance providers should be more involved in controls and informative conversations; they give the victim the feeling that they are primarily interested in helping her, rather than investigating her case only.

Less reliance on the victim testimony

Multiple stakeholders outlined that law enforcement needs to move away from relying on the victim testimony. Cases should be solved without even needing charges filed by the victim. There is a responsibility to act not only in relation to the individual victim, but focus should also be placed on the entire criminal network that operates behind this. Whether a victim collaborates with the police should not have to be a relevant factor in all investigations. To move dependence away from the victim testimony it was considered positive to utilize alternative forms of evidence. Conducting financial investigations has aided in identifying and convicting traffickers.

Setting in the courtroom

It is considered to be good practice when closed hearings are held in the setting of a judge commissioner and an investigative judge who conducts the questioning in a less formal setting. Judges are said to be quite mindful regarding the types of questions the victim is asked and intervene in moments where this is necessary. When a victim is not psychologically or cognitively able to be questioned or if inappropriate questions on her private life are asked, her lawyer can object to the questioning. A report of findings is then sent in and further questioning is not necessary.

In an attempt to minimize confrontation with the offender it is beneficial to have separate entrances into the courtroom for the victim and offender or the perpetrator leaves first and the victim last. Although this does not work in all cases, in general it seems to be beneficial. A Lawyer mentioned that avoiding confrontation with the suspect is not beneficial in all cases. In fact, she encourages victims to confront the suspect in order to empower her.

During the proceedings, the victim, friends and family, are informed that they can leave the proceedings if they feel the need to do so at any point. The fact that this is emphasized in the courtroom allows the freedom for those who are most affected to determine their own needs in the process.

In cases where contact needs to be minimized video and audio recordings are regularly used in order to avoid secondary victimization. These developments are mentioned to be very beneficial for both the investigation and victim. Recordings allow law enforcement to have the testimony available even in cases where the victim may withdraw or disappear. Moreover, it also minimizes the need for repeated questioning and questions as the recordings can be consulted instead.

Personal approach

Stakeholders from various professional backgrounds have highlighted the importance of a personal approach in the interaction with victims. One law enforcement professional articulates the importance of a personal approach as follows:

“As a police officer you really have to prove yourself once you have made steps gaining their trust. That means you should sometimes call the victim, visit them in the shelter, show up at hearings, and letting them know that they can contact you if they have any questions. We realize very well that it is difficult to file charges and to participate in the criminal proceedings. They should not have to carry this burden by themselves.”

Assistance providers state that it seems to work positively to operate at the victim’s pace. As everything is new to them, these assistance providers aim to provide enough space and cancel appointments whenever the victims are not ready. Social workers also describe that victims seem to appreciate noticeable acts of kindness such as accompanying them to doctor appointments. Such undertakings all facilitate a more positive relationship between the facilities and victims.

Culturally comprehensive treatment

Culture plays a significant role in the interpretation of the care and therapy provided. In general, culture seems to be an overarching complication during all phases of contact between victims and institutions. It is for this reason that a culturally comprehensive treatment plan is needed for each group of victims without seeming to force Western Ideals upon them.

Training

Trainings regarding ways in which to guarantee victim well-being could be an efficient tool in minimizing the negative psychological consequences experienced by victims. It seems that among stakeholders, there is an openness towards trainings and suggestions. Trainings were also mentioned as being insightful in the past. For example, stakeholders from the immigration and naturalization services mentioned that during a “human trafficking day”, they became more exposed to the victim perspective on the process. These stakeholders stated that, although they seek a balance between objective information and the vulnerabilities of victims, their work is rather focused on objective facts such as names, dates, and times. However, during this training they were shown that victims have issues accessing and articulating such memories. The transferring of such vital information can have significant practical implications in the process and benefit everyone involved.