

Psychological Health Impact of Human Trafficking

Victims' Perspectives

Leyla Khadraoui

Floris de Meijer

Conny Rijken ¹



Co-funded by
the European Union

¹ We thank FIER for the data collection and furthermore we thank students Alexis Reed and Shirley Remonato for support with data processing.

1. Introduction and Methodology

This chapter describes an essential perspective on the psychological health impact of trafficking: the victim perspective. In this study, victims of human trafficking do not only provide an insight into the direct psychological health impact of human trafficking and their experiences with service providers during and after their victimization. They also share how these experiences influence their lives today.

A total of fifteen female victims of sexual exploitation were interviewed in the Netherlands. The recruitment of the participants took place via the organizations from which the participant received assistance.

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. Among other topics, participants were informed about the content of the interview, the possibility to cease participation at any time, and about their privacy. In order to guarantee full comprehension of the information and purpose of the study, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form. As an incentive for participation, a €30,- cash voucher was given before the interview.

The questionnaire contained the following chapters: socio-demographical information, experiences prior to the situation of exploitation, experiences regarding the trafficking and/or sexual exploitation (including contact with police and criminal justice services), present time, and a severity scale of symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It furthermore contained an English or Dutch version of the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire Revised (HTQ-R), which is a 40-item questionnaire, used for identifying symptoms of PTSD that were experienced by the participants in the week prior to the interview. The HTQ-R contains 16 items that assess

the severity of PTSD symptoms (1-4 scale) according to DSM-IV criteria. A mean score on these items of 2.5 or higher is seen as a clinically significant indicator of PTSD. The structure of this chapter will broadly follow the structure of the questionnaire. The majority of the interviews (except for one due to privacy concerns) have been audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were thematically analyzed using ATLAS.ti.

2. Sociodemographic information

A total of fifteen women participated in this study with a mean age of 28.33 years old (range 18-45). The five participants that make up the West-African group originate from Nigeria, Ghana, Congo and Guinea and had a mean age of 29.6 years old. The Eastern-European group consists of four participants originating from Romania and Hungary and had a mean age of 27.3 years old. The group of Dutch nationals contains six participants with a mean age of 28 years old.

2.1 Education

With regard to the level of studies completed by participants it is seen that this is lowest among the West-African participants of whom three had not received any form of education, due to poverty and circumstances. Furthermore it is seen across all groups that adverse childhood experiences or sexual exploitation have affected motivation, capacity and access to education. However, seven participants have returned to school and were receiving an education in the period the research was conducted. Furthermore, the West-African and Eastern-European participants were following Dutch language courses.

2.2 Current living circumstances

The majority of the participants received some form of financial or housing support. The data suggests that those who are currently living independently are more likely to consider their income

to be insufficient as they can only just cover basic necessities. The presence of children in their household seems to contribute to this assessment. Interestingly, when discussing romantic relationships some of the victims explicitly mention not wanting to live in the same house as their (future) boyfriend as they would like to maintain a sense of independence.

2.2.1 Residency

The Eastern-European participants originate from EU-Member States and therefore did not have to apply for asylum or a residence permit in the Netherlands. However, the West-African participants do not automatically have the right to remain in the Netherlands legally and therefore had to apply for residency and/or asylum procedures. All five West-Africans have been in the B8-procedure which is described by a Nigerian victim as follows:

“After the interview with the police you get a stay until they have caught the people. So it is the period that you have to wait, that is the stay.”

However, if there are insufficient investigative indicators the criminal procedure will be discontinued and the B8 permit will be withdrawn. One of the West-African victims was granted asylum after the discontinuation of the criminal proceedings, due to the dangerous circumstances in her country of origin. For two of the West-African victims, the B8 procedure was still ongoing at the time the study was conducted and two have been denied asylum and were unable to understand their current legal status as it was too complicated.

3. Experiences prior to the situation of exploitation.

3.1 Childhood experiences and potential risk factors

In this section, the childhood experiences and potential risk factors for exploitation will be discussed in general. However, emphasis will be placed on the distinguishable patterns and similarities between the three groups.

The women consulted in this research all seemed to have a background that contained a significant amount of hardship, which led to half of the respondents assessing their childhood as ‘bad’. When articulating perceptions of their childhood, all participants addressed family dynamics, which seems to be an important factor in the assessment of childhood for all groups of participants. Five participants mentioned living separated from their parents at some point during their childhood. Two of the West-African women resided within the home of strangers or relatives as servants, two of the Eastern-European women were brought to children’s homes and one of the Dutch victims was taken into a foster family.

Furthermore, at least twelve participants explicitly mention behaviors displayed by their parent(s) that contain elements of inadequate parenting. Examples hereof are unsupervised exposure to (potentially) dangerous adults, physical and emotional abuse and neglect. Generally it seems that parents were preoccupied with several stressors such as poverty, war and conflict and also psychological issues of their own which appears to have decreased their ability to adequately take care of their children. Although family factors have been mentioned by all groups, it seems that the Eastern-European and Dutch women more often mention unstable family dynamics as an important factor while negatively assessing their childhood. Four Dutch victims mention that the lack of emotional availability of their parents was due to parental psychopathologies such as depression, PTSD, personality disorders or substance abuse.

Some participants also mentioned having experienced sexual abuse and rape during their childhood. These experiences have been articulated mostly by the majority of the Dutch participants. Three Dutch victims mentioned that they were sexually assaulted over an extended period of time by non-related adults who were close to them. During this period these women were constantly threatened, which had a severe impact on the participants' well-being, as they mention dissociation, suicidal ideation, drug use and absence from school as consequences. Furthermore, two of these women mention that they were looking for a father figure when they were teens, as a result of their negative experiences.

Another important factor that comes forward with regard to childhood assessment and vulnerability to exploitation is poverty, which seems to have been more prevalent among the West-African and Eastern-European women. In the narratives of the West-African women, poverty affected their access to basic necessities such as food and education. In these cases poverty has also led to child labor and forced marriage.

Ghanaian victim: "From the beginning, my parents haven't had any money. Not at all. So things were not easy for us. They said that he would come take me and put me in school so that he would take good care of me. But it did not go that way at all. I had to become a maid. The woman, her seven children and the whole family- I served them."

Eastern-European women describe poverty in the sense that they did not have access to much more than just the necessities.

The Dutch participants generally seemed to be aware of the impact of negative childhood experiences on vulnerability to become a victim of exploitation. Suffering from low self-esteem seems to be a common vulnerability factor for these women.

Dutch victim: “Throughout my whole childhood my mother told me that I was worthless. Because of this, I always wanted others to like me and I never learned to stand up for myself.”

Vulnerability factors	
West-African	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Political conflict in her country, divorce of her parents, abandonment by her mother, murder of her father and brother and later imprisonment due to corrupt police. ▪ Growing up with aunt who treated her like a slave and forced her to marry an old man before the age of 18 who abused her. ▪ Living in poverty. ▪ Previous childhood labor trafficking experiences, living in poverty and the death of her parents and husband.
Eastern-European	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Being abandoned by her mother and guardian when she was a child. ▪ Being pregnant before the age of 16.
Dutch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sexual abuse by teacher before age of 12, fights and divorce of parents. Was taking care of her parents and was looking for a father figure. ▪ Stopped going to school after the age of 14 out of fear of bullies. Was often called a whore by her social surroundings including her father. ▪ Has been raped by a stranger before the age of 10. The rape changed her perspective on sex. ▪ Sexual abuse and exploitation in her childhood, living with a foster family and emotionally unavailable parents. ▪ Emotionally unavailable parents/ mother and personality traits as a consequence hereof (2).

4. Trafficking & Sexual Exploitation.

In the second part of the interview victims were asked about their experiences with trafficking and sexual exploitation. Not all participants were asked the same questions due to the sensitivity of the subject.

4.1 Contact and offer

The previous section uncovered the range of vulnerabilities that emerged out of the early life paths of the victims of human trafficking included in this research. These vulnerabilities all seem to be trigger the offer provided to them by traffickers, which leads to these victims being exploited. It seems like West-African women were more often in a position in which staying in the country of origin would likely lead to death or severe adversity. Therefore, these women did not need extensive convincing and deceiving to agree upon the offer. In case of the Eastern-European and Dutch women (faked) romantic relationships with the trafficker are more prevalent. With the latter group it appears that traffickers gradually let women become accustomed to the idea of working in prostitution while slowly pushing their boundaries. Throughout the process these traffickers invest in creating a dependent relationship with the woman during which she is made to believe in a better future with the trafficker. In these cases, deception and methods of manipulation continued throughout the exploitation.

Offer and expectations	
West-African	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ She was in prison where she was tortured and raped. A stranger saved her life and offered her safety. She did not realize what was happening and had no other options. ▪ She was living in severe poverty when she was offered to work in a hair salon in Europe, she expected to make good money with this job. ▪ After escaping forced marriage, a white man offered to marry her and take care of her and her children in the Netherlands. ▪ She escaped from her abusive husband and a stranger saved her life. She did not realize what was happening and had no other options.
Eastern-European	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Her boyfriend offered to move to the Netherlands where she would work in a restaurant. She expected to live with him and start a family in the Netherlands. ▪ Her boyfriend initially told her she would work in a restaurant in Germany but eventually told her she would only work in prostitution for a year so they would start a family together. ▪ A stranger approached her she could become rich because she was so sexy. He promised to take care of her so she did not expect to work in prostitution.
Dutch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ She was offered a relationship in which he would keep her safe. She expected a nice and good life with him. ▪ Her boyfriend offered her a future but to stay together she had to work in prostitution during weekends because of the debt he created in her name. ▪ She expected to make easy money working in prostitution. She did not expect to be exploited (2). ▪ She was raped, blackmailed and forced into prostitution at the age of 13 years old. ▪ After an incident, her mother called the trafficker that he could come pick her up at the age of 16 years old.

4.2 Conditions of human trafficking

The following section will describe the manner in which the exploitation was conducted, with reference to their journey, the conditions in which these victims were exploited and in some cases, the debt which was bestowed upon them. On average the victims who participated in this study were sexually exploited for a period of 49 months.

It can be safely stated that the majority of the victims have been threatened, physically and sexually abused and manipulated. Furthermore, victims mention that threats of violence against others were used as another strategy. Generally, none of the victims was able to keep a fair share of the money and in most cases they were not allowed to keep any money at all. As the exploitation often lasted for an extended period, many of the participants, in particular the Dutch, have worked

in several locations. The hours of work seem to vary, however the majority of the respondents had to work each day of the week and were not able to take a break when they wanted to. Victims from all groups have been deprived of their passports or at least occasionally locked up by the trafficker.

There seems to be a difference between the methods of control that were used between the group of West-African victims on one side and Eastern-European and Dutch victims on the other side. As the West-African victims seemed to have been in a situation in which they had little options for survival prior to the trafficking, it appears that methods of deception were less necessary in order to convince these women. All West Africans that were interviewed in this research were almost immediately aware that they were going to be exploited upon their point of arrival in the Netherlands. Furthermore, three West-African women were confronted with unexpected debt upon their arrival. Additionally, the use of voodoo rituals was mentioned by West-African participants

Congolese victim: "They told me: I helped you out of your country, because people wanted to kill you, and then you have to work for me. The money is not for you, the money is for me. The money goes away from you it goes to me. I also need money, for you to come here"

During the exploitation, the deception of the Eastern-European and Dutch victims continued in order to maintain control over them. Contrary to the West-African women, in the case of the Eastern-European and Dutch victims it often seems like they were technically able to go out and contact others but that they were either completely isolated from their friends and family or that they were under constant control of the trafficker.

Although there seem to be differences with regard to how the exploitation started, it seems that the conditions of exploitation do not vary to the same extent between the groups of victims.

However, as the majority of the Eastern-European and Dutch participants were in a relationship with the trafficker, this relationship that the trafficker maintained throughout the exploitation, is an essential element regarding the methods of control used to maintain the situation of exploitation. The Eastern-European and Dutch victims all mention being physically abused by their trafficker whilst at the same time being in love with him. These traffickers would often promise them that their work in prostitution was only a temporary solution until they had sufficient financial means to start a family together.

5. The end of exploitation

In this section the end of exploitation will be discussed, whereby emphasis will be placed on detection and contact with professionals. It appears that West-African participants were more often exploited in underground prostitution during which they were unable to communicate with others such as the police. Although they seemed to have self-identified as victims, they were never identified as such by police or other professionals because they were generally not confronted with this opportunity. Furthermore, it came forward that across all groups there was a lack of awareness with regard to the available services for support.

5.1 Failure to detect

Victims in both the Eastern-European and Dutch group mention various instances in which stakeholders failed to identify them as victims of trafficking and consequently failed to intervene. It seems that especially the Dutch victims have been in touch with professionals such as teachers, police and healthcare providers most frequently during their exploitation compared to the other groups.

5.1.1 Assistance providers

One Eastern-European victim mentions that child protection services offered her an opportunity to leave to a safe location with her children but without her boyfriend (trafficker). As she was still in love with the trafficker, she declined the assistance that was offered to her. She wishes somebody would have explained the situation to her in a way that would have made her realize the gravity of the situation. Two of the Dutch victims mention that they appreciated the straightforward approach and the pressure that was put on them by an organization (Veilig Thuis) because they would not have agreed to receiving help if they had not pressured them to this extent.

Dutch victim: “That woman told me that my options were simple. I would either choose to be with my boyfriend and I would be separated from my child or I would choose for myself and I would be in a safe location together with my child and we could be happy together. The choice is yours, she said. I was happy she said it in such a direct way because it actually got through to me this way. She made me realize that these were the only options. That same day my child and I went to a safe shelter.”

5.1.2 School

Three of the Dutch victims mention that they attended school during the period of exploitation. In two of these cases, the school employees were not paying sufficient attention to the well-being of the students.

Dutch victim: “They were so preoccupied with how they were performing as teachers that they did not pay enough attention to students.”

Another Dutch victim however, did inform a school teacher about some of the problems she was experiencing. The school teacher reacted in an intense and unregulated manner and almost cried when confronted by the victim. She felt as though she could not tell him what she was really experiencing as he would not be able to handle it.

5.1.3 Police

One of the Dutch victims was invited to the police station for a conversation due to suspicions of sexual exploitation. However, during the conversation, they failed to inform her regarding the safety that they could provide her if she disclosed that she was being exploited. Consequently, the victim felt too afraid to inform the police about her situation as she felt that she may face severe repercussions for doing so.

Dutch victim: “One time, I needed to come to the police. Because they could tell that something was not right. But they never told me that if I told them what was happening to me that I could go to a safe shelter, or a women’s refuge. They never said anything like that, so I was far too scared to admit anything. Because in my head I was thinking, soon I will walk back to them, and then I will have a massive problem. So I would have really liked it if they had said to me ‘that they would immediately remove me from the situation’.”

Another Dutch victim also reported that the police failed to detect the true nature of her situation. Due to the violent relationship with the trafficker, the police were quite involved in their lives. She states that the police perceived it more as a domestic violence context, and did not investigate whether there was more at play. Due to the trafficker framing the situation as if she was the perpetrator of domestic violence, she felt as though the police approached her in a way that made

her feel unequal and did not feel as though she was taken seriously. Consequently, during the exploitation she did not have trust in the police.

An Eastern-European victim stated that the police were aware of the situation she was in. However, during that time she was unaware herself that she was being exploited by her own partner. At the time of the interview she still could not understand why the police did not intervene earlier.

Hungarian victim: “The police actually knew that my ex was smart about these things. I did not know what he was doing to me and that is was not right. They should have helped me then. They did not give me enough information and the Hungarian translator was talking to me in a demeaning way.”

5.1.4 Healthcare professionals

One of the Dutch victims had been in touch with several health care providers during the period in which she was trafficked. The weight loss that was a consequence of the traffickers’ punishments (no work = no food) was mistaken for an eating disorder for which she was treated by a psychologist for at least six months. Similarly, another Dutch victim had also been receiving treatment by her general practitioner during the exploitation. She often received treatment for sexually transmitted diseases and told her doctor that she was being raped regularly by her boyfriend. Furthermore, she mentioned that she was being sexually exploited. Although her general practitioner wrote this down in her medical file and told her to go to the police, he did not undertake any other action himself. The victim, however, is satisfied with her doctor because he did listen to her story, which was sufficient for her at the time.

5.2 Escape

With regard to the escape out of exploitation it was seen that West-African victims all individually realized that they were being exploited and that this should be reported to the police. Interestingly, this is not the case for the other two groups of victims. Regarding the Eastern European group, the victims often did not identify as victims of human trafficking. Therefore, they did not self-report and the police had to illuminate to them that the exploitation was indeed taking place. The manner in which the exploitation actually ended varies among the Dutch respondents. Some were able to escape out of their own initiative after realizing the gravity of the situation. Others were saved out of the exploitation by family members, assistance workers, or police officials who were eventually able to convince these women that they were in a situation of exploitation.

5.3 Criminal proceedings and immigration

As mentioned in the section addressing the manner in which the exploitation ended, the police have played a positive role in some of the trafficking narratives of the victims consulted in this research. However, other victims outlined negative aspects of their interactions with stakeholders also. In this section, interactions with law enforcement, criminal justice, and immigration stakeholders will be discussed from the moment the participants escaped the exploitation.

5.3.1 Police

It is seen that all West-African and Eastern-European victims have cooperated with the police by filing a report, which may be due to assistance being dependent on their cooperation. Generally, the West-African victims seem to be quite pleased with the interaction with the police and emphasize that they were not at all like the police in their own country. A Nigerian victim also

mentioned that she was particularly scared because a Voodoo spell had been laid upon her during a ritual. The police was unable to understand this fear, a Nigerian victim says, because they were not raised with these beliefs.

In the case of the Eastern-European and Dutch victims it appears that the police had to put in more effort to establish a relationship of trust. A fair amount of victims mention that they were initially unwilling to cooperate with the police.

Romanian victim: "I didn't trust the police when they were saying that my boyfriend was using me. They made me realize that my boyfriend was always only interested in the money and never asked me if I was okay. Then I thought: the police are right. Maybe I was blind because I was loving him."

Generally it seems that it was emotionally difficult for the victims to answer all the questions from the police.

Nigerian victim: "I did not know anything. I could not tell them from which place I fled because I did not know anything in the Netherlands. I also could not tell them how I exactly came to the Netherlands. I did not know what was going to happen to me and additionally I was very stressed so I did not pay attention to all the details during this period."

Some mention that the police have explained all information in a comprehensive way and were friendly and empathetic. However, two Dutch victims mention they did not experience sufficient empathy from the police, resulting in a negative experience at the time. One of the Dutch victims mentions that she had been told her whole life that people would never believe her if she would ever tell them about the things that happened to her. When she finally arrived at the police station,

she felt like the officers asked questions in a condescending way, which confirmed her internalized beliefs of not being believed.

Dutch victim: “They really asked me ‘how did YOU end up in this situation? Why were you there? What were you doing? It really felt like they were blaming me for what happened.’”

Furthermore, victims from all three groups found it difficult that they had to provide the police with evidence, which they did not have. In some of the cases, this has been the reason for the discontinuation of the police investigation. Although West-African victims were pleased with how they were treated by the police, they were disappointed that their information did not contain sufficient investigative indications to continue criminal investigations.

5.3.2 Participation in criminal proceedings

A complaint that is mentioned by all groups of victims is a lack of information with regard to the proceedings and their rights as victims of human trafficking. One of the Dutch victims mentions that she did not go to any of the court sessions because she did not want to be confronted with the offender. Furthermore, she mentions that at the time she was unaware of regulations regarding compensation and other measures that are possible to protect victims during court sessions. She says that she may have participated more if she would have been aware of these measures. However, she adds that there is a chance that she was indeed provided with all the information, but that she could not process all of it at the time.

Hungarian victim: “I was a woman working in prostitution in the Netherlands but nobody told me that I could get a lawyer or that I could stop doing this work, even if I did not have any money. Nobody came to me with any advice or information.

Nobody stood up for my rights. I had to stand up for the rights I did not even know I had.”

Generally, it seems to come forward that there is a lack of transparency regarding the progression of the proceedings. Victims would like to be informed about what to expect and which would be the next steps. Furthermore, some victims have mentioned that their lawyer did not understand her enough and failed to obtain and provide sufficient information regarding her case.

Romanian victim : “These criminal investigations and proceedings are moving too slowly. I understand that the judge is busy, but this is taking a lot of time. I hardly ever get answers to my questions. What is going to happen to the guy? What is going on? Why is it taking so much time? What is going to happen next? I have a lot of questions and not even my lawyer can answer me.”

5.3.3 Asylum

It seems that the asylum procedures are confusing for most of the West-African participants and furthermore cause a lot of stress. A Nigerian victim was informed about her case being discontinued via a letter, which was very unsettling for her because she did not understand what the next steps would be. The fact that her case was discontinued had serious consequences for her residency and her lawyer made an objection to the immigration services. The result of the objection was negative, however her lawyer failed to inform her about this. Furthermore, victims experience a lack of understanding and empathy from employees who work for the Dutch immigration services. At the time of the interviews, two of the West-African victims were still in the B8-procedure, which means that the investigation and the criminal case were ongoing. The criminal cases and investigations of the other victims seem to have all been discontinued due to a lack of investigative indications.

6. Consequences of human trafficking

In this chapter a brief overview will be given of the consequences of trafficking that were experienced by the participants in the period right after escaping the exploitation. These questions were asked in terms of symptoms, however the victims' narratives suggest that the consequences of trafficking exceed these symptoms *as it had a big influence on daily life.*

6.1 Somatic symptoms

Some of the somatic symptoms that were mentioned by participants appear to be a direct consequence of the conditions in which they were exploited. For example, two victims mention having spots on their skin due to a lack of exposure to daylight. Furthermore, some somatic symptoms appear to be direct consequences of the physical and sexual abuse such as pain and infections in the reproductive organs. However, a majority of the somatic symptoms that were mentioned appear to be due to psychological suffering. Headaches, fatigue, loss of appetite, breathing difficulties, memory problems and muscular pain all seem to be related to the stress that was experienced by these victims after their escape.

Romanian victim: "I still find it difficult to eat because I'm always thinking about how stupid I was."

6.2 Psychological symptoms

The psychological symptoms that were experienced right after trafficking are clustered as follows: anxiety, depression, hostility and traumatic stress. The symptoms belonging to anxiety and traumatic stress were most often reported by all participants.

6.2.1 Anxiety

With regard to anxiety it seen that the majority of the victims have experienced panic attacks after the exploitation ended. Furthermore a general sense of fearfulness and restlessness is reported by these victims. The anxiety that was experienced by these victims led to breathing difficulties such as hyperventilation or ‘forgetting to breathe’ due to tension in the body.

6.2.2 Depression

Sadness and feelings of worthlessness were most frequently reported when depressive symptoms were discussed. The majority of the West-African and Dutch respondents also mention a sense of hopelessness for the future and general apathy. All three West-African participants who were asked these questions mentioned that they were having suicidal thoughts during the period after their escape. A Congolese victim mentions that she tried committing suicide whilst in the shelter.

Congolese victim: “I was always sad and always crying. One day I grabbed a knife and took it to my room to commit suicide. I was too tired and I was always thinking about my problems.”

These suicidal thoughts have also been reported by four Dutch respondents and three of the Dutch respondents have actually done a suicide attempt at some point after their escape. These symptoms of depression such as suicidal ideation and a lack of interest in things after the end of the exploitation have not been reported by the Eastern-European respondents. However, some of these respondents did mention experiencing feelings of depression, a lack of will to live and feelings of hopelessness while the exploitation lasted.

6.2.3 Hostility

The majority of respondents mentioned feeling easily irritated or frustrated after the exploitation ended. However, other symptoms of hostility were primarily reported by Dutch participants who

experienced the urge to hurt people or break things. Furthermore, these Dutch participants also experienced outbursts of anger that were not easily controlled. About this topic a Dutch victim mentions *“I was just constantly defiant, angry and scared and at that time I found it really difficult to calm down and control my emotions.”*

6.2.4 Traumatic stress

Symptoms of a traumatic stress disorder have been mentioned the most by all participants. These symptoms entail experiencing flashbacks, avoidance of stimuli that remind them of the traumatic experience, not being able to recall facts or events that happened in the past and hypervigilance.

Dutch victim: “I believe in hindsight that I was physically safe after I escaped the exploitation, but even when I was safe I did not feel safe. It took a long time for me to actually experience a feeling of safety. I would always be alert for any danger.”

6.3 More than just symptoms

The exploitation of the women who participated in this study lasted more than 4 years on average. During this extended period of time, these women were exposed to numerous trafficker strategies such as the use of drugs as a way of making them endure the work for a longer time. However, some participants also mention taking these drugs voluntarily as a coping strategy to deal with negative emotions. Therefore, many participants had to rehabilitate from addiction to substances after escaping the exploitation. Furthermore, the dependent relationships that were used by traffickers as a way to control these victims have led a number of victims to return to their trafficker after the exploitation ended. Another way in which the traffickers’ strategies contribute to problems that are experienced by victims is by reinforcing their low self-esteem. Many of the

victims have mentioned they feel personal responsibility for their sexual exploitation and blame themselves for what happened.

Additionally, the exploitation has had an influence in the daily lives of victims on numerous aspects. Some victims who were minors while the exploitation started have not been able to finish school. Furthermore, due to the victims being isolated from their friends and family throughout the exploitation, many lacked social support after the exploitation ended.

For the West-African and Eastern-European victims, the exploitation also entailed being moved to another country with a different language and culture. Not only did they have to adjust to the circumstances in the Netherlands, they were also often separated from their parents and children.

7. Assistance

Regarding the assistance that was provided to participants immediately after leaving the exploitation it appears that the majority of the West-African and Eastern-European victims were placed in (specialized) shelters during the reflection period. The aforementioned groups most often reported being in need of accommodation after the exploitation ended, whereas this was only reported by half of the Dutch participants. It appears that the presence of a social network influences this phenomenon as well as the fact that assistance and protection is often provided under the B8-procedure which is not applicable to Dutch victims. A remarkable finding is the reported need for psychological support and trauma treatment after the exploitation ended, as this has only been mentioned by Eastern-European and Dutch participants but not at all by any of the West-African participants.

For the West-African and Eastern-European victims it seems like assistance mostly entails having a lawyer and having been in a shelter where they provided her with money or food, a place to sleep and some practical assistance. These victims generally mention receiving integral support that covers all of the abovementioned needs. A few of the West-Africans mention having received psychotherapy for their trauma, which they considered to be very useful. However, it seems like some of the West-African participants find certain aspects of assistance difficult to comprehend, which is articulated by one of the victims as follows:

Guinean victim: "What I don't like is that people will only talk to you if you have an appointment. If you don't have an appointment they will not come to you or ask you how you are."

What seems to come forward in the Dutch group of victims is that there is a lack of specialized institutions for female victims of trafficking. One Dutch victim, for example, has been to at least four different psychologists who all had to refer her to another institution due to a lack of expertise on their behalf.

Dutch victim: "One time, I was with a psychologist and I told him my story. At the end of the appointment he listed all my problems and said 'with which one do you need my help?'. I found that very strange, I don't just have one thing that I need help for, I need help with all the issues he mentioned."

Not only was it emotionally draining for her to tell her story from the beginning to different people each time, there was also a gap between these short periods of assistance during which she was left without any assistance at all.

By those victims who have been able to receive adequate assistance in specialized centers it is also mentioned that frequent changes in staff members and psychologists were difficult for them as they had to establish new bonds each time. It seems that generally in the beginning of starting treatment, the motivation of these victims can be fairly low. Multiple victims mentioned that they would have appreciated more initiative, effort and pressure from the assistance providers to enhance their motivation for therapy.

Dutch victim: "It wasn't the case that I did not want to put in effort to make my treatment work, I just could not do it anymore. I was emotionally drained and I felt like my life was worthless. They said I was not motivated and told me they could not help me anymore and that I had one week to leave the institution."

This Dutch victim mentions that when she lost her motivation, the assistance workers should have put in more effort to figure out why she wasn't motivated anymore. This is also mentioned by another Dutch victim, who says that psychologists and assistance providers should ask more questions. She explains that she has never been honest about her problems because nobody ever asked her.

Aside from pressure and effort from these assistance providers, it seems like these victims also needed clear and strict guidelines with regard to what to do and how to live their daily lives. It seems like these victims have appreciated or would have appreciated strictness when it comes to assistance, which is articulated as follows:

Dutch victim: "I think in the beginning it is really good for these victims that the department is so strict and that they take away your phone and just tell you what you can and cannot do. In the beginning you're in a very unstable situation and

you simply can't make these decisions on your own. But at a certain point they just tell you that you should learn how to make your own decisions."

However the transition from one department with a lot of structure and strict behavioral guidelines to another department with more independence seems to go too quickly according to the interviewees. They mention that especially in the beginning they needed clear guidelines and found it difficult to deal with all the independence they were given so suddenly.

8. Current situation

8.1 Psychological consequences and ongoing stressors

Many of the psychological symptoms that were experienced by victims right after leaving the trafficking situation are still present to this day. It appears that it was sometimes difficult for participants to distinguish the symptoms they've experienced after their escape and the symptoms that are still experienced in the present. Symptoms such as difficulty focusing or sustaining attention have been mentioned frequently by participants in all groups. These difficulties sometimes make it challenging to fulfill daily tasks, and can be considered functional impairments in some cases.

Generally it seems like the Eastern-European and more particularly the Dutch victims are mostly preoccupied with the psychological consequences of the exploitation. All Dutch victims of whom the exploitation ended less than 4 years ago all met the DSM-IV cut-off score for PTSD. With regard to experiencing symptoms after escaping exploitation a Dutch victim mentions: *"It feels like being out of the exploitation is sometimes worse than being in it."* Multiple Dutch victims mention that since they've been able to escape the exploitation, they find it difficult to have a purpose in life. They mention that they would like to lead a normal life, but have no idea how this can be achieved. The continuing fear and lack of trust in others seems to have an effect on the

social and romantic lives of these women, who appear to have a lack of social contacts. The majority of the Dutch victims still report experiencing panic attacks frequently, especially when confronted with stimuli that bring back traumatic memories. Although experiencing a lack of safety can be a part of a PTSD, it seems that at least one of the Dutch victims is currently still in danger because of the traffickers. Apart from possible retaliation from the trafficker, it seems that some of the victims have also been victimized by others. One victim, for example, mentions that she has had several other sexual experiences in which her boundaries were not respected or completely ignored: *“Apparently no does not mean no when I say it”*. She is still struggling with suicidal thoughts on a daily basis.

The West-African participants however, more often report a need for (adequate) accommodation and a need to work. Generally, they also mention that they are currently experiencing a lot of stress due to uncertainty with regard to immigration procedures and fear of repatriation. None of the four West-African participants met the cut-off score for PTSD during the interview. However, as follows from the citations below, clear indicators of posttraumatic stress can be identified. Out of five participants who did meet the criteria, four were Dutch and one was Eastern-European. For one of the victims it seemed that her criminal investigation will be discontinued soon, which means that she would likely be sent back to Guinea. This causes a lot of stress and her symptoms are increasing due to the instability of the situation. Going back to Guinea scares her a lot because she is sure that the traffickers will track her down, find her and kill her.

Guinean victim: “If the IND tells me that I have to go back I will kill myself here in the Netherlands. Because I know that if I return either the trafficker will kill me or I’ll live on the streets and somebody else will kill me. Sometimes I feel like a burden to the Netherlands because they keep telling me that I have to go back.

Each time they say that I just want to die. When you're dead everything is gone. All your problems are gone. All your pain is gone. All the sadness is gone."

What comes forward in all groups of victims is the need for distraction from their problems. They often start thinking about their past and current problems and mention that they have a need to engage in activities to distract them from their problems.

Ghanaian victim: "I'm always having these negative thoughts and blaming myself. If I would be working, I wouldn't be thinking about these things because my mind would be occupied with work."

Furthermore, self-blame is encountered in all groups. Although the degree to which these women place the responsibility for what happened to them varies, they do mention that they still blame themselves.

Romanian victim: "My mother tells me that it is not my fault what happened to me. But I know better; it is my fault. It's my fault because I was stupid. It was not my ex-boyfriend who was stupid, but me."

Loneliness, anger, frustration and suicidal ideation are currently experienced by the majority of the West-African and Dutch respondents. Furthermore, two of the West-African victims describe symptoms that seem to resemble dissociation whereby they sometimes suddenly find themselves on the streets, seemingly without any idea how they ended up there. They attribute this to their previous trafficking experiences, but mention they mostly experience this when they are confronted with a lot of stress.

9. Moving forward

As mentioned before, many of the participants from all groups experience a need for distraction. It seems that for all groups seeking distraction from their thoughts and feelings is a frequently used coping mechanism. Distraction seems to be found in work, school, children and pets. One of the Dutch respondents mentions that she sometimes does her homework twice, just to keep herself busy. Participants with children mention explicitly that they experience a lot of comfort from their children. Although providing for children is sometimes considered a stressor, it seems like they provide a lot of distraction. It helps these women to prioritize their children's needs.

With regard to pets it seems like they provide a lot of emotional support to some of the victims who mention that they either talk to their pets about their problems or experience a sense of self-worth by being able to take care of their pets. Religion and music seem to be the most important coping strategies for the West-African participants. They either play music themselves or listen to (gospel) music at home or at the church. Furthermore, prayer and visiting church is often mentioned by these women.

During the interviews, the victims were asked what accomplishments they are proud of. Although initially, this question appeared difficult for them to answer, the majority of them was able to mention an accomplishment they were proud of. Those participants with children all initially mentioned being proud of their children. When looking at the answers of all participants it becomes clear that they are proud of their ability to overcome their problems and continue their lives.

Furthermore, participants were asked what they wanted for their future. Although these answers vary slightly more, it seems that the majority of the participants wants to lead an independent life which they want to share with family, partners or pets. Some of the participants

have also been inspired by their experiences and want to dedicate their future to helping other victims of sexual exploitation.