

Sex Trafficking in Mexico: Perpetrators' Profile

La trata sexual en México: el perfil de los victimarios

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to examine the profile of the perpetrators; it is based on detailed interviews with 75 migrant women victims of sex trafficking in Mexico. The results of this study present a masculinized profile. The perpetrators who lead trafficking networks are predominantly men, while female perpetrators generally take up secondary positions and in many cases are coerced. Women in leadership positions accounted for only 5% of all cases studied. Furthermore, the acts of migrant women in secondary positions were the result of a situation of trafficking. By contrast, the actions of autochthonous women in secondary positions appeared to be motivated for profit.

Key words: migrant women, sex trafficking, perpetrators, organized crime, Mexico.

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo, sustentado en entrevistas en profundidad con 75 mujeres migrantes víctimas de trata sexual en México, es examinar el perfil de los victimarios. Los resultados de la investigación muestran un perfil básicamente masculinizado. Quienes lideran las redes de trata son casi siempre hombres, mientras que las mujeres victimarias por lo general ocupan posiciones secundarias y en muchos casos son coaccionadas. Las mujeres que tenían posiciones de liderazgo representaban únicamente 5% del total de los casos estudiados. Por otra parte, los actos de las mujeres migrantes que ocupaban posiciones secundarias eran resultado de una situación de trata. Como contraste, los actos de las mujeres autóctonas en estas mismas posiciones estaban motivados por el lucro.

Palabras clave: mujeres migrantes, trata sexual, victimarios, delincuencia organizada, México.



Introduction¹

The Palermo Protocol defines sex trafficking according to three elements: the action, the means, and the purpose. The means is the threat, force, and other forms of coercion or the abuse of power or of a situation of vulnerability. Therefore, the presence of the means implies the annulment of the victim's consent. Mexico incorporated the Palermo Protocol into its legal system through the 2007 Law to Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons. This law was criticized for not including the irrelevance of consent clause, because this favoured the acquittal of the perpetrators. In response to this criticism, in 2012 Mexico passed the General Law to Prevent, Punish and Eradicate Crimes related to Trafficking in Persons. In the new law the means disappears completely (Acharya *et al.*, 2016: 15), since the consent granted by the victim is not considered in any case as a cause excluding criminal liability.

The suppression of consent apparently grants greater protection to victims. However, it also leads to an interchangeability of roles of victim and victimizer (Madrid Romero *et al.*, 2014: 150). The victim/victimizer label becomes reversible, so that the authorities grant one or the other label to the person depending on his or her willingness to cooperate with them (Maldonado Macedo, 2022: 32). Several academics, as well as human rights organizations, after conducting fieldwork in Mexican prisons expressed their indignation upon discovering that the profile of many people convicted of the crime of trafficking corresponded more to that of victims than victimizers, as they were migrant women with no connections to transnational criminal groups (Núñez Chaim, 2017: 125; Correa Cabrera and Sanders Montandon, 2018: 7; Maldonado Macedo, 2020: 324).

Scholars explain this paradox since the 2012 trafficking law was used to combat prostitution not to combat trafficking (Tyburczy, 2020: 101). They also consider that the aforementioned law, rather than confronting traffickers, encourages the surveillance of migrant women's sexuality (Madrid Romero *et al.*, 2014: 150; Maldonado Macedo, 2022: 29).

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The aim of this article is to examine the profile of the perpetrators who subject migrant women in transit through Mexico to a situation of sexual trafficking. First, the element of consent in the crime of sex trafficking is analysed. Then, the methodology used is examined and the sample is described. Finally, the profile of the perpetrators is studied.

Consent and the Crime of Sex Trafficking

In the academic community there is no consensus on what constitutes human trafficking (Shih, 2016: 68; Clemente, 2023: 422). The key defining the concept of trafficking appears to be associated with the notion of consent, the reading of which is not univocal.

Neoabolitionist feminism argues that consent is only valid when it takes place between two parties in a situation of equality and reciprocity (Fraisie, 2012: 77). When it takes place between two unequal parties it is invalid, because it is the product of a false consciousness that disables victims to perceive their own exploitation (Lobasz, 2009: 335; Chuang, 2010: 1664; Martynowskyj, 2019: 81). Consequently, prostitution cannot be defined as a choice, since between the participants (client and victim) there is neither reciprocity nor equality, but dissymmetry (Fraisie, 2012: 56 and 57; Doychak and Raghavan, 2020: 352).

An adult woman transported to another country to perform an activity where a third party will make a profit from the exploitation of the prostitution of others will be a victim of trafficking, even if she knows in advance the nature of such activity and agrees to do it. The victim's consent is not considered because it is vitiated by the inequality between the parties (Cobo, 2017; Doychak and Raghavan, 2020: 349; Farley, 2022). The voice of the victim is equivalent to that of a mentally ill person who must be protected. As Fraisse (2012) points out:

Even if a young woman indicates to police or border officials that she knows she is going for prostitution and that she agrees with that purpose of her journey (which she accepts and assumes) it is advisable to ignore her opinion. The proof of the existence or not of trafficking would not rest on her word. This indifference to the act of consenting would thus be a guarantee of measures to combat the trade in bodies transformed into commodities (Fraisie, 2012: 87).

According to this paradigm, the lack of self-awareness as victims will require a process of assimilation, in which they are educated to become aware that they were exploited. This lack of agency of the victims determines that they must be rescued from those who exploit them

(Whitford, 2020). This justifies the surveillance of the sexuality of migrant women who are to be rescued (Shih, 2016: 67).

This paradigm does not distinguish between scenarios as distant as those of those who live voluntarily from the sex trade when a third party obtains an economic benefit, or those who were kidnapped, threatened, raped and forcibly prostituted. In both scenarios people are categorized as victims (Pederson and Gerassi, 2022). The indistinction between these two extremes (exploitation of the prostitution of others and sex trafficking) is intended to give greater protection to the victims (Shih, 2016: 69).

As a contrast, pro-rights feminism stresses the unrestricted nature of the exercise of will, meaning that the consent given by a person to engage in the sex trade is always relevant and valid (Doezema, 2010: 132). This paradigm underscores the disconnection of neoabolitionism from the life experiences of sex workers (Mitchell, 2016: 334). According to Augustine (2007: 161), neoabolitionist activists speak on behalf of sex workers without listening to them.

From this perspective, it is concluded that when women know the nature of the activity, they will carry out in the destination country, and accept and assume the purpose of their trip, there is no trafficking (Agustín, 2007; Hamid, 2022: 95). Trafficking only occurs when entry into the prostitution market is through threats, force, or other forms of coercion (Hamid, 2022: 91; Clemente, 2023: 423). Therefore, a victim of sex trafficking is aware of her situation since what defines her as a victim is the fracture of consent. Victims, far from losing their capacity for agency, are described as agents with the capacity for political action to rescue themselves and other victims (Galusca, 2012: 15).

The difference between these two paradigms arises in part from the methodological designs used. Neoabolitionist scholars are more inclined to study rescued victims *ex situ* (Doychak and Raghavan, 2020: 345); whereas pro-rights scholars are more inclined to conduct *in situ* research. We reject the neo-abolitionist approach to the concept of consent because it is indifferent to the act of consenting. This implies a *de facto* nullification of the voice of the person in prostitution who is not recognized as a victim, which amalgamates voluntary prostitution and sex trafficking.

Methodology and Description of the Sample

This is qualitative research. The technique used to collect the information was the qualitative interview and the participants were recruited through chain sampling. 75 migrant women victims of sexual trafficking in Mexico were interviewed. The selection was based on five criteria: 1) they were of legal age, 2) they were forcibly prostituted without receiving any type of economic or other type of compensation, 3) they were locked up or went out to attend clients under surveillance, 4) they were not allowed to rest, and 5) they stated that they were victims of trafficking. When information was obtained to corroborate that they met the five criteria, the interview began, which followed the guidelines proposed by the World Health Organization for investigating this type of population (Zimmerman and Watts, 2003).

In addition, the Research Ethics Committee of the Academic Body “Migration, Development and Human Rights” of the Autonomous University of Tamaulipas approved the methodological design of this study. Consent for voluntary participation in the study was obtained orally, and each interviewee was assigned a code to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the data collected. The purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation in the study were explained to them. Pseudonyms were used for their names.

Interviews were conducted between 2013 and 2022 in Veracruz, Mexico City, Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and Coahuila (in Mexico), and Nevada (United States). Participants were from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Belize, and Colombia (see Table 1²). They ranged in age from 19 to 36 years, and they had an average of 3.8 years of education. When they were between 12 and 35 years of age, they were subjected to a situation of sexual trafficking while in transit through Mexico. This scenario lasted for periods of time ranging from 1 to 39 months (Table 2).

These people were victims of sex trafficking in half of Mexico’s states, although most of the registered cases were concentrated in the center, south and northeast of the country (Table 3).

The participants were sex trafficked while transiting northbound through Mexico and were interviewed in public spaces after escaping from their captors. Nearly half of the women recounted events that occurred less than three months earlier (Table 4). Far from wanting to

2 All tables can be found in the Annex at the end of this article (Editor’s note).

return to their countries of origin after the traumatic situation they had suffered in Mexico, they all wanted to find a guide to lead them to the United States. None of the interviewees intended to report the perpetrators, as they distrusted the authorities and feared repatriation.

The Profile of the Perpetrators

Different studies have found the presence of women in sex trafficking networks, because they gain more easily than men the trust of the victims they deceive (Miccio Fonseca, 2017: 28; Constantinou, 2020: 334; Broad, 2015: 1061). However, women participate in these networks in a different way than men do, they are in subordinate positions, they are often coerced and in numerous cases they were victims before being victimized (Miccio Fonseca, 2017; Broad, 2015; Rodríguez López, 2022). When the life trajectory places women in both positions (victim and victimizer), international law recommends not charging the crime of trafficking. According to Gallagher (2010: 284), non-imputation can be argued from two prisms. The first is the causation model, where the acts in question are the result of a trafficking situation. The second is the coercion model, where the acts were performed under duress.

The interviewees were victimized by six types of networks, operated by perpetrators with different profiles: 1) members of Mexican cartels; 2) nightclub owners; 3) members of international pseudo-modeling agencies; 4) individuals belonging to trafficking groups; 5) *freelance* traffickers; and 6) casually dating (Table 5). Almost all these networks were led by men. Only the owner of a cantina and the leaders of three prostitution networks (two operated in transient hotels and one through the Internet) were women. The rest of the victims were secondary or coerced.

Mexican Cartel Members

Drug cartels are a major player in Mexico's sex trafficking industry. Victims are generally abducted by armed men. They are held in safe houses and transported in vehicles guarded by criminals to hotels, farms, private homes, or nightclubs. Since 2018, migrant caravans have become a fertile space for collecting victims. Some of the interviewees indicated that they were forcibly taken from the caravans by armed men or through

deception, without the authorities or their countrymen noticing or doing anything. This is reflected in expressions such as:

They forced me, they kidnapped me and took me because even though there was security, they did nothing, the police, the guards, they did nothing (Raquel, 2021).

They kidnapped me and took me (...) I thought [the caravan] was safe because there were many people coming and I thought we were taking care of ourselves, but nobody did anything (Remedios, 2021).

I don't understand how those people could talk to me and trick me, get among the people and those who were guarding the caravan didn't say anything (Yolanda, 2022).

These organizations seek to maximize economic profit. Victims are a cheap and plentiful commodity. To obtain new victims, the cartels need only rob a train or bus, accost a coyote who smuggles women, break into migrant caravans, or simply ram women walking the streets. Other times they buy the victims from the police or immigration authorities who detained them for not being able to prove their legal stay in Mexico, or from third parties. The cartels' business strategy consists of exploiting the merchandise to the point of exhaustion and replacing it when it deteriorates or fails to perform. Prolonging the useful life of prostituted women does not make sense for these organizations, since the cost of preserving the lives of the victims exceeds the replacement costs.

Male perpetrators guard, discipline, and escort victims to client locations. Furthermore, when a victim is killed, his body must be buried in pits or dumped in secluded places. Just as in Nazi concentration camps death by starvation was the usual fate of the prisoner (Levi, 2012: 501), in cartel safe houses death by beatings, torture and deprivation of sleep and food is the fate of many of the victims.

Female victims are victims of sex trafficking, forced to engage in activities that introduce them into a criminal world that can lead to imprisonment. In some cases, older women are forced to train younger women in the prostitution trade; others are coerced into recruiting their fellow countrywomen through deception; others are urged to spy on members of rival cartels; others must provide information that facilitates the kidnapping of wealthy clients; others climb the ranks of the organization after becoming a favourite of a cartel leader; others traffic drugs; while still others are put in charge of safe houses to guard kidnapped persons.

These activities are riskier and produce greater moral damage than forced prostitution, since the victims, like the way the *kapos* or the Auschwitz *sonderkommandos* did in the Nazi concentration camps (Levi, 2012: 510), have to betray natural group solidarity in order to survive (Levi, 2012: 121).

As Levi (2012: 503) explains, this form of action practiced by the mafia seeks to compromise and burden the victims with guilt through the generation of links with the perpetrators, which prevents them from turning back. Women who successfully fulfill a valuable activity for the cartels can obtain freedom; this is what happened to Elvia (2015) and Sagrario (2022).

One of the labours Elvia performed for the cartel that kidnapped her was to romance a rival cartel boss. He was her client for three months, until she gained his trust and got him to talk about his plans and when he would be alone. With this information, the cartel was able to ambush him and take his life in order to take over the plaza. If this man had discovered that Elvia was a spy, he would have tortured her to death. Also, if she had not obeyed the orders of the cartel that abducted her from the bus where she was traveling, she would have been killed. What traumatized Elvia was not her being forcibly prostituted, but her complicity in the murder of others. But as Elvia pointed out: “That’s when I came to decide between my life and theirs (...) It was either them or me. I must survive to move forward”.

The exchange of roles between executioner and victim occurs in situations of pure survival, where the space for moral choice is annulled (Levi, 2012: 509). This is the case of the victims who, in addition to being forcibly prostituted, they had to go out into the street to lure young and slender countrywomen, who would later be kidnapped, forced into prostitution and often killed; those who had to train girls in the prostitution trade, some of whom ended up committing suicide; or those who participated in the tortures that were committed in the safe houses. Once they escaped, they began to carry the burden of guilt.

Like what happened in the Nazi extermination camps (Levi, 2012: 535), when the interviewees were held by the cartels, the feeling of guilt was relegated to the background because they were too busy surviving. The right to be alive had to be earned day by day. But the pain of guilt emerged when they escaped. Liberation is a critical moment that coincides with a wave of reflection and depression (Levi, 2012: 534). The cartels suck the humanity out of the victims until they are stripped

of their innocence. As Rosa (2021) said: “I feel bad with them [the women he captured for the cartel] (...) they killed one of them”.

Nightclub Owners

Some owners of nightclubs (brothels, casinos, canteens, hotels, etc.) abuse the vulnerability of migrant women who arrive there in search of employment. They offer them a roof and food and promise them that they will receive a good salary. In other cases, the owners of the premises work in collusion with fake polleros, who promise migrant women without economic resources to take them to the United States in exchange for their agreement to work in the sex trade. In other cases, the women are taken to the brothels by recruiters who tell them that they will be paid a good salary.

There are two types of women in these premises. On the one hand, there are those who are free, have Mexican nationality, prostitute themselves voluntarily and they usually serve clients outside the premises. They return home every day and receive a percentage of the fee paid by the clients. On the other hand, there are the victims of trafficking: migrant women who cannot prove their legal stay in Mexico, they live in the premises and serve clients there. As Fausta (2015) said: “They were not all the same because the Mexican women did not do to them what they did to us Central American women. The Mexican women worked, they had their lives, they arrived, they were at work, they went home and got paid”. In general, the former are a larger group than the latter. As Jimena (2015) said: “By force there were two women of those who came to work I do not know how many they would be; but there were many, about 20 women”.

The owners of these premises hold the victims for weeks or months through deception; when they discover that they have been tricked, the owners intimidate and threaten them. In other cases, they lock them up to prevent them from escaping. Some women remain deceived for more than a year, because they think that if they stay there longer, they will eventually be taken to the United States. As Leonor (2015) explained: “There were women who had already been working there for a year, who were forced and did not try to escape (...) They were told that they were going to take them to the north, that they would help them and they believed that, and they stayed there”.

When victims discover the deception, they confront their captors and try to leave the premises. In some cases, the victims leave the premises without being arrested, they give up their payment in exchange for regaining their freedom. As Ana (2014) said: “We escaped from the place, just like that, we left and that was it. They did not arrest us because they knew they were wrong to cheat us”; or as Brenda (2014) pointed out: “I got upset, I got angry (...) It did not suit me anymore and I got out of there”. Others are expelled by the owners of the premises so that they stop complaining to them, others are thrown out because they got pregnant, and some others run away in hiding.

The perpetrators lack an infrastructure for accessing violence and they do not have an apparatus for monitoring and controlling the victims; they scold them, call their attention to them, or lay a hand on them. As Jimena (2015) pointed out, “The same madam slapped me because I answered what I did not agree with”. However, in a business as violent as the sex trade, scolding, dissonant words or getting slapped are not far from the norm. Moreover, the fact that migrant women do not leave the premises is not unusual given their irregular migratory status. As a result, the free local women do not notice the suffering of the migrant women, but when they discover that the latter are victims of trafficking, it is not uncommon for them to help them escape.

Individuals Belonging to Trafficking Groups

The interviewees called trafficking groups, prostitution networks or criminals who run prostitution businesses those organizations that capture migrant women in transit through Mexico to forcibly prostitute them. The interviewees distinguished these groups from the cartels. The former pay a periodic fee to operate within a cartel-controlled territory. Such groups operate similarly to cartels, but lack an infrastructure of access to violence, which is compensated for by their ties to cartels and law enforcement authorities. The association between prostitution networks, cartels and police authorities is an amalgam that inhibits reporting and makes it difficult for victims to escape.

The ties of these groups with the police are an antidote to denunciations. When one happens, the victim is returned to the network to be disciplined. As Irene (2015) pointed out, “There they had a woman who had denounced them and the police handed her over to them, and there she was, they had beaten her a lot.” Moreover, if a victim asks a

police client for help, he or she will not hesitate to turn him or her in. As Adela (2013) said: “I told a policeman and he did not help me with my problem, on the contrary, he got me into more trouble because he told the pimp, and the pimp told me that he was not going to help me. I told the pimp, and the pimp punished me and beat me”.

These networks' bonds with the cartels encourage submission and make it difficult for victims to flee. When a victim does not cooperate or escapes, she is traced by the cartel that supports the prostitution network. In these cases, the outcome is often fatal. As Adela (2013) said: “I was kidnapped by a prostitution network, I escaped fortunately, because others have fared badly, and they have even been killed in their attempt to do so”. Victims who do not cooperate are sold by the network to the cartel. The biggest fear of the interviewees was being transferred to the networks run by the cartels. As Irene (2015) pointed out: “They threatened me that organized crime could come for me if I didn't want to work, and yeah, I saw that some girls from El Salvador had also been sold, so I better work”.

These groups are a kind of franchise of the cartels. These networks are not managed by the cartels, but they have to give them a share of their profits. In return, they are supported by the cartels' apparatus of violence. Death threats are the main mechanism for controlling the victims, which is reflected in expressions such as:

They told me that they would kill me if I escaped, or I did not work. They always told me that, as I had looked at how they had done to other women, well, I did believe in what they could do to me (Narcisa, 2018).

Some of them were even beaten to death for talking and that was how they threatened me (Socorro, 2022).

I was always threatened that if I did something I shouldn't have, they were going to kill me, and they would disappear me (Valeria, 2022).

In these organizations, recruitment is carried out by young women, male recruiters or fake coyotes and migration authorities. The young women wait for hours in places frequented by migrants until they set their sights on a victim. The victims are migrant women who are alone, and they are in distress. This is when the recruiters come into action: they approach them, they offer to help them, and they take them to an apartment. This space is a safe house where the victims are guarded by men who guard the place.

The male recruiters or fake polleros are apparently people who hired the victims to drive them to the United States. However, the victims are tricked and abandoned in places (brothels, hotels, etc.) where they will be exploited. Migration authorities detain migrant women in an irregular situation and sell them to these networks. The role of the authorities in the recruitment of victims is reflected in expressions such as the following:

Even the police took women to the boss (Carolina, 2014).

All the local women were forced and had been detained by the migrants. They were caught when they passed from Guatemala to Mexico (Federica, 2015).

The interviewees used the same lexicon to name both the leaders of the networks and the nightclub owners: *patron, padrote or madrota*. Unlike the nightclub owners, these networks do not manage free women. In addition, the police and cartels also collect bribes from nightclub owners, but do not provide them with the protection they do for trafficking groups.

Not all the people who participate in the networks do so freely. The interviewees pointed out that some of the security guards who guarded them were not free, but rather, like them, they were forced to do this work. As Narcisa (2018) said, “There were men who guarded us. They said that they were also kept by force working, they never told me anything, I think they were also threatened or punished”.

Members of the International Modelling Pseudo-agencies

International pseudo modelling agencies operate in multiple countries. South and Central America are points of origin for victims. Mexico is a place of origin and destination, as well as transit for victims who are trained to be sold in the United States or Canada. The pseudo-agencies have physical offices in other countries but operate mainly through the Internet. Recruitment is carried out by a woman who offers false information to the victims about the nature and economic conditions of the activity they will be doing abroad. Some of the victims know that the work they are offered will be related to the sex trade, but others think they will be working as models or dancers. The victims are young women of exceptional beauty. The pseudo-agencies take care of the paperwork and the transfer of the young women to Mexico.

The victims travel alone by air or accompanied by a guide by land. They travel to Mexico on tourist visas. Those who are selected to be trained and sold in the United States or Canada travel with apocryphal documentation. However, they do not travel alone, as when they arrived in Mexico, but accompanied by a security agent in collusion with customs agents. When they take a plane to Mexico, they do so with original documentation. They say goodbye to their families, and they come with illusions. When they take a plane to go to the United States or Canada they do so with apocryphal documentation and under threat. Therefore, they must be watched so that they do not try to escape. As Julia (2015) said:

When I went north, to Canada and Texas, I went with false papers (...) I was the one with the IDs, but with a different name; that's how I got to leave Mexico, that's how I went north, and I had no problems when I left.

The leaders of these networks were defined by the interviewees as people with many friends, power, and influence. The women recruiters leave the scene when the victims arrive at the safe house; it is then that the guards who always accompany the victims enter. One actor that remains hidden is the immigration officials who facilitate the victims' border crossing.

These organizations are basically security agencies. The apartments where the victims are held are guarded by security agents and the girls are escorted to clubs, bars, hotels or private homes by security personnel, whose members are intimidating in appearance, burly and know self-defense techniques, so that the victims (fragile, thin young women) have no chance of overpowering them and escaping. Victims who do not meet the standards for export to the United States or Canada remain in Mexico, where they cater to a clientele with high purchasing power.

Young women who have a more stylized figure are trained in Mexico to be exported. As Adriana (2013) said: "They were going to take me to work with them in the United States (...), but they would not take me because they were taking women younger than my age". Unlike in Mexico, where the victims only receive food, in the north they receive a salary after the payment for their purchase has been deducted. These pseudo-agencies also recruit Mexican minors, whom they take far from the place of abduction, where they are trained to be exported to the north.

Victims are a scarce and expensive commodity. The process of convincing victims is laborious, and their transfer involves a cost, which

must be paid prior to their arrival. Moreover, only a small number of people meet the high standards of beauty demanded by the pseudo-agencies. Due to the difficulty of replacing victims, these organizations do not usually use brute force, but subjugation through intimidation and threats. As Alberta (2014) said: “They didn’t hit me much, but I did suffer mistreatment, shoving and bad words that offended me”, or as Julia (2015) pointed out: “They didn’t hit me, but they did threaten me”.

However, when the victims escape, these groups use lethal force to terrorize those deprived of their liberty. The acts of violence are exceptional and exemplary. They aim to achieve the greatest impact at the lowest cost. In other words, they seek the submission of the greatest number of victims with the least number of lives lost. Therefore, such acts are videotaped and projected to the victims. As Evelia (2015) said:

They did not beat me, no; they did not beat me there, it was all psychological (...) If you did not obey, they would show you videos of abused women, and that was how they would violate you, so that you would not go out and tell the street what was happening, so that you would not run away.

Pseudo-modeling agencies operate differently from cartels. The former are more sophisticated, they have their own apparatus for producing violence that they use mainly as a deterrent, they operate only in the upper stratum of the prostitution market, and they seek to preserve the victims.

Freelance Dealers

Freelance traffickers are not networks, groups, or organizations, but isolated individuals who kidnap one victim at a time for their personal use or to make a profit from exploiting prostitution. Victims are locked up and threatened with death to prevent them from escaping. The perpetrators have a changeable mood. At times they beat them or insult them, and at times they praise their beauty and tell them that they love them and forgive them.

Some are pedophiles or persons engaged in criminal activities who buy their victims from pimps or criminals and forcibly confine them in luxury hotels or mansions. The victims are held in a kind of golden cage. They do not suffer deprivation of food and only have to satisfy the desires of one person. However, they suffer humiliation. As Alicia (2014) said, “I led a good life, but he had me by force”. When the victimizers get tired of them and buy a new victim, they let them escape.

Others are poor, lazy, and alcoholic men, who pose as coyotes to pick up disoriented migrant women in public places because they have run out of money, or their belongings have been stolen. The victims are locked up in the victimizer's house. The perpetrator sells them to friends and acquaintances, who rape the woman in the place where she is locked up. The victims are kidnapped in poor neighbourhoods where neighbours can hear their screams but do nothing. As Cristina (2014) said: "Nobody does anything for anybody, the neighbours listened and did not say anything because they were afraid of the man".

The *pseudonovios*

Pseudonovios (casual relationship) recruit victims through infatuation. The perpetrators are pimps from the center of the country who invest a substantial amount of time and resources to romance victims in another country.

These perpetrators are supported by an extensive family network that covers up their alibi for deceiving women. The main characteristic that distinguishes them from the rest of the victimizers is their facility with words and power of persuasion and seduction. They have polished a narrative of fairy-tale princes, which makes the victims leave their previous lives behind, leave their jobs, families, and places of residence, to move to a country they do not know.

Perpetrators arrange for victims to cross irregularly into Mexico under the assumptions that they will marry, have children, and live a comfortable life with the income generated by a thriving family business. The promise of marriage is at the center of all interactions and conversations with the victims. As Alejandra (2014) pointed out: "He spoke to me very nicely and about marriage (...) I believed everything because he told me very beautifully".

Victims believe offenders because offenders tell them what they want to hear. The key to their convincing power lies in the description of the details, as they specify to the victims a detailed long-term project in which the perpetrators present themselves as solvent providers. As Lucía (2015) indicated:

He had promised to marry me, we were going to get married, have children, he had told me that he had a house, that he worked and that we were going to have a family, that he wanted me to be the mother of his children. Everything seemed so good that I believed what he told me, everything seemed true and honest. He was very detailed, he talked to me, and he treated me well.

The perpetrators shower the victims with attention to the point that they are so enveloped in a cloud that they are unable to recognize what is going on around them. For months, the victims are overwhelmed by the deference and attention they receive from their supposed boyfriends. However, after this honeymoon period, everything changes. The attentions turn into abuse, and the victims are forced into prostitution. As Lucía (2015) said: “It was so nice what we lived that I thought it would always be like that, that’s why I came here. I never ever imagined what he was like behind that good man I thought”.

Conclusion

The results of this research show that the profile of victimizers in sex trafficking cases in Mexico is highly masculinized. Mexican cartels coerce female victims of trafficking, transforming them into victimizers. International pseudo-modelling agencies use women to recruit victims. Women are also involved in recruiting victims for sex trafficking networks. There are even women who own nightclubs where victims are trafficked, or who lead trafficking groups, but these cases are exceptional. Women in leadership positions accounted for only 5% of the total cases studied. Almost all the actors in the sex trafficking business in Mexico are male.

The life trajectory of the women abducted by the cartels often places them in the positions of victim and victimizer, so they should not be charged with the crime of trafficking, as their actions were carried out under duress as a result of a trafficking situation. The interviewees noted that some security guards working for the trafficking groups were also coerced. However, the results of this research indicate that the women who recruited victims for international pseudo-modelling agencies or trafficking networks did so for economic motivation.

Also, the owner of a nightclub or the three leaders of groups dedicated to trafficking cannot be exempted from the charge of this crime, because their acts were not carried out under coercion. They led the network that exploited the victims, they profited from this activity, and they were the ones who gave orders for the victims to be raped.

Claudia (2014) was bought by a woman who locked her in a house guarded by fierce dogs and threatened to have her killed if she tried to escape. Jimena (2015) was slapped and threatened with being handed over to a criminal group by the owner of a nightclub. Juana (2015)

recounted how the woman who kidnapped her had one of her classmates executed, whose body was found a day later dumped in a garbage dump. Veronica (2022) had difficulty walking and carrying heavy things, due to the beatings she received on the orders of the woman who bought her. The women who appeared in the stories occupying the positions of victim and victimizer were migrants. In contrast, those who occupied only the position of victimizer were natives.

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Annex

Table 1

Country of origin of interviewees

	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Colombia	Belize	Total
n	32	19	17	4	2	1	75
%	42.7	25.3	22.7	5.3	2.7	1.3	100

Source: Elaborated from interview data.

Table 2

Characteristics of the interviewees

	Median	Mean	Mode	Min.	Max.
Age	24.7	24	21	19	36
Education	3.8	5	6	0	9
Age when she trafficked	22.4	22	19	12	35
Months in trafficking situation	10.5	6	5	1	39

Source: Elaborated from interview data.

Table 3

States where the interviewees were sexually trafficked

Federal State	n	%	Federal State	n	%
Mexico City	29	38.7	Coahuila	2	2.7
Chiapas	15	20.0	Guerrero	2	2.7
Veracruz	7	9.3	Tamaulipas	2	2.7
Nuevo León	6	8.0	Tlaxcala	2	2.7
Puebla	5	6.7	State of Mexico	1	1.3
Tabasco	3	4.0	Guadalajara	1	1.3
Baja California	2	2.7	Michoacán	1	1.3
Chihuahua	2	2.7	Quintana Roo	1	1.3

Source: Prepared from interview data.

The total of “n” is 81 because six women were enslaved in two different states.

Table 4

Months elapsed between the date of the story and the flight from the trafficking scenario

Months	< 3	3 - 5	6 - 14	> 15
n	33	12	14	16
%	44.0	16.0	18.7	21.3

Source: Elaborated from interview data.

Table 5

The leaders of the trafficking networks examined

	Males		Women		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Mexican Cartels	37	100	0	0	37	48.0
Nighclub owners	12	92.3	1	7.7	13	16.9
Trafficking groups	12	80	3	20	15	19.5
Pseudo-international modeling agencies	6	100	0	0	6	7.8
Freelancers traffickers	4	100	0	0	4	5.2
Pseudonovios	2	100	0	0	2	2.6
Total	73	94.8	4	5.2	77	100

Source: Author's elaboration based on interview data.

The sum of "n" is 77, since two interviewees were victimized by two different actors.

Interviews quoted in the text

Adela	30-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2013
Adriana	27-year-old Nicaraguan woman interviewed in 2013.
Alberta	27-year-old Colombian woman interviewed in 2014.
Alejandra	26-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2014.
Alicia	24-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2014.
Ana	23-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2014.
Brenda	25-year-old Belizean woman interviewed in 2014.
Carolina	20-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2014.
Claudia	19-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2014.
Cristina	36-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2014.
Elvia	26-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2015.
Evelia	20-year-old Honduran woman interviewed in 2015.
Federica	23-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2015.
Fausta	30-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2015.
Irene	21-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2015.
Jimena	25-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2015.
Juana	33-year-old Honduran woman interviewed in 2015.
Julia	24-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2015.
Leonor	21-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2015.
Lucía	25-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2015.
Narcisa	24-year-old Colombian woman interviewed in 2018.
Raquel	23-year-old Honduran woman interviewed in 2021
Remedios	22-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2015.
Rosa	24-year-old Salvadoran woman interviewed in 2015.
Sagrario	25-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2022.
Socorro	22-year-old Honduran woman interviewed in 2022.
Valeria	20-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2022.
Verónica	24-year-old Guatemalan woman interviewed in 2022.
Yolanda	26-year-old Honduran woman interviewed in 2022.

Note: The names are pseudonyms.

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