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Chiara Ferrari

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The Factors Involved in the Exit from Sex Trafficking: A Review

By Chiara Ferrari¹

Abstract

Sexual trafficking and exploitation are a worldwide phenomenon affecting a huge number of women. Many studies have examined the process of sex trafficking entering, but less have analyzed the exit process. The aim of this review is to provide an overview of factors that intervene on the sex trafficking exit, starting from the most common theoretical models in literature. We used the Sociological Abstract and Scopus database to identify articles; further relevant studies have been identified with the snowballing method. We focused on empirical studies, the exit factors, and studies based on victims' point of view. There was no limitation for sample's nationality, gender of trafficked people or age of victims, or timing. We included 13 empirical studies (9 qualitative, 3 quantitative, and 1 mixed method). The review revealed several factors that intervene in the exit process at the individual, relational, and structural level. For each level, facilitating, hindering, and controversial factors have been identified. Results show the complexity of the process of exiting sex trafficking; 4 ambivalent factors were identified, 7 hindering, and 21 facilitators. The review operationally suggests which factors are to be strengthened (like the social capital) to facilitate the emancipation of women from trafficking, which ones should be limited (as the stigma of women who have come out of prostitution) for the social inclusion of people, and which ones should be studied in more detail (for example, the role of families) because they are sometimes facilitators and barriers to the exit of sexual exploitation. The limitations of this study include that it only includes English studies, there is little coherence in defining sex trafficking among the scientific community, and secondary information (type of exploitation, destination of trafficking) is not present in the selected articles that complicate the exhaustive interpretation of the results.

Keywords: Sex trafficking, Survivor, Exit from prostitution, Review

Introduction

Human trafficking is a global problem that is continuously expanding and transforming. The United Nation Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (UN Protocol, 2000) defines "human trafficking" as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or

¹ Chiara Ferrari is a clinical psychologist and PhD student in Sociology, Organizations and Cultures at the Catholic University of Milan where she is a Teaching Fellow and facilitator of laboratories of General Sociology and Sociology of the Family and Personal Services at the Faculty of Psychology. She collaborates with the University Center for Studies and Research on the Family of the Catholic University and ISMU Foundation - Initiatives and Studies on Multi-ethnicity. She deals with gender violence and sex trafficking.

receiving of payments or been to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

The causes of this phenomenon are related to the modern processes of globalization, the implemented migration policies, and the existing socio-economic imbalances between the West and the so-called “Developing Countries”. The forms of exploitation linked to the trafficked people coincide with forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery or servitude, the removal of organs, and sexual exploitation (U.S. Department of State, 2015). Until a couple years ago, millions of people worldwide were estimated to have fallen into human trafficking networks dealing in labor and sexual exploitation (ILO, 2017). Specifically, it is noted that almost the 80% of 27,000 (26,750) trafficked victims detected in 110 countries are trafficked for sexual exploitation; among these almost 50% are women and 20% girls (UNDOC, 2018). Therefore, the women population is most relevant in this issue (UNODC, 2012; Wijkman & Kleemans, 2019). Sex exploitation of victims involves the exchange of commercial sex acts such as stripping, pornography, or prostitution for something of monetary value (UN Protocoll, 2000). The areas most affected are the Americas, Europe, and East Asia and the Pacific. Girls prevail in Central America, while women are mostly detected in the other regions. Based on TIP² (2015), of the 28,263 sexual trafficking victims identified in 186 Nations, 57% obtained health services, 55% received mediation services in the host country and 52% were awarded government service. Even if data relating to sex exploitation is often quite allusive, since it’s a submerged and illegal phenomenon, among the studies that dealt with sexual trafficking, many focused on the factors of entry, shedding light on risk factors (Moore, Houck, Hirway, Barron & Goldberg, 2017; Task Force on Trafficking of Women and Girls, 2014), but fewer have analyzed the exit process (Walker, Gaviria & Gopal, 2018). Among those who focus on the period following the emancipation from traffic-related exploitation, many analyze the psycho-social effects of trafficking on survivors (Macias-Konstantopoulos & Ma, 2017), while others put their attention on the effectiveness of the forms of treatment dedicated to this particular target (Wilson, 2019; Muraya & Fry, 2016). Few, however, focus on the factors that come into play during the exit from exploitation: what happens? What elements facilitate the exit from criminal networks? What barriers do migrants face in changing their lives? In this respect, the present study aims to reconstruct the exit process of people involved in sex trafficking through trying to identify which factors intervene as facilitators or as obstacle barriers. At the same time, this study tries to highlight if and which controversial factors are present in the emancipation period from trafficking. In order to achieve this aim, we conducted a literature review; starting from the theoretical models used for prostitution, we explored the results of empirical research conducted in all continents. We expect to have a systematization of the literature in order to organize the empirical contributions that are often fragmented. It could be important not only for the researchers, but also for the policy makers, those who work in care services, or NGOs who are interested in understanding what factors can be used to support the victims in abandoning exploitation circuits.

Theoretical Background

The literature that attempts to explain the dynamics of the departure from sex trafficking often describe theoretical approaches and are not always grounded in empirical data. Among the

² TIP: Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons in the U.S. Department of State.

latter, some focus only on the barriers that hinder exit without focusing on resources (Howell, Schiferl & Ruhlmann, 2019; Roth & Wells, 2019), while some do the opposite; the result is that we don't have a uniform picture of all the factors involved in the exit process. Baker, Rochelle, Dalla, and Williamson (2010) have systematized four theoretical models that study the exit process and are the most commonly used for the analysis of emancipation from the sexual industry. This includes not only victims of sex trafficking, but also street workers and women who slide into prostitution, who were not necessarily trafficked but, for various social and economic reasons, started working as prostitutes³. Regarding the 4 models mentioned, two are more generic—Stage of Change model (Prochaska et al., 1992) and Role Exit Model (Fuchs Ebaugh, 1988)—while the other two are more specific—Breaking the Matthew Effect (Månsson & Hedin, 1999) and Becoming an ex-sex worker (Sanders, 2007). These models explain the steps a person goes through before changing their life situation and getting out of prostitution. The change in the behavior of one person can be self-initiated or promoted by professional help. Regardless, exiting the sex industry is often associated with a dynamic process that includes numerous exit-re-entry exit cycles. The models find evidence that the trend of these cycles is influenced both by personal factors (motivation, awareness of one's condition, health), but also by relational factors (family, encouragement from significant others). In line with these four models, another prototype used for the sex trafficking is the Traumagenic Social Ecological Framework (Finigan Carr, Johnson, Pullmann, Stewart & Fromknecht, 2019). According to a socio-ecological framework, it highlights all the levels and risk factors that make individuals more susceptible to sex trafficking, particularly for children. The result is the emergence of factors that intervene on the social level (as the diffusion of the capitalism), on the community level (as the level of people aware of the sex trafficking problem), on the interpersonal level (as the relation with family or the peer group), and on the individual level (as health). In summary, although all of these theoretical models differ from each other, integrating their contributions, they hypothesize the presence of individual, relational, and structural factors that intervene in the process of exiting prostitution, including sex trafficking. The models, therefore, suggest three levels of analysis that we must keep in mind if we want to understand what factors are involved in the exit process.

Based on what is suggested by the theoretical models presented above, the purpose of this study is to systematically identify and synthesize the empirical research on personal, relational-interpersonal, and structural factors that constitute hindrances or resources in the process of exiting sex trafficking. In fact, we want to focus not on the entire sex industry, but only on the sex trafficking. The aim is to select only empirical studies. The following research question guided this study: What are the individual, relational, and structural factors that intervene during the exit process from sex trafficking of women?

The review question is important when it comes to organizing data from empirical research—not only from theoretical models—in order to have a complete overview of the factors that come into play during the process of exiting sex trafficking. The aim is to highlight both the factors that hinder and facilitate the exit, including the controversial ones, so as to have a comprehensive overview of victims' exit from trafficking, an emerging topic of research in sex trafficking. The systematic review also has important operational consequences such as giving indications to operators involved in sex trafficking intervention programs on which factors to strengthen in order to facilitate the emancipation of victims and which ones to avoid.

³ We refer to prostitution activities as all sexual services offered in exchange for money. In this sense, not only street prostitution falls within this definition, but also prostitution in indoor apartments (nightclubs or massage centers ...), digital environments (passing through social networks), and even pornographic activities.

Methods

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

A broad search on the English-language literature was performed, identifying articles through electronic database searches on online bibliographic archives. Sociological Abstract and Scopus have been chosen as search engines because they provide abstracts and indexes of international literature concerning sociology, social work (including social policy, social welfare), and related disciplines in the field of social sciences. Scopus is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature, but it does not always provide full texts. For this reason, we also used Sociological Abstract because it makes the full text of the indexed manuscripts available in premium sociology or social science collections. The only limitation of Sociological Abstract is that almost 60% of the publications come from North America. The search included a combination of the following terms and key words: (*sex* traffick* OR forced prostitution OR commercial sexual exploitation*) AND (*survivor* OR exit OR recovery*). Articles published until July 2019 are included without any time limit. The other relevant articles have been identified through the snowballing method, starting from the indicated search engines. Studies of any design (both qualitative and quantitative) were included as long as they investigated the exit process from sex trafficking from the victims' point of view, highlighting the obstacles or resources they faced. Studies that provide descriptions of exit factors and had an empirical research design (sampling and measures) were also included. The sample was not curbed based on nationality, gender (male or female or transgendered), or age (children, teens, and adults are considered). The review included both peer-reviewed journals and non-peer-reviewed publications.

Screening and Data Extraction

The sample was selected through two levels of screening. Firstly, publications were excluded according to the following criteria: publications in languages other than English, newspapers or editorials, books, blog or web sites, lectures, dissertations. When a publication was classified as relevant, its abstract was then selected based on the following criteria:

- Discussing personal, relational-interpersonal, and structural factors intervening during the exit process from sex trafficking
- Qualitative or quantitative studies
- Having female victims of sex trafficking as a research sample

The selection criteria were chosen based on the research question; respectively, the criteria allowed for the collection of the factors involved in the exit process, identified empirical studies, and were based on the victims' point of view.

When the abstract met the inclusion criteria, a copy of the full text was obtained. Where necessary, authors of the articles were contacted for additional data or to obtain the full text if it had not been uploaded to the database. Secondly, after reading the entire articles, only those that actually met the selection criteria used during the first selection step have been included in the systematic review. The publications for which the full text was unobtainable and those not fitting the aforementioned criteria were excluded.

Subsequently, to organize data for each study, the following details were extracted: (Figure 1: Features of the 13 included observational studies on the exit factor of female victims of sex trafficking (studies are in alphabetical order); type of study (quantitative or qualitative); sample size and characteristics of participants (gender, age, nationality); instruments and main topics; site

of exploitation (indoor or outdoor); and migratory route (national or transnational). All the exit variables from sex trafficking identified by researchers in the selected articles have been described and organized into different levels (individual, relational, and structural), highlighting their role in the process of abandoning sex trafficking (facilitators, hindering, controversial). None of the studies employed doubtful methodologies.

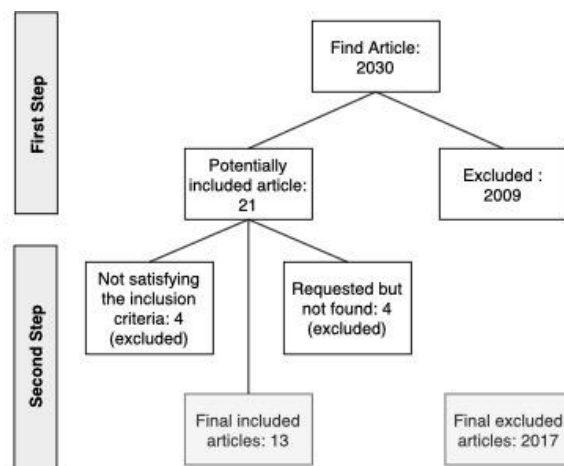
Data Analysis

Analyses were designed to produce descriptive information on the characteristics of all included studies. Having included both qualitative and quantitative studies, the analysis was conducted through the construction of theoretical categories, synthesizing in a narrative way all the included records. The first entailed the coding of the samples of the selected studies based on gender, age group, nationality, type of exploitation (indoor or outdoor), or migratory route. Secondly, the factors involved in the process of exiting sex trafficking have been extracted and categorized to one of these three levels: individual, relational, or structural. Specifically, in line with the model proposed by Finigan-Carr, Johnson, Pullmann, Stewart, and Fromknecht (2019), the individual or intrapersonal level refers to all the elements concerning the characteristics of the subject. This level includes all the psychological and biological variables of the subjects, their beliefs, desires or expectations, and the behavioral styles implemented by the people who can influence the path of exit from sexual trafficking. The relational level considers the relationships that the victims of sex trafficking have with the other people they encounter during the exit process. The third level concerns the objective social structures (Bourdieu, 1979). Specifically, this thematic area concerns the socio-economic system, the social institutions with their respective functions, and the normative and cultural system. Finally, once the identified constructs were labeled according to the levels on which they operate (individual, relational, or structural), each of them was classified either as hindering, facilitating, or controversial in regard to the exit process.

Results

Final Studies Sample

Figure 1. Flow Chart of the Study Selection Process



A total of 13 studies were identified for inclusion in the review after the aforementioned two-stage process. See Figure 1 for a flow diagram of the study selection process. In the article

selection process, 13 empirical studies were retained, of which 9 were qualitative, 3 quantitative and 1 mixed method. Most are based on adults (n = 8), 3 young adult studies, and only two include both young adults and adults. All the studies include a female sample (n = 12), while only 1 study includes a sample with women (n = 44) and also men (n = 15) and 2 transgender women (n = 2). For these reasons, it was not possible to consider men and women separately. In regard to nationality, 7 of the studies have an Asian sample (n = 3 Nepali, n = 3 Indian, n = 1 Filipino), 4 research studies have participants from United States, 1 study uses a sample consisting of Indians and Americans, and 1 performed via the web has a mixed sample (Australia, Cambodia, Canada, Germany, India, Lithuania, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, United States, United Kingdom, and Uganda).

With regard to the trafficking process, 6 studies concern national trafficking, for example, in the case of India (Vindhya & Dev, 2011), 4 deal with transnational trafficking, and 3 studies do not specify the direction of the migratory route. An examination on the type of prostitution revealed 7 studies involving indoor prostitution (n = 2 in controlled places typical of domestic sex trafficking, n = 4 in brothels, n = 1 in brothels and/or private clients), 1 study concerning outdoor prostitution (street-based prostitution), and 1 study dealing with a mixed sample in which prostitution was performed indoor by Indians (brothels, dance bars, lodge-based prostitution) and outdoor by Americans (street prostitution). Out of the 13 selected articles, 4 do not specify the form of prostitution.

Content Results

The following paragraphs present the results obtained from the systematic review. We present them divided by levels (individual, relational, and structural). In each section, the factors are then organized with respect to the role they play in the exit path (hindering, facilitating, or controversial factors).

Individual Level

Facilitating Factors: Spirituality helps to provide a sense of hope and motivation to get out of exploitation (Hickle, 2017) as well as having life plans, and career projects for the future (Gonzalez, Spencer & Stith, 2017). During the process of regaining one's autonomy, self-confidence and self-esteem, the strengthening of a sense of self-efficacy and of feeling that one possesses the skills to satisfy one's own needs encourages the victims to complete the path of emancipation from exploitation (Hickle, 2017). Furthermore, the desire to help others out of trafficking, by making their skills available to other people, is a stimulus to take life back in one's own hands, giving it a meaning (Sukach, Castañeda & Pickens, 2018). In a study that compares a sample of exploited American and Indian women, the type of exploitation can affect the readiness to exit; specifically, in the Western sample, having had an experience of indoor (and not outdoor) prostitution is an element which helps victims abandon forced prostitution quickly (Wilson & Nochajski, 2016).

Hindering Factors: Two research studies (one on a Nepalese sample of trafficked women in brothels and one based on the collection of 15 testimonies of victims from different parts of the world) showed that the feelings of shame and uselessness due to being a victim of sex trafficking make it difficult to complete the exit path (Sukach, Castañeda & Pickens, 2018; Dalla & Kreimer, 2017).

Controversial Factors: Being addicted to substances (drugs/alcohol) is an ambiguous element. According to a study on domestic sex trafficking, having drug addiction problems hinders the recovery process, facilitating relapse and the return to prostitution (Gonzalez, Spencer & Stith, 2017). In another cross-cultural research study, however, having problems with substance abuse can increase/strengthen the drive for change (Wilson & Nochajski, 2016)

Relational Level

Facilitating Factors: Social support is positively associated with the exit process (Wilson & Nochajski, 2016). In particular, it emerges how the girls manage to escape exploitation thanks to the help of their companions; in fact, they rarely manage to break free on their own or through the intervention of the police who stage raids in strategic places with the intention of seizing the victims of sex trafficking (Dalla & Kreimer, 2017). One study also showed that customers helped women out of the street or pointed to the presence of “kidnappers” who helped women out of prostitution due to age, financial debt, or health conditions (Dahal, Joshi & Swahnberg, 2015).

Social support was also useful in the recovery process; the presence of mentors, professionals, roommates or positive leaders in reception/recovery facilities and friends outside the center (when present) are a resource in achieving emancipation (Gonzalez, Spencer & Stith, 2017).

Once out of exploitation, interpersonal relationships (with the staff of the host houses, lawyers, health workers) facilitate the holding capacity in the "new life", containing the risk of returning to the street. Among the significant relationships, those who serve as the "peer mentors" of care-taking services play a crucial role (O'Brien, 2018). Feeling “connected”, in contact with former co-workers or places of recovery, members of social organizations, and people who have come out of prostitution contributes to reducing feelings of isolation, shame, and stigma and provides women with the motivation to pursue their personal goals. The sense of connection also includes spirituality (Hickle, 2017). The presence of a formal and informal support network favors the ability to build hope and an emotional support system (Sukach, Castañeda & Pickens, 2018).

In some studies, it has emerged that having children is significant: the hope/desire to be reunited with them provides the motivation to complete the path of emancipation (Gonzalez, Spencer & Stith, 2017; Hicke, 2017).

Hindering Factors: The fear of being recognized as a prostitute (labeling and stigma) makes the possibility of social integration complex (Crawford & Kaufman, 2008; Dalla & Kreimer, 2017). Denial, social rejection, and the feeling of being seen as degraded and corrupted make it difficult for people to re-enter society. Women often change their residence as a strategy to "shelter" against the stigma and stereotypes associated with their former life, which can lead to their return to the prostitution circuit (Dahal, Joshi & Swahnberg, 2015). Only in one study involving an Indian and US sample suggests that, for the Indian sample, the stigma may represent an accelerating factor with respect to change (Wilson & Nochajski, 2016); not wanting to be recognized any longer as "prostitutes" leads to the search for help. A study that analyzes the micro-aggressions that victims of sex trafficking are subjected to showed that they are exposed to derogatory language and face difficulties in being accepted as equal citizens and treated equally by others (Dhungal, 2017). In addition, invisible forms of rejection or sexualized objectification towards women are implemented. In the same study, it appears that offensive behaviors and attitudes are put in place

towards these subjects; they are considered to be ignorant and inferior, to be people who can never reenter society, have a family, or participate in religious rites and activities. People's beliefs in the fact that victims of sex trafficking possess fewer skills and the underestimation of their emotions (invalidating behaviors) amplify the difficulties of achieving social inclusion. Microaggressions affect not only the women's physical and psychological health, but also their sense of isolation (Dhungel, 2017).

The description of sexually exploited children as "poor, innocent victims" worsens their possibility to develop relationships of trust with the services. The boys perceive themselves as "strong" because they survived and being looked at as "helpless" creates a reaction of repulsion towards the services (Williams, 2010).

Controversial Factors: The family can be seen both as a factor that obstructs the exit from prostitution (dishonor for the family in having a relative who prostitutes) (Dalla & Kreimer, 2017) or as a facilitating element (Hickle, 2017) because it offers victims motivation and encouragement to undertake emancipatory paths, especially if children are present. The people who participate in the same religious organizations as the victims can also be beneficial in helping them escape situations of exploitation and fit into a new context. In some cases, however, they are perceived as institutions that do more harm than good. In any case, they are seen not as the only organizations in a society that can actively do something to counteract the phenomenon (O' Brien, 2018).

Structural Level

Facilitating Factors: A study of 20 Nepalese women highlights how social awareness programs on sexual trafficking can decrease women's stigma (Crawford & Kaufman, 2008). Moreover, group and individual programs of empowerment and rehabilitation implemented by social agencies (especially involving addiction and/or use of substances) facilitate the exit process through the promotion of a sense of security, responsibility, self-efficacy, and through the restoration of a life routine and the recovery of professional skills (Hickle, 2017). A study conducted on 163 women victims of sex trafficking shows how the presence of agencies and welfare services helps people get out of exploitation (Bincy & Nochajski, 2018), particularly if they favor access to the labor market. The possibility of having access to professional contexts favors the resumption of one's life (Sukach, Castañeda, & Pickens, 2018). Another study involving 30 young adults and their families, through analyzing their financial diaries, observed that limited access to jobs represents a key barrier to achieving financial stability for themselves, their children, parents, and other family members (Cordisco Tsai, 2017). The difficulty of finding a job, in fact, affects the possibility of having access to the control of household finances, of redistributing income to family members (parents), and of evading violent relations (Cordisco Tsai, 2017).

A study conducted with 30 Nepalese youths and adults has highlighted how NGOs, although helpful when it comes to immediate relief, are seen negatively because they do not prepare people to acquire the necessary skills for professional integration (Dahal, Joshi & Swahnberg, 2015). This lack of skills may result in an increased difficulty in reentering everyday life, especially due to the stigma and lack of social support that the people likely must face.

Even the presence of a security system can facilitate exit from trafficking: among those selected, a Nepalese study highlights how sometimes police raids allow women to escape exploitation; few people manage to escape autonomously because of age, health, or debts (Dahal, Joshi & Swahnberg, 2015).

As far as the cultural system is concerned, only one of the surveyed studies took this variable into account in the process of exiting trafficking. The work takes into consideration Indian and American girls; having a collectivist cultural orientation (in the Indian and American sample) and an individual one (in the Indian sample) can facilitate readiness for change (Wilson & Nochajski, 2016).

Hindering Factors: Low starting economic conditions make it difficult to escape prostitution (Bincy & Nochajski, 2018). Having little income even in the process of taking charge empowerment increases the chances of dropouts from the exiting process and the relapse into prostitution (Gonzalez, Spencer & Stith, 2017). Even low levels of cultural capital make it difficult to leave the exploitation circuit (Dalla & Kreimer, 2017).

Controversial Factors: No studies have been found in this section.

Discussion

Analyzing the results of the review, in general, shows that some geographical areas present more empirical studies on the issue of leaving trafficking; in particular, the Asian region (the India-Nepal area) presents an elevated number of studies, perhaps also due to its greater involvement in the phenomenon (Gunnell, 2004; Kaufman & Crawford, 2011; Crawford & Kaufman, 2008). Most of the review studies concerned adult women. It is also interesting to underline which types of prostitution have been identified in the review; generally, in the selected articles, the oriental (Asian) prostitution studies are indoor, specifically in brothels, while in Western studies (US) the outdoor phenomenon is also registered. In the selected articles with Asian samples, the indoor prostitution coincides with domestic sex trafficking, a particular type of practice which mainly involves minors who are forced to sell themselves in closed, controlled environments which are not, however, comparable to brothels or night/dance clubs typical of Eastern indoor prostitution. These variations may also be attributed to the different legislations enforced in each country (whether it considers prostitution a crime or not) and, above all, to the type of social norms present in these countries. Regarding cultural orientation, the only study that took this variable into consideration did not find great differences between collectivist and individualist orientation.

Figure 2. Intervening Factors in the Exit Process from Sex Trafficking

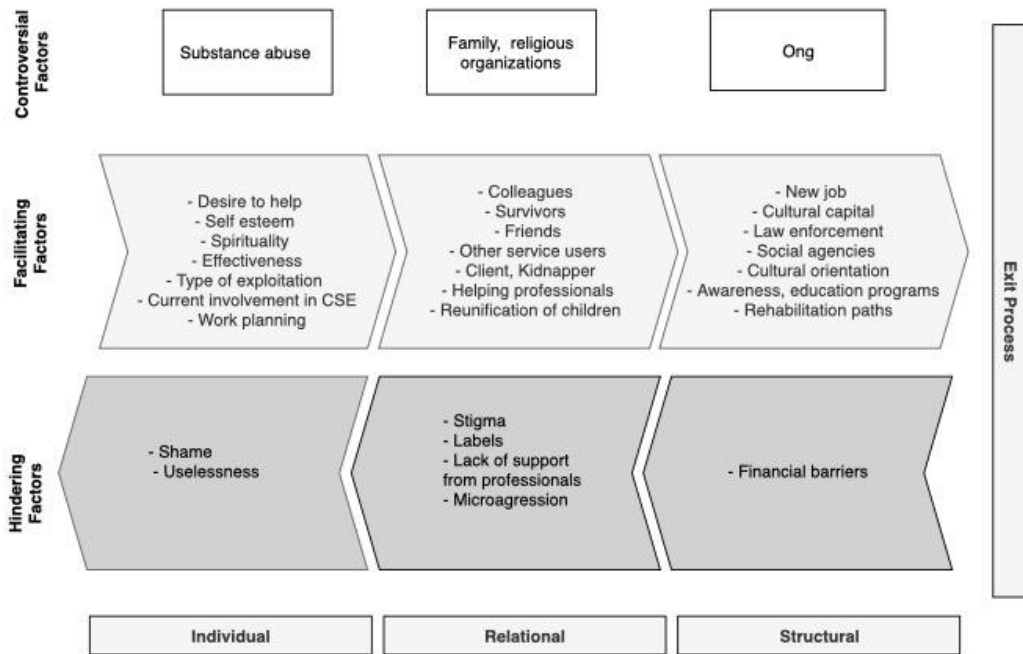


Figure 2 summarizes the results, highlighting 7 facilitating factors for each level (individual, relational, structural) for a total of 7 factors that hinder and 3 that are ambiguous. The difference in the number of facilitating factors and hindering factors could be connected either to the researchers' lack of attention to the obstacles that victims encounter during the exit, or to the fact that those who abandon sex trafficking must use a lot of internal and external resources to escape the situation of exploitation. Among the latter, the family appears to be controversial most likely because it is often implicated in the sale of the trafficked person (Fleisher, Johnston, Alon & Hunt, 2008; Surtees, 2008) or because it doesn't want to keep in contact with the victim, considering it a dishonor. At the same time, the religious organizations have an ambiguous role. In part, religious movements can try to hinder human trafficking and modern forms of slavery by implementing programs in favor of the victims' exit from exploitation (Potrafke, 2016). On the other hand, in some regions of the world, religious traditions can play an important role in the processes of subjugation and entry into trafficking, as in the case of the juju ritual for some areas of Africa (Ikeora, 2016; Van der Watt & Kruger, 2017). In regard to victim assistance services, studies show that they can be considered positive resources when they help people to enter into the socio-economic structure of the host country; that is, they can be positive if they do not limit their work to emergency interventions, but implement economic empowerment programs (e.g., micro credit actions). This is a crucial turning point because economic opportunities serve as a strategy to prevent victims' return to sex industry; as evidenced by the models presented in the first part of the text (Månsson & Hedin, 1999; Sanders, 2007), the complete abandonment of the criminal networks connected with the sexual exploitation cannot be definite if there are no alternatives for a rewarding livelihood. Otherwise, it's easy for that "entry-exit-re-entry" specified in "The Stage of Change Model" to occur (Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992). Another

shortcoming, of recovery services is their victimization of the people in charge; both health professionals and ordinary citizens face the risk of stigmatization (as emerges from this research). In this case, the review confirmed what previous theoretical studies had already hypothesized about the exposure to the stigma and labeling of trafficked persons, making not only the exit processes difficult, but also those of social inclusion, even in the workplace (Scambler & Paoli, 2008; Scambler, 2007). Substance consumption emerged among the ambiguous individual factors, while no mention was made of HIV, an illness that is extensively investigated by empirical studies dealing with sex trafficking or prostitution in general (Sarkar et al., 2018; Decker, McCauley, Phuengsamran, Janyam & Silverman, 2011; Silverman, Decker, Gupta, Maheshwari, Willis & Raj, 2007). It is most likely not considered a factor that intervenes strongly in the decision-making processes of people who want to get out of sexual trafficking; however, the role of HIV should be studied in depth because in the theoretical “The role exit model” (Ebaugh, 1988) it is one of the most probable turning points for abandoning paid sexual practice.

Finally, the relational factors that emerged from the review concern different stakeholders: clients, former work colleagues, friends, professionals, trafficking survivors, and children. This highlights how exiting from exploitation passes through a social network that sometimes colludes with the criminal system (as in the case of the clients or exploited colleagues). Professionals and survivors of trafficking come into play later; the exit process takes place slowly, with gradual steps that allow the passage from the criminal network to the “normal” one. The entire exit path is a process of empowerment for victims of sex trafficking. This process entails the rebuilding of one’s own self-esteem, regaining trust in oneself and in others, and reclaiming control over one’s life up to the point that one then desires to help those who are in their former condition.

Conclusion

This aim of the review was to study the exit process from sex trafficking, providing a summary of the factors involved in the step of leaving sexual exploitation linked to trafficking of victims. The intent was to focus on the results of empirical studies. The research focused on a) qualitative studies b) quantitative studies c) mixed methods studies.

The current study tries to fill the gap in the literature, offering operational insights for those working in support services for victims of sex trafficking. This review can in fact be useful not only for researchers in human trafficking, but also for policy makers or those who work in care services or NGOs and are interested in understanding what factors can be used to support the victims in abandoning exploitation circuits. The exit process is a complex journey in which many elements take over; it is necessary to know which ones need to be strengthened, which ones should be limited, and which elements require careful consideration because of their ambiguity. Considering the spread of sex trafficking worldwide and the presence of the services that intervene in the phenomenon, it is important to be able to provide them with guidelines to intervene appropriately in the exit process.

Limitation and Future Research Directions

First of all, this review was restricted to articles written in English and not in other languages. Since sexual trafficking is a phenomenon that is widespread throughout the globe, there may be other important studies published in languages other than English that we were unable to include in the review. Secondly, even if the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (UN Protocol, 2000), signed by 147 Nations and ratified by 190 States, provides a clear definition of human trafficking, sometimes the definitions used to refer to sex trafficking in scientific publications vary and are not always used by the authors to refer to the same topic. For example, in some cases the term “sexual exploitation” did not refer to trafficking for sexual purposes, but only to sexual exploitation. This in part forced us to exclude many studies identified in the first step of the review. Secondly, we risked not including studies that, while referring to sexual trafficking, did not use terms included among the keywords of our research. Thirdly, some of the studies didn’t specify the type of exploitation or the direction of the migration path (national or transnational). Furthermore, in some cases, the reference sample was very small. These elements have limited the interpretation of the results obtained through the review. We must highlight that the selected articles were few ($n = 13$); this doesn’t allow for designing of a universal and generalizable tool. Yet, our research goal was not to do this, but rather to provide an initial holistic organization of the factors that enter the process of exit from sexual trafficking.

In order to acquire a better understanding of the phenomenon, it could be beneficial to conduct additional quantitative studies, since qualitative research studies are much more numerous and, in comparison, represent a larger number of the sample. Having identified some controversial exit factors, further studies could better explore the role that these elements play in the emancipation process. Furthermore, it would be important not only to study the exit process in more depth, but also to evaluate what happens to the victims once they have abandoned protection programs. Although there are many studies that evaluate the effectiveness of exit programs and the types of services that are activated for victims (Cox, 2018; Hammond and Mcglone, 2014), few provide follow-up assessments to verify the effectiveness of these programs. Furthermore, since studies on adults and young people have been considered jointly, it could be useful to conduct an analysis on the different life stages in order to better identify the difficulties and resources that they faced during the exit process, starting from personal life experiences. Meta-regressions should be carried out by type of traffic (national or transnational) and type of exploitation (indoor—brothels, dance bars, lodge-based prostitution, massage parlors, protected and supervised places as in the case of domestic sex trafficking—or outdoor—prostitution in the street). Considering the global dimension of the phenomenon of sex trafficking, it might be appropriate to better understand how the culture and norms of the countries (including migration policies and laws governing prostitution) are involved in trafficking, in particular, paying close attention to the impact that meanings attributed to the phenomenon have on the attitudes towards the sex trafficking of victims, citizens, and welfare services. The cultural aspect is in fact a variable that has emerged in one single study of those selected and that is still little studied (Hennink and Simkhada, 2004). Finally, with reference to the theoretical models identified in the literature and presented above (Baker, Dalla and Williamson, 2010), it could be useful to understand which exit factors (facilitating, hindering, or ambivalent) come into play in the phases of change and exit from sexual trafficking.

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