

MATERNITY IN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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Abstract: *Human trafficking is not a recent phenomenon but remains one of the most severe forms of crime with which modern society is confronted. Its true dimensions are still unknown due to the obscurity surrounding this phenomenon, which is often hidden behind seemingly legal activities. The primary factors have largely remained the same; however, new causes have emerged in light of recent social and geopolitical trends. New recruitment forms have also appeared, as traffickers quickly adapted their methods to the online environment with the rise of cyber activities following the Covid-19 pandemic. The domination practices and strategies are diverse and aim at destroying the victim's identity and asserting the trafficker's authority, creating a social network of dominance and servitude. From a social values perspective, trafficked girls are reduced to the status of goods, gradually dehumanized, and profoundly traumatized, which impacts their entire life path. This article aims to explore the complex issues faced by trafficked women who have become mothers, highlighting situations where traffickers use strategies involving children to manipulate these mothers and keep them in exploitative situations for as long as possible.*

Keywords: human trafficking, maternity, traffick strategies, exploitive situations.

1. Introduction

Arms, drugs, and human trafficking represent some of the most complex and well-organized criminal activities, violating fundamental human rights, including the right to life, security, and freedom (Stan, 2019). Human trafficking is defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or holding of persons through force, fraud, or deception, for the purpose of exploitation for profit" (Law 678 of 2001 on preventing and combating human trafficking). According to Eurostat, over 7,000 victims of human trafficking are registered in the European Union each year, but the actual figure is likely much higher, as many victims go unreported. In Europe, most victims are women and girls, though the number of men is increasing, particularly in cases of forced labor (<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat>). The United Nations identifies inequalities within and between countries, increasingly restrictive migration policies, and a rising demand for cheap labor as key underlying causes. Poverty, violence, and discrimination make victims more vulnerable to trafficking (<https://www.un.org>).

2. The Vulnerability of Girls to Human Trafficking

Human trafficking remains the most recognized form of modern slavery (Quirk, 2011; Palaghia, 2013, 2015) and constitutes a crime against humanity (Savona & Stefanizzi, 2007). From a social perspective, human trafficking is both a national and transnational phenomenon, facilitated by globalization and the use of modern technologies. It involves various forms of exploitation, including the violation of human rights through forced labor (Palaghia, 2013 a&b). Human trafficking refers to the recruitment, transportation, transfer, or "holding" of persons through threats, use of force, or other forms of coercion, deception, or abuse of power to exert control over others for the purpose of exploitation. From a social values perspective, trafficked girls are reduced to commodities, gradually dehumanized, and subjected to profound emotional trauma that shapes their entire future (Palaghia, 2017).

Vulnerability itself "characterizes not only certain populations but also each individual in specific relations with external reality, in certain social contexts of individual action, and can be a result of individual interpretations of these contexts" (Cojocaru, 2005). Vulnerability represents "individuals' lack of inclination to act" or "the inability to adapt actions to the structural requirements of the social system caused by inadequate individual interpretations in relation to some common and socially accepted interpretations" (Cojocaru, 2002: 131). "Vulnerability signifies a state of potentiality, a present non-manifestation of certain factors that may, however, lead to marginalization, disadvantage, or related phenomena in the future, a mental map of inadequate interpretations in relation to reality or the person's potential" (Cojocaru, 2005: 30).

Victims are portrayed in the literature as individuals repeatedly subjected to aggression from others, in the form of physical and/or verbal attacks or psychological abuse. Each individual exhibits a

certain level of tolerance and resilience when faced with victimization, depending on three categories of factors:

1. Pre-victimization factors;
2. Contextual factors;
3. Post-victimization factors.

Minors are in the category of individuals with heightened vulnerability due to specific age and psychobehavioral characteristics, which include having almost no physical or psychological defenses; limited capacity to anticipate both their own behaviors and those of adults; a reduced ability to understand the consequences of their own or others' actions; low empathy levels; difficulty discerning good intentions from bad; and a high degree of gullibility (Palaghia, 2019). In some cases, trafficked girls come from families where they were abused or abandoned, and they may become involved in prostitution out of a need to support themselves financially or to obtain items they believe they need or desire.

Young girls are sold to traffickers, locked in rooms or brothels for extended periods (weeks or months), drugged, terrorized, repeatedly raped, beaten, threatened with weapons, and display signs of torture, such as cigarette burns, malnutrition, and sometimes branding, indicating their "ownership." This continual abuse enables traffickers to exert easier control over their victims. Captive girls are so intimidated and fearful that they rarely disclose anything that could incriminate the traffickers, even when they have a chance to escape, aware of how well-organized and hierarchically structured these groups are, resembling other criminal organizations. Traffickers with multiple victims often have a "top girl," who was once a victim but has been with the trafficker long enough to gain their trust. This "top girl" collects money from the other girls, disciplines them, and manages the traffickers' day-to-day affairs. Various methods are used to control the victims, including force, drugs, emotional manipulation, and financial tactics (<http://www.anitp.mai.gov.ro>).

Traffickers find it easy to establish a strong bond with young girls, promising them marriage and a lifestyle they have not previously experienced within their families, pretending to be in love and suggesting that this lifestyle is for the future they will build together. "The victim differentiates from the aggressor through their capacity to feel guilt, sometimes feeling guilty for actions carried out by the aggressor, independent of themselves, or for not doing enough to remedy the situation" (Rădoi & Irimescu, 2021: 91).

In cases where the girl has had few male role models in her life, or those she had were negative, traffickers exploit this, often asking the victims to treat them as a father figure. In many cases, they use violence, such as group rape and other forms of abuse, to force young women to work for them and, more importantly, to keep them under their control. Often, victims are simply beaten into submission, become addicted to drugs, and traffickers can control them solely by controlling their access to the drug supply. Traffickers also confiscate important documents, such as birth certificates, passports, or driver's licenses, so that even if the victims escape, they cannot support themselves and often return to the traffickers. These abusive control methods have significant psychological and mental impacts on the victims, who suffer from severe traumas, such as Stockholm Syndrome, a paradoxical psychological phenomenon in which victims become attached to their abusers over time, complicating their ability to escape the aggressor's control. In human trafficking, the practices and strategies of domination are diverse and aim to destroy the victim's identity and establish the trafficker's authority, creating a mechanism of domination and servitude that enables to form a true social network (Gavriliuță & Gavriliuță, 2013: 17).

The proportion of minors as human trafficking victims remains high, highlighting the need for institutions and responsible organizations to work toward reducing these numbers, punishing those responsible, and supporting and assisting the victims. Disturbingly, according to specialists from the National Agency Against Human Trafficking minors are at risk of being re-trafficked, with some experiencing repeated exploitation, a situation that underscores the weaknesses in the system for preventing and protecting vulnerable individuals (<http://www.anitp.mai.gov.ro>). In 2021, a total of 282 children under the age of 18 were identified within the Romanian anti-trafficking system as victims of child trafficking. Most of these minors were exploited within Romania, particularly through various forms of sexual exploitation, including being forced to produce explicit sexual images and content. Of these, 230 minors were sexually exploited in 2021, and at least 105 were forced into pornographic representations (<http://www.anitp.mai.gov.ro>). "The high proportion of minors among the total population of victims can also be explained by the increasing criminal interest in online exploitation and the coercion of minors to produce (photo-video) content and distribute it online" (Tamaș et al., 2022: 13).

The majority of identified minors are between 12 and 17 years old (89%), with most victims being *girls*, making up 90% of minors registered as victims of human trafficking. Additionally, 63% of the

minors exploited in 2021 came from rural areas, especially from counties such as Bacău (24 victims), Mureș (22 victims), Dolj (18 victims), Brașov (18 victims), Bucharest (17 victims), Constanța (15 victims), Caraș-Severin (14 victims), Sibiu (13 victims), Galați (11 victims), and Alba (10 victims). Domestic trafficking was the primary destination for child trafficking in 2021, with children being transferred from one city to another by traffickers, especially in cases of forced begging or labor exploitation, or the exploitation occurring within the same city of origin. In some cases, minors were manipulated, blackmailed, and exploited through technological means without leaving their residence, and the proportion of female victims among the total victim population in 2021 reached 88% (444 victims). This statistic is particularly concerning, given that *more than half of these victims are under 18, with female victims predominantly forced into prostitution (82%) or coerced into producing and/or distributing explicit sexual content* (Tamaș et al., 2022).

It is noted that, while the operational mechanisms seem to be consistent, regardless of the power dynamics involving the body, there is a shift towards a personalized form of authority and power when considering the trafficker's figure exerting control over the victim. "Analyzing the phenomenon of human trafficking reveals a certain continuity between the ritualistic practices of body control from the past and the controlling practices exercised by the heads of trafficking networks" (Gavriliuță, 2017: 216). Traffickers employ subtle and effective strategies through which victims are subjected to a "regime imposed by the trafficking network," developing their own means of domination and control. The trafficker pursues personal interests and asserts power by setting rules and punishments. "The victim becomes obligated to obey the trafficker master, who becomes the sole authority, harshly punishing any potential defiance" (Gavriliuță, 2017: 221).

3. The Experience of Maternity in the Context of Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is a severe, complex, and well-organized criminal activity that violates the rights to freedom, security, and life of human beings (Lobasz, 2019). For Romania, it remains a major social issue that is constantly worsening, with serious social and economic implications. The true extent of this criminal phenomenon remains concealed, as it is obscured and disguised under seemingly legal activities. This extremely serious social problem has, over time, transformed into a global phenomenon, resulting in millions of human tragedies and growing alarmingly in recent years. Romania is both a source and a destination country for major trafficking networks, providing both victims and recruiters.

Corruption within authorities, unreliable national statistics, and legislative gaps are only part of the factors that enable the expansion of this phenomenon. Human trafficking is a complex process involving socio-political and economic factors (external), as well as personal factors (internal). The actors involved vary from those who facilitate the recruitment of victims, to the traffickers themselves, and especially the clients, the purchasers and those demanding such "services", without whom this phenomenon would not exist.

Research in the field shows that victims identified in human trafficking are often traumatized individuals who prefer not to speak about their experiences as a defense mechanism. Frequently, sexually exploited victims do not consider themselves victims, as exploitation is masked by an emotional bond with the trafficker, through which they may even become mothers (Pascoal, 2020).

Motherhood within the context of human trafficking may be transnational, as victims may be exploited in other countries while having children in their country of origin. Indicators that distinguish prostitution from human trafficking include:

1. clothing that is inappropriate for the season, with girls often on the streets dressed very scantily even in winter;
2. working excessively long hours, even when they are ill;
3. unfamiliarity with the city or area, with minimal social interaction;
4. being on the street in adverse weather conditions;
5. extended absences from their home country, even if they have children there;
6. changes in behavior in the presence of certain group members. The presence of a single indicator may suggest low self-esteem or lack of determination, but a combination of two or more indicators over a longer period strongly suggests a potential situation of exploitation (Pascoal, 2020).

UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) has defined APON (Abuse of Position of Vulnerability) as "any situation in which the person involved has no real or acceptable alternative other than to submit to the abuse." Gallagher (2012) notes that the term "real and acceptable alternative" remains unclear. In Romania, human trafficking has become difficult to detect because traffickers are well-versed in the laws or have acquaintances who are, allowing them to skillfully avoid situations that could

lead to their arrest. Nearly two decades ago, girls were kidnapped, transported across borders, and sold to others. However, today, human trafficking is increasingly difficult to prove, particularly since Romania joined the European Union. Small groups or even individual traffickers have emerged, reducing physical aggression against victims and employing subtler coercive strategies to avoid rebellion and extend the exploitation period (OHCHR, 2010).

Human trafficking is increasingly difficult to prove, as victims often do not file complaints or choose to withdraw them. Experts believe the number of reported cases is decreasing because *the phenomenon is becoming more invisible*. One method of recruitment that has gained prominence is the *loverboy* technique, which eliminates physical violence, replacing it with more subtle methods, often within an emotional and familial context (Aninoșanu et al., 2016). This method is based on the victim's blind trust in the trafficker. In some cases, traffickers use it only during the recruitment phase, establishing a relationship with a woman and later selling her, thus ending the relationship between the recruiter and the victim. This type of relationship is primarily based on romantic illusions, and the woman realizes she has been deceived when she is passed on to another exploiter. There are also cases where the recruiter continues his role as *loverboy* during the exploitation phase, even going as far as marriage. This method is far more effective than the previous one, as the victim is almost unable to perceive the deception. *She may appear as a victim of domestic violence but does not identify herself as a victim of human trafficking*. The act of marriage further supports the trafficker, as it allows them to manipulate the victim more easily (Pascoal, 2020).

The paradigm of the abuser playing the role of the savior suggests that the victim justifies the abuser's actions in her mind. In cases of violence where the abuser exploits his partner, girls often prefer this form of attachment (traumatic bonding) over returning to their families of origin, thus continuing to be exploited for years. A typical *loverboy* profile may include the following characteristics: a low level of education, but boasting about having the "school of life" (referring to street experience), and being charismatic. Research shows that 75% of traffickers are narcissistic, maintain "relationships," and often receive support from female relatives who help control the victim and ensure she does not make connections outside the network. This creates an environment where the victim remains isolated and dependent on the trafficker. In the initial stage, traffickers typically target vulnerable girls who have no friends, have poor relationships with their families, or who may have been abused at home, such as children from abusive or authoritarian families. Traffickers provide the attention these girls crave, gaining their trust. They act as if the victims can rely on them in any circumstance, openly communicating even about the illegal activities they are involved in. Traffickers often target young victims who lack love, face familial difficulties, or have grown up in foster care systems (Pascoal, 2020).

It is important to note that not all poor families are vulnerable to human trafficking, as traffickers primarily seek girls who do not get along with their parents or who are abused in their families, not necessarily from impoverished backgrounds (Fedor, 2013). In cases of sexual exploitation, girls are coerced into earning money, but not through physical force; instead, traffickers create a fabricated marital plan, such as saving money for a house or a car, which they can enjoy together. In the end, however, the money earned remains under the trafficker's control.

Trafficker's plans are long-term, never materializing, and are designed to ensure continuous exploitation. The children of trafficking victims are often neglected or abused by relatives who care for them or are placed under social services care. There have been cases where traffickers controlled the children of their victims, using them as coercive tools. In such situations, traffickers condition a mother's access to her children on paying increasingly large "debts," which are always justified as "expenses for the child." These debts grow due to situational factors created by the traffickers and lead to prolonged exploitation. Particularly, the children of Nigerian women exploited in Spain and Italy are used as coercive tools by exploiters (Pascoal, 2020).

Traffickers who hold the children of their victims are able to directly harm them while emotionally abusing the mothers. They often use terrifying threats, including threats of death or actions such as "throwing [the victim] from the balcony." The verbal and psychological abuse, combined with the knowledge that their children are in danger, generates post-traumatic stress for the mothers, which impacts their decision-making abilities. Living in constant fear and anxiety, the only goal these women have is to protect their children. Pascoal (2020) describes how a woman in such a situation was forced to pay an additional 400 euros to a trafficker, beyond the other "debts" she owed, just to be able to visit her child. Traffickers reported to authorities that the mother had abandoned her child, continued exploiting her, and even charged her another 200 euros, purportedly for "child expenses." As a result, the child was placed into child protection services and eventually became eligible for adoption.

In Romania, there are cases where children have been born during sexual exploitation, as traffickers are so cunning and unscrupulous that they marry their victims and have children with them. Exploitation, therefore, becomes a "family business," with the child often used for begging, especially in countries where a high profit can be made.

4. Social Work Interventions for Human Trafficking Victims

Nationally, Decision No. 49 from January 19, 2011, for the approval of the Framework Methodology on Prevention and Intervention in Multidisciplinary Teams and Networks in Cases of Violence Against Children, Domestic Violence, and Exploitation of Children, highlights the importance of initial and ongoing professional training for all professionals involved in this issue. This methodology emphasizes the role of multidisciplinary and interinstitutional teams in assisting victims of trafficking, especially children, and other vulnerable groups, including Romanian migrant children who fall victim to other forms of violence in foreign countries.

Based on this methodology, each County Directorate for Social Assistance and Child Protection (DGASPC) initiates partnership agreements with accredited private organizations (OPA) and adopts the multidisciplinary and interinstitutional intervention methodology for children who are victims of human trafficking. The trafficking of minors is defined by national law (Law 678/2001 on the Prevention and Combat of Human Trafficking) and includes exploitation as the primary motive. This methodology emphasizes the term "child trafficking" within child protection and social assistance, recognizing that abuse, neglect, exploitation, and trafficking of children may be perpetrated by parents, acquaintances, strangers who coerce or gain the trust of the child, or even other children. These crimes may occur in families or public or private institutions dedicated to children and families. Often, these forms of violence are intertwined, for example, physical abuse being accompanied by emotional abuse, or sexual abuse involving both physical and emotional harm.

For trafficking survivors, particularly women and children, Stockholm Syndrome is commonly observed. This phenomenon refers to the victim's expression of admiration, gratitude, and other positive feelings toward their abuser, which may seem irrational in light of the danger and risks the victim faces (Peters, 2015). Stockholm Syndrome, as defined by H.G. No. 49 from January 19, 2011, is the phenomenon in which a victim expresses adulation, gratitude, and other positive feelings toward their abuser, seemingly irrationally, considering the danger and risks faced by the victim. This psychological response can complicate the recovery and reintegration of victims, as they may develop strong emotional bonds with their traffickers, which impede their ability to seek help or recognize their victimization.

The Center for Assistance and Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking operates with the mission of ensuring the protection of adults at risk, for a specific period of time when they are in imminent danger, in line with the provisions of Ordinance No. 29/2019. This emergency reception center provides a range of essential services to the beneficiaries, including decent living conditions, primary medical care, social counseling, and support for their social and professional reintegration. The services offered include:

1. Accommodation: Providing a safe place to stay.
2. Meals: Preparation and serving of food.
3. Professional Integration Counseling: Guidance for re-entering the workforce.
4. Assistance with Documentation: Helping victims obtain identity documents or civil status certificates.
5. Access to Other Social Services: Facilitating access to various social benefits.
6. Job Placement and Vocational Training: Supporting the search for a job, participation in qualification or requalification courses.
7. Housing Assistance: Helping secure housing, including social housing and collaboration with local communities for reintegration.

Case Management is a crucial process in supporting victims, where the goal is to connect the victim with the necessary services to help them overcome their status as a victim and reintegrate into society. This process involves offering social, medical, psychological, and legal services, tailored to the individual needs of the victim. Given the varied severity of each case, effective intervention requires a multidisciplinary team including a social worker, psychologist, lawyer, medical professional, and police officer, who work together to address the complexity of the victim's needs (Cojocaru, Cojocaru, 2005).

In Romania, victims of human trafficking can access a wide range of services, including:

1. Social Work: Support for basic needs and community integration.
2. Psychological Assistance: Therapy and counseling to address trauma.
3. Medical Assistance: Health care and treatment for any physical or mental health issues.

4. Legal Assistance: Legal support for cases involving exploitation or seeking justice.
5. Educational Assistance: Access to education and training opportunities to rebuild life skills.
6. Outreach Services: Support to reach victims who may be isolated or unwilling to seek help on their own (Alexandru, 2010). These services are essential to helping victims reclaim their lives and escape the cycle of exploitation and trauma caused by human trafficking.

After a victim of human trafficking has been identified, they are directed to an assistance and protection center to benefit from specialized help. Victims can be assisted in three types of centers, each offering a different level of protection and confidentiality:

1. Closed residential center: Offers a high level of protection, with restricted access and constant supervision.

2. Semi-open residential center: Allows more freedom, but with appropriate protection and supervision measures.

3. Apartment-type center with protected address: Provides victims with a more private environment and enhanced identity protection.

Within the social intervention process, the Social Worker Case Manager (the coordinator of the multidisciplinary team) plays a crucial role, having essential responsibilities to ensure the protection and appropriate support for the victim. Their responsibilities can be summarized in the following 10 points:

1. Ensures the victim's access to services established in the service plan: Facilitates the victim's connection with various types of help (medical, psychological, legal, etc.).

2. Encourages communication between specialists: Ensures coordination between members of the multidisciplinary team for a holistic approach to the case.

3. Is the contact person with any specialist who intervenes in the case: Maintains contact and communication with the professionals involved in the victim's support.

4. Has permanent and direct contact with the victim: Ensures that the victim receives continuous support and monitors their condition.

5. Mediates the connection between the victim and reference persons from their life environment: Ensures the victim's integration into the social and family environment, when possible.

6. Makes quick and immediate decisions in crisis situations: Is ready to intervene rapidly to protect the victim in emergencies.

7. Calls and organizes case conferences: Organizes meetings to evaluate and revise the support plan for the victim.

8. Checks the permanent updating of the victim's needs: Constantly monitors the victim's evolution and adjusts interventions as new needs arise.

9. Monitors the victim's situation continuously: Tracks progress and changes in the victim's life to ensure the effectiveness of the intervention.

10. Can also provide psychological counseling services in urgent situations and in the absence of a psychotherapist colleague: In emergencies, can offer basic psychological counseling, both individually, in groups, or family-based, until the intervention of a specialist.

These responsibilities are essential to ensuring effective protection and comprehensive support for the victim, helping them overcome trauma and reintegrate into society in a safe and sustainable manner.

The stages of case management involving victims of human trafficking (Buzducea, 2010) are as follows:

1. Reporting and registering the case;
2. Assessing the victims' situation;
3. Planning the intervention;
4. Implementing the Service/Intervention Plan or providing the services;
5. Monitoring and periodic evaluation;
6. Final evaluation and case closure/Post-intervention monitoring.

In summary, the case manager's objectives in human trafficking cases are (Mihai, 2008):

1. To develop the trafficking history and the victim's needs;
2. To assess the victim's resources to overcome the current situation;
3. To connect the victim with the network of service providers;
4. To develop the victim's coping capacities to face difficulties in the process of psycho-social reintegration;
5. To plan the provision of services and interventions for the victim through the Individualized Service Plan (PIS).

Trafficking of women has extremely severe consequences on victims from a physical, psychological, and social perspective (Anghel, 2011). In the long term, they become suspicious, lose trust in people, and face physical illnesses and psycho-emotional disorders. These consequences are directly proportional to the duration and severity of the "treatments applied," but the most important factor remains the victims' ability to cope with stress and difficult situations (Obokata, 2006).

5. Human Trafficking and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Physical abuse has extremely serious consequences on health: from injuries, strokes, which can even lead to the victim's death. Also, the inability to protect oneself during sexual abuse can lead to contamination with various sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS, and the occurrence of unwanted pregnancies. Psychological abuse leads to anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and attempts. The victim loses trust in others and in herself, feels shame, guilt, and self-blame, and may become dependent on alcohol and drugs. Social abuse, where the trafficker manipulates and imposes social restrictions, exacerbates feelings such as loneliness, isolation, and social exclusion; the victim becomes suspicious and feels a constant insecurity, which leads to social withdrawal. The acute stress experienced can evolve into post-traumatic stress disorder (Burke, 2022), a situation where the victim remains marked by the horrors of the past and finds it extremely difficult to focus on the present. The trauma experienced by female victims originates from the physical and psychological abuse they have endured, which makes the process of recovery and reintegration difficult and long-lasting.

For an effective intervention, the social worker must understand the suffering caused to the victims by the traumatic experience of trafficking, which can be devastating and is characterized by the fact that the victim continuously lives under intense stress, caused by the fear of death threats or severe harm to herself or her family. Victims may not speak about their experience, and the physical and psychological consequences they face are difficult to overcome. Among the most common symptoms seen in human trafficking victims, we mention feelings of fear, panic attacks generated by the expectation that the trauma will repeat itself at any moment, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress, depression, which can lead to suicidal thoughts or attempts, behavioral disorders such as aggressiveness, irritability, anger, substance abuse (alcohol and/or drugs) considered a way to cope with the trauma (Dumitrașcu, 2012).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is present among girls with major trauma of this type (Burke, 2022, Palaghia, 2024), and support must be provided on a psychological, social, and economic level in the initial stage. However, in the long term, the focus is on the healing process through counseling for victims who survive traumatic events (Weaver, Flannelly, Preston, 2003).

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has three main components:

1. Re-experiencing, through involuntary thoughts, nightmares, and flashbacks;
2. Avoidance, which occurs in an attempt to forget, avoiding thoughts, feelings, or situations that remind the victim of the traumatic event;
3. Hyperarousal, which is characterized by agitation, exaggerated startle response, excessive vigilance, and concentration difficulties, generated by the fear that the traumatic experience could repeat itself.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is usually diagnosed in victims of trafficking for a long period. "Overcoming trauma is a long process, but even when the traumatic experience is successfully treated, the trafficking victim remains marked for life. When events arise that remind the victim of the trauma, however vaguely, they can provoke a new state of unease, especially when the links to the traumatic experiences remain unconscious" (Dumitrașcu, 2012, p. 237). There is a "high incidence of trauma and consequently PTSD among children and adolescents" (Muntean, Munteanu, 2011, p. 165).

Social workers must be familiar with the 6 diagnostic criteria for PTSD, as outlined in the DSM V, as follows:

1. The person has been exposed to a traumatic event experienced by themselves, witnessed, or confronted with a situation that threatened their or others' integrity, causing injuries or even death, to which they responded with terrifying fear;
2. The traumatic event is periodically relived through distressing and recurrent memories, thoughts, and feelings, which give the impression that the episode will repeat itself;
3. There is a tendency to avoid stimuli that may be associated with the trauma, including avoidance of thoughts, feelings, or conversations related to the trauma, activities, places, or people that may remind them of the experience. There may be a reduction in interest in certain activities, amnesia related to a crucial part of the traumatic episode, diminished attachment to others, restricted emotional range, and a bleak outlook for the future, in personal, professional, and social aspects;

4. A constant state of agitation sets in, with insomnia, irritability and anger outbursts, hypervigilance, difficulty concentrating, and exaggerated startle responses;
5. Symptoms from points 2, 3, and 4 last for more than one month;
6. Deterioration in social and professional skills occurs.

In children with PTSD, instead of fear and insecurity, there is agitated and chaotic behavior, and "emotional paralysis" results from exhaustion. Adolescents show high vulnerability to trauma. For school-aged children and preschoolers, trauma is expressed and relived repetitively, especially through play, drawings, and various forms of non-verbal expression (Muntean, Munteanu, 2011).

Traumatic experiences affect and destroy a person's ideas about safety, their positive self-image, and the meaning of life. Most often, victims refuse to talk about traumatic experiences, but specialists must know that the most common symptoms of trafficking may include: the victim may experience a strong sense of guilt, believing they are to blame for causing the abuse, may feel unworthy or dirty, may experience feelings of fear, panic attacks, as they expect the trauma to repeat at any moment, a profound sense of insecurity, generalized anxiety, social phobia, specific phobias (e.g., open or enclosed spaces, insects, etc.), stress, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, psychotic phenomena characterized by hallucinations and paranoid ideas, thoughts of or attempts at suicide, nightmares, sleep disorders, communication difficulties (inability to express desires or needs), anger and aggression, feelings of being judged by everyone, distrust, and shame in relationships with others, a negative self-opinion, substance abuse (alcohol, drugs, food), sexual disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Palaghia, 2024).

There are several types of reactions to psychological crisis situations, such as: suicide, depression, anxiety disorders, anger, and aggression. Suicidal attempts can also occur in the context of psychoactive substance use, alongside anger and explosive aggression. Working with clients exhibiting suicidal and parasuicidal behaviors is quite stressful, as, while always wishing the best for the people they work with, their self-destructive behaviors can affect the specialists, especially when a child manages to commit suicide. Children and adolescents who use drugs become depressed, and some exhibit active suicidal tendencies. We can reduce the likelihood of suicide primarily by helping the person stop using drugs, as many suicides occur when the person is under the influence of drugs (Blume, 2011).

In working with survivors of human trafficking (Winterdyk, Perrin, Reichel, 2012), who are angry or aggressive, we must be careful not to expose ourselves to risks, and if threatened, we should remove ourselves from the situation and request support if necessary. We should not encourage the expression of anger, to avoid escalation. We must calm the angry person with rational, calm, disarming responses, demonstrating tranquility and balance. Under no circumstances should we touch the beneficiary who is in a state of anger; we teach them strategies to avoid escalating anger before it reaches that stage, and we ask them to practice the skills they've learned in controlled conditions (Leahy, 2022).

Suicidal behaviors include suicidal ideation, which can be fleeting thoughts, quickly abandoned, or it can transform into obsessive, all-consuming preoccupation with suicide and death (Wodarski & Feit, 2009). Later, these thoughts may include a plan or multiple plans for committing the act, which may involve ideas about methods of carrying out the act; these can vary in terms of lethality or the potential to have lethal consequences. Often, plans can include chronological aspects that may be carried out immediately, or others that may be in the distant future. Eventually, suicidal behaviors may include self-injury, which can range from superficial self-harm to self-injurious behaviors that could lead to death. In the case of suicidal behavior, the lethality of the self-harm act is important; in many cases, especially in less lethal suicide attempts, death occurs because the person is alone and not discovered in time.

Self-harm can be non-suicidal; self-mutilation that is not necessarily a conscious attempt to end one's life is called parasuicidal behavior and is differentiated from behaviors in which there is an intent to die. There are situations where a parasuicidal behavior can result in the victim's death, even though there was no intention to die. Extremely lethal attempts present a clear intention to die, especially if carried out in secret. In cases of non-suicidal self-harm, some beneficiaries have reported that actions such as burning or cutting themselves were associated with shame, sadness, not knowing how to solve a problem, boredom, or revenge on close people they have been hurt by. Parasuicidal behaviors are also common among individuals diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, who may abuse alcohol and drugs (Linehan, 2022). All these aspects must be known by the specialist supporting the beneficiary with chronic suicidal tendencies in order to reduce them; it is a difficult job that requires much time and preparation (Blume, 2011).

The meetings with the counselor must aim to eliminate the victim's feelings of fear and insecurity and to regain a sense of safety, which is an important process for their rehabilitation. The counseling activity must focus on building trustful relationships with those around them and developing coping skills

for new situations, as well as creating a safe environment, so that the individuals assisted do not become victims again (Alexandru, 2012).

The stages of intervention in crisis situations are (Holdevici, 2011): a. Focus on the problem; b. Assessment; c. Contract; d. Actual intervention; e. Closing the counseling process; f. Final evaluation.

Ewing (1990) outlines the principles of crisis intervention as follows:

1. Crisis intervention is short-term and needs to be applied quickly;
2. Crisis intervention targets not only the beneficiary but also their family and social support networks;
3. Crisis counseling addresses a "wide variety of human problems," not just a single type of crisis;
4. Crisis counseling focuses on current issues, especially those that lead the beneficiary to seek specialized support, with an emphasis on the triggering factor of the crisis;
5. Working with a beneficiary in crisis aims to resolve problematic situations and develop new adaptive coping mechanisms;
6. Crisis counseling is reality-oriented;
7. Crisis counseling is characterized by the fact that the specialist (psychologist or social worker) takes an active role;
8. Crisis counseling may prepare the beneficiary for subsequent interventions.

The cognitive-behavioral therapeutic model can be used as a foundation for short-term intervention in crisis situations and includes the following steps:

1. Establishing the therapeutic rapport;
2. Assessing the physical danger or risk of harm the person is in;
3. Assessing and mobilizing personal strengths and cognitive-behavioral resources;
4. Developing a positive action plan;
5. Strengthening personal commitment to the development plan of adaptive (coping) strategies;
6. Evaluating the effectiveness of the plan.

In working with victims of human trafficking, as well as with other categories of beneficiaries, individual counseling, group counseling, and family support remain effective (Șoitu 2011, 2012).

Conclusions

Female victims of human trafficking are traumatized individuals who remain extremely vulnerable to traffickers. The trauma experienced by these women originates from the physical and psychological abuse they have endured, which makes the process of recovery and reintegration difficult and lengthy. When sexual exploitation is the objective, the trafficking process involves various offenders acting on multiple levels: from spontaneous actions carried out by individual and unorganized criminals to international trafficking networks. Methods that have proven effective in maintaining submission are often brutally violent, and women are seen as commodities used for trade, serving as lucrative sources of profit for traffickers.

In combating this alarming phenomenon, which seriously violates human rights, social policy solutions consist of: repatriation, reintegration, the development of social assistance services, and the punishment of criminals. Doru Buzducea points out that, both nationally and internationally, the system for repatriation and social reintegration "does not operate at a level that guarantees the elimination of the possibilities of re-trafficking former victims," and specialized psychosocial assistance services remain underdeveloped and require special attention. Social workers are exposed to many risky situations in their practical work and must be prepared to manage them effectively.

Victims of human trafficking constitute social groups that are highly vulnerable to risks. Work with at-risk groups is extremely important in the field of Social Work, and the practicing social worker must focus on aspects such as security and resilience, alongside working with individuals and groups in risky situations, in order to help address some of the problems and to outline future security-focused actions in the social work of at-risk groups. The intervention of the professional social worker must be prompt and effective. As the main agent of social intervention, they must coordinate the multidisciplinary team swiftly and efficiently, initially ensuring a minimum level of security, comfort, and well-being for the affected individuals, understand the special protection needs of victims, and intervene both *in crisis situations* whenever necessary and in the long term, supporting the beneficiaries to overcome trauma and achieve psychosocial reintegration. Prevention of the phenomenon, through information and awareness campaigns, remains crucial, but the effective solution remains the criminalization of demand.

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