

Relationships Between Suspects and Victims of Sex Trafficking. Exploitation of Prostitutes and Domestic Violence Parallels in Dutch Trafficking Cases

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Abstract This article centres on the hypothesis that human trafficking for sexual exploitation is not only an organised crime activity, but a crime of relational nature as well. Therefore this study explores the relationships that exist between suspects and victims of sex trafficking, and examines to what extent the nature of sex trafficking has parallels with domestic violence. The study is based on an analysis of 12 police investigations into sex trafficking related to window prostitution in the Amsterdam red-light district in the period 2006–2010. The findings suggest that there are intimate relationships between traffickers and victims, and that these relationships display various characteristics of domestic violence. Aside from intimidation, control and violence, factors such as affection and attachment contribute to the persistency of these relationships. This empirical study shows the theoretical and practical importance of focusing on the relational aspects of sex trafficking and the use of domestic violence knowledge to help identify trafficking situations, as well as for the prosecution of cases and to provide assistance to victims.

Keywords Domestic violence · Human trafficking · Organised crime · Prostitution · Sex trafficking · Violent relationships

Introduction

It is a random Friday night in Amsterdam's red-light district. Despite the rain, the streets are packed with people. Tourists stroll through the narrow streets and alleys, looking at the red

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lighted windows where women - working as prostitutes - offer their services. Whereas the area exudes an atmosphere of fun and excitement, some prostitutes are bamboozled out of their money by pimps, using manipulation and fraud. This phenomenon, the exploitation of prostitutes, is known in the Netherlands as sex trafficking.

Sex trafficking is a form of trafficking in persons, which is defined in the UN Palermo Protocol 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 receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation shall be irrelevant' (UN Palermo Protocol 2000:2).

This internationally recognised definition is also used in the Netherlands. This means that pimps exploiting prostitutes by means of coercion, deception or fraud are prosecuted for the offence of human trafficking.¹ In this article sex trafficking follows the UN definition of trafficking in persons, applied to trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Although there is an immense variety in trafficking situations and victims (Brunovskis 2012; Tyldum 2013), trafficking is often studied as a transnational organised crime phenomenon (Viuhko and Jokinen 2009; Hoyle et al. 2011; US Department of State 2013). Much research focuses on recruitment in countries of origin and the transportation and exploitation of foreign girls to far away countries. Some authors stress the 'trade' aspects of human trafficking, with victims being moved across borders like illicit commercial products, comparable to other commercial illicit merchandise such as drugs and weapons (for a review, see e.g. Zhang 2009; Abadinsky 2010; Shelley 2010, 2011; Winterdyk and Reichel 2010).

However, our study of prosecuted sex trafficking cases in the Netherlands shows that offenders and victims are often related in some way and often have close, intimate relationships. Without underestimating the seriousness of sex trafficking, it is clear that an organised crime perspective does not entirely fit the trafficking cases in which such intimate relationships exist between offenders and victims. Also, a focus on organised crime aspects may risk creating or confirming certain misconceptions about human trafficking. Such a perspective may for instance create a certain image or 'ideal type' of trafficking victims (Hoyle et al. 2011). This may mean, in consequence, that someone who chooses to work in prostitution cannot be considered a victim of trafficking. Or, that someone who does not run away or press charges against the exploiter cannot be a victim of trafficking. These misconceptions can lead to missed opportunities to identify victims or situations of trafficking (Hoyle et al. 2011; US Department of State 2013: 30).

In this article, based on the cases we studied, we argue that sex trafficking is not only an organised crime activity, but can also be a crime of a relational nature. This argument is an important contribution to the existing sex trafficking literature (Lehti and Aromaa 2006; Savona and Stefanizzi 2007; Kleemans 2009; Turner and Kelly 2009). We show the relational nature of sex trafficking through an analysis of 12 police investigations into sex trafficking related to window prostitution in the Amsterdam red-light district during the period 2006–

¹ In the Netherlands, prostitution is a legal and regulated profession. Nevertheless, coerced prostitution and the exploitation of prostitutes is a criminal act and falls under the definition of the offence of human trafficking.

2010.² This study demonstrates that sex trafficking is often embedded in *intimate relationships*, in which intimidation, control and violence play a role, along with affection and (economic) dependency. These characteristics seem to resemble situations of domestic violence. The parallels between domestic violence and sex trafficking are that both can occur within a relationship, that neither are single events but rather an accumulation of acts in which forms of violence enter the relationship, and that neither are easy to stop. It is quite remarkable that, to date, little or no sound empirical research has been done on the similarities between the two phenomena. Failure to map out these similarities means that valuable insights may be overlooked that could prove useful for a better understanding of the underlying processes. Knowledge of these (similar) processes could in turn be helpful in finding clues for effective prevention, prosecution, investigation and victim assistance (see also Caneppele and Mancuso 2013). In this article, we take a look at those similarities in order to explore what can be learned from the domestic violence literature to achieve a better understanding of sex trafficking.

Earlier Research

There is very little earlier research on this topic. In 2007, for instance, a literature study was published on the intersection between domestic violence and human trafficking (Warnath 2007). Warnath's study, however, does not examine similarities but discusses cause-effect relations between both phenomena. It deals, among others, with the extent to which victims of human trafficking were exposed to domestic violence. Warnath concludes that there is a large knowledge gap regarding the links between domestic violence and human trafficking, particularly concerning the interaction between the victim and the offender in human trafficking cases (Warnath 2007).

In 2008, a study was published on how best to provide assistance and support to victims of the two phenomena. However, the similarities between the two phenomena solely pertain to the effects of these two types of offences on the mental and physical well-being and the socio-economic position of the victims (Surtees and Somach 2008).

There is some research in which comparisons have been made between *prostitution* and domestic violence or between 'batterers' and pimps (Giobbe 1993; Raphael 2010; Hester and Westmarland 2004). Some authors argue that prostitution *per se* is violence and is the same as domestic violence, and that all prostitution causes harm to women (Farley 2004; Stark and Hodgson 2004). An Australian study uses a wide definition of domestic violence and states that it may also include forced prostitution (New South Wales 2012: 6). With the exception of this scant academic literature, we found very little empirical research on parallels between *sex trafficking* and domestic violence. In their recent study on human trafficking, Helfferich et al. (2011) do pay attention to the similarities between the phenomena and refer to insights gained from research on domestic violence because 'these cases are usually marked by difficult detachment processes' (Helfferich et al. 2011: 132). They furthermore refer to literature on domestic violence to explain the reluctance of victims of trafficking to turn to the police. We will return to both these aspects later on in this article.

In order to explore the parallels, the following section looks into the definition and characteristics of domestic violence. The second section describes our current research, explaining our empirical data and research methods. The third section comprises empirical

² The Amsterdam red-light district is a network of streets and alleys with approximately 300 'windows' that are rented by prostitutes. Window prostitution means that the prostitute is visible behind a window, a position from which she solicits customers who are walking by and are able to look at her. Once the customer has been solicited, the sexual services are provided behind the same window, after the curtains have been closed.

results on the relationships between offenders and victims, on control, intimidation and violence within sex trafficking relationships, and on victims' coping mechanisms. The last section discusses the main results of this study.

Characteristics of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence may be defined broadly or narrowly, but in essence domestic violence is about the exertion of (psychological) violence and control within relationships. There are different forms of domestic violence: (threat of) physical violence, sexual or emotional abuse, psychological violence such as controlling and dominating someone, and intimidation or stalking (Shipway 2004). Often, violence serves as a means of exerting control and power (cf. Babcock et al. 1993). In this article we use the definition of the British Home Office that domestic violence is 'any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality'.³

International academic literature provides descriptions of various characteristics of domestic violence (Malsch et al. 2005; Stark 2007, 2010). The prime characteristic of domestic violence is that violence is committed in a relational context. These are intimate (romantic) relationships or family relationships, yet domestic violence also includes violence committed against *ex* partners rather than just people who are living together.

A second characteristic of domestic violence is that the behaviour of both offender and victim display specific patterns or processes. Malsch et al. (2005) have described the systematic and persistent character of domestic violence. They observe that within violent relationships, particular patterns of dealing with one another frequently occur. Stark (2007, 2010) stresses that within abusive relationships the abuse tends to be 'on-going' rather than incident based. Furthermore, he points out that domestic violence consists for 90 % of other tactics than violence, namely intimidation, isolation and control. Consequently, he uses the term coercive control to describe this behaviour. In addition to physical assault, intimidation is used to induce fear and humiliation. Isolation refers to a subset of control tactics that constrain victims' access to friends, family and others (and thus to forms of support). Control includes material deprivation (money is taken away), limitation of speech and movement, and the regulation of someone's everyday life. He gives examples of certain trivial rules that women are forced by their partners to obey, always with the 'or else' proviso hanging over their heads. Illustrating the impact of imposed limitations, he describes how women explain that what was done to them was less important than what their partners prevented them from doing. Much of this deprivation and control is structural and induces an objective state of dependency (Stark 2010: 3).

The result of the expressed power, control and created dependency is that partners will be reluctant to separate and leaving is a complicated option. Leaving the relationship does not guarantee safety and may even increase the risk of further violence (Dichter and Gelles 2012). Other barriers to leaving an abusive partner are: fear of increased violence, lack of economic or social resources, concern for the welfare of children, sense of moral obligation, or love for the partner (Dichter and Gelles 2012). Since these relationships were not ended, the risk of domestic violence will also continue. Oddly, partners may continue the pattern of abuse even after the relationship has ended (Malsch et al. 2005: 366; Dichter and Gelles 2012).

³ Retrieved July 2013 from the website <https://www.gov.uk/domestic-violence-and-abuse>

Victims' Coping Strategies in Cases of Domestic Violence

According to Stark (2007), abusive offenders are actually dependent on their partner, either materially, sexually or emotionally. For this reason they usually protect their investment in a partner and actively block opportunities for escape. So, it is actually men who stay, not their partners (Stark 2007: 130, 205). Taking action against domestic violence by reporting it to the police or attempting separation often places victims at a higher risk of renewed violence (Erez et al. 2012: 2). How do victims deal with this situation? Some authors contend that coping mechanisms or ways of dealing with these complex situations can be understood as a (protracted) process of adaptation, which can have the effect that victims do not perceive themselves as victims (cf. Helfferich et al. 2011). Stark describes battered women's reactions to coercive control as a dynamic interplay of agency, victimisation and resistance (2007: 215). He sketches how the dynamics in abusive relationships are shaped through continuous negotiation about proximity and distance (2007: 130). Paterson (2009) points to 'resistance strategies' to abuse that can be viewed as a continuum of attempts to reduce or eliminate violence. She also mentions the importance of the context in which victims choose their strategies, as this context 'is key in shaping the actual options available to women' (Paterson 2009). Kearney (2001) has described the way in which victims deal with violence as an on-going process in which they redefine violence as something temporary or something that can be overcome. Some victims think, for instance, that they have to take care of the offender. Others think that they themselves are partly the cause of the violence, or are simply unable to see any other practical or emotional alternative (Ferraro and Johnson 1983). In other coping processes, victims are hoping for the return of better times within the relationship, or have an intense focus on the 'hoped-for' relationship and seek logical explanations for their partner's behaviour (Kearney 2001). The result of such reactions is that the relationship persists. It furthermore happens that women do not want to leave but just want the violence to end (Paterson 2009), and that they will continue to strive for non-violent contact with their partner (Dichter et al. 2011).

Partly for the same reasons for not ending an abusive relationship, victims are usually reluctant to call on the police for assistance, to file a report, or to facilitate the state's prosecution (Dichter et al. 2011).⁴ Research by Dichter et al. (2011) distinguishes several barriers that victims face when wishing to prevent further violence by means of State prosecution. Those barriers are: fear of retaliatory violence; love or financial dependency; the belief that the relationship will improve; the belief that the abuse is deserved, or that it was not serious or not 'bad enough'; concerns about the impact on children; negative prior police experiences; and the fear of being arrested themselves for illegal activity (Dichter et al. 2011). Also, victims do not wish their partner to be subjected to a prison sentence, and there is the role played by a sense of shame. Dichter et al. (2011) also found some motivating factors to engage in the prosecution process; namely certain breaking points where the violence had built up to a level of 'enough is enough'; concerns that the abuse was damaging for their children; and the presence of a social support network of friends, family, or co-workers that can influence their decision to go ahead with prosecution (2011: 29–30).

There are generally no witnesses to domestic violence: prosecution or any other form of intervention largely depends on the willingness of the victim to report the offence to the police

⁴ Approximately one in four cases of physical interpersonal partner violence (IPV), are reported to the police (either by the females themselves or by others) (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Some women in the study of Dichter and Gelles (2012: 59) felt that the threat of police sanctioning would deter their partners from using violence in the future, while others said that the lack of accountability from formal institutions (including the legal system) made them feel less safe and less protected.

(Malsch et al. 2005). Moreover, filing a report is not anonymous, since victim and offender are involved in a relationship. In cases in which victims actually filed a report, they often withdrew it later, and/or returned to their partner (Smeenk and Malsch 2005).

Current Research

This study explores the relationships and interaction between victims and suspects of sex trafficking. It also explores parallels with characteristics of domestic violence known from the literature, to see what insights this may yield. The research is based on an analysis of 12 criminal investigations into human trafficking for sexual exploitation.⁵ Under Dutch law, human trafficking includes the exploitation of a person by coercion, deception or violence, regardless of whether this takes place across international borders or within the Netherlands.⁶

We studied all sex trafficking cases that were prosecuted in the period 2006–2010 that were directly related to window prostitution in the Amsterdam red-light district. This concerns 12 cases that are selected as follows. Annual numbers of trafficking cases handled by the police are not available because trafficking is not registered separately in the police registration (BNRM 2012: 127). Because there is no such overview, the Dutch Police were requested for a list of trafficking cases handled in the Amsterdam area. This list contained 25 cases. Together with the police we determined which cases that had already been concluded were related to Amsterdam's red-light district, which were 12 cases. So in a period of five years, a total of 12 cases were pursued that related to the capital's red-light district. These 12 cases contain a total of 70 suspects and 76 victims. To compare, in the period 2007–2010, around 200 suspects of trafficking were registered by the Dutch Prosecutors Office each year (BNRM 2012: 170, 200). This figure includes all forms of trafficking, so not only sex trafficking.

For the source material we were granted access to the original police files. We analysed the complete files from the criminal investigations. These files contain the results of each investigation and consist, among other things, of transcribed telecom interceptions, reports on police observations, interrogations, statements made by victims and suspects, etc. In the Netherlands, victims of sex trafficking are counselled and interrogated by special police officers who are trained and certified in taking statements from these specific victims.⁷ Dutch criminal investigations make extensive use of wiretapping, yielding substantial amounts of 'non-obtrusive' evidence. In all 12 investigations, the teams decided to wiretap suspects and/or victims. These telephone conversations provide valuable information about the relationship between victims and suspects and the ways in which they dealt with each other.

⁵ On the basis of the collected data we reported earlier on the investigation of human trafficking by the police and on their cooperation with other government agencies (Verhoeven et al. 2011).

⁶ Weitzer (2005: 228 and 2007: 463) states that the definition of 'coercive sex trafficking' (the use of force, fraud, or deception to procure, transport, harbour, and sell persons, within and between nations, for purposes of prostitution) does not apply to persons who willingly travel in search of employment in the sex industry. He stresses that many writers lump this kind of migration into the trafficking category. In the light of the discussion about what should be called trafficking, we want to mention that in some of our cases we see that there are situations in which both deception and voluntary travel go hand in hand. Women, for example, hear about possibilities and big earnings in the Dutch sex industry and they agree to travel with some of the suspects to the Netherlands. While working there, they are misled about their expenses and earnings and they are forced to hand over most of their earnings to suspects.

⁷ Furthermore, the police use so-called 'intake conversations' with victims of human trafficking in which the judicial procedure is explained by a specialised detective with the aim of enabling them to make the decision whether they want to press charges.

In addition, we conducted face-to-face interviews with leaders of police teams involved in the investigations. The 12 police investigations varied in duration from one to 18 months, while the majority lasted between three to seven months.

All the gathered data were coded using MAXQDA to facilitate the analysis. This is a software tool especially designed for qualitative data analysis.

Using police data inevitably imposes some limitations. Police data are originally gathered for a different purpose, namely the investigation and prosecution of crime. Also, possible human trafficking that is not investigated by the police is not included. Unobtrusively gathered police data offers a close look at relationships between traffickers and victims, but does not give a complete picture. Interviews with the women involved could also shed light on similarities between sex trafficking and domestic violence, but for a first exploration of our hypothesis we chose to use police data. Further research and the use of other methods could test and validate our findings.

Empirical Results

The data from the human trafficking cases relate to 76 victims and 70 suspects. Most suspects were male. All victims were female. In this article we therefore use the terms traffickers, suspects and men as synonyms, and the terms victims, prostitutes and women as synonyms, depending on the context.

The ages of the suspects appearing in the cases varied from 18 to 58. The average age was 30. Most were born in Turkey, Hungary, the Netherlands and Germany. Three of the 12 studied cases had only one suspect as the target of the investigation, whereas four cases centred on two or three suspects. Almost half of the cases (five) focused on a wider group of suspects, generally six or seven. One investigation was quite extensive, involving about 30 suspects.

The ages of the victims at the time of the investigation varied from 17 to 35. The average age was 23. They were mainly in their 20s (54), but there were also adolescents (15) and women in their 30s (7). Approximately a third of the women were 21 or younger at the moment of the investigation. More than half of the victims was born in the Netherlands (45). Another significant group of victims was born in Hungary. Other countries of birth of the victims were Romania, Germany, and in a few cases Poland, Thailand, France, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Belgium, and the Netherlands Antilles.

In all cases relationships between suspects and victims occurred. The 12 studied cases involved 73 intimate relationships.⁸ Some investigations involved one or more relationships (five cases), whereas other investigations comprised three to five relationships (five cases). Two investigations consisted of more than 20 intimate relationships. These were both protracted investigations, in which suspects were under surveillance for a long time. The main suspects in these two cases had up to nine intimate relationships over a longer period of time.

Relationships Between Suspect and Victims

In addition to information on exploitation, deception and different types of abuse, the police files contained information on how the traffickers established the 'boyfriend relationships'.

⁸ Sometimes the police files contained a lot of information about the relationships between victims and suspects, while there was less information on others because it wasn't the focus of the criminal investigation. We excluded the intimate relationships between suspects and prostitutes that emerged at some point outside the duration of the criminal investigation.

Victims and traffickers in the studied files met each other in nightlife, in prostitution areas, or in their countries of origin. A lot of suspects were already active in the Amsterdam red-light district, as pimps, illegal taxi drivers or in other capacities, or they met the prostitutes when visiting them as a customer.

In the beginning of the relationship the couples tend to enjoy themselves. They do fun things together, they go out, they visit places together and text each other. A number of women indicated that they were having a good time together:

'We were forever talking, laughing, fucking, boozing, smoking joints and chilling out.'

Several women indicated that their boyfriend had shown kindness and personal interest during their first encounters, as the following excerpt from the police files shows:

'X listened to me when I talked about my feelings and I felt he was someone I could talk to really well. He sometimes dropped by to sit with me for a while. He was aware of my problems in the prostitution business. (...)'

The criminal investigations we studied revealed that a number of men were keen to show off their money. They drove around in eye-catching cars, wore expensive clothes, and preferred to spend their money conspicuously in the company of others.

X. recalls the first time Y. came by to pick her up for a nice outing:

'Y. gave me butterflies. When I saw that car parked with that barrel-chested bloke in it (...). I thought 'this is it'. That's my man, strong, good-looking and smooth; it looks like he's got money. I think he's loaded. What more do you want?'

As usually happens at the start of intimate relationships, some particular characteristics of the partner are valued. One of the women described her boyfriend as sweet and shy. Other women indicated they were treated with respect, that their boyfriend was sensitive or very helpful. Besides affection, the relationship brings a number of other benefits. Their partners organise a place to live for the women, for example, or help them do their work. They bring them to work and pick them up again, bring food during working hours, do the women's shopping and help out when other pimps make trouble.

Almost all couples started living together. Sometimes they ran a shared household. Sometimes suspects lived with several women at the same time. There were also criminal cases in which several women and suspects shared a house. A number of couples talked of marriage and one couple did get married. Some couples have a child.

Most of the suspects did not say very much during the police interrogation. However, a few did disclose bits of information. One suspect briefly talked about his relationships with his girlfriends and why he 'lived off them'. According to this man, his girlfriends really wanted to take care of him and thought that he did not need to do anything. 'It is normal in a relationship that you share everything', he argued. According to another suspect, what concerns women most is to have a sense of belonging, to have fancy things, and to have money. As one suspect said about a number of women and a group of other pimps:

'Those girls want to belong. They do it themselves. They themselves make that decision. They want to compete among each other with nice bags and beautiful clothes. For that you need money and you don't earn that on your own with some shitty job. And those guys have plenty of girls. They just say that if they want to belong, they have to start doing that work. Otherwise the girls can't see those guys. It's up to them. And then those girls start doing it because that's the way to become the guy's girlfriend.'

Later on in the relationship, some suspects encouraged ‘their women’ to start working in prostitution. Other victims were already working in prostitution. In all cases the men urged women to hand over their money, on the pretext of managing their money for them (for example for a shared future together, a house abroad, their own business, or a study), or that there were debts or certain (protection) costs. Sometimes women thought they had saved a lot of money together, only to discover later that the money was gone. Overall, the cases paint a picture of men who rely on the money earned by their women, while they act as if it is the other way around.

Control, Rules and Isolation

One of the methods used by traffickers to continue the relationship and the flow of money is through a far-reaching control over the woman’s life, under the pretext of their shared future together, for her own safety, or simply because he sets the rules.

Most victims are dropped off at work and picked up afterwards. When working, the traffickers or others (so-called bodyguards) keep an eye on them. They watch how many customers they receive, how long the customers stay, the women’s working hours, and thus how much money they should have earned. Moreover, traffickers monitor whether other pimps try to persuade their women to start working for them. Therefore, traffickers are present in the prostitution district and have frequent telephone contact with the women. Also, sometimes several times a day, the money is picked up at the women’s window by the men, to avoid the prostitute having a large amount of money in her room. The men claim that they are present in the area for the sake of security.

The suspects introduce certain ‘rules’ into the relationship. One woman says she had to promise her boyfriend to keep him informed about her working hours, to put his mind at ease. She sends him text messages about her earnings, to show how well she works. In one of the cases, women have to ask the men for permission to stop working or to leave the room to get a sandwich or something to drink. Sometimes a woman even calls her boyfriend after each customer visit. Some traffickers argue that in a relationship you inform the other where you are. One of the women says:

‘We always had to report if we went somewhere, we could not go out with men, we had to describe in detail who we spoke to, or who smiled at us’.

Various statements and wire taps also show how rules are imposed on victims as to the minimum daily earnings, while others are not allowed to travel alone or to talk to other women about their work, even when living in the same house. One victim tells the police the following:

‘He doesn’t only want control of my money, but also of my whole personality. He wants to prescribe who I hang out with, what I do, how much of my self-earned money I can spend, how I do my work, how long, and with whom...’.

Several women reported about the ‘rule’ that they had to pay a certain amount if they wanted to stop working or to leave their partner. Amounts between €6000 to €50,000 were quoted.

Also when not at work, the women’s movements are limited. In several cases women remained alone, at home, with the door locked from the outside by their partner. In all of these cases there was only one key to the house, which the suspects always took with them when leaving, locking the door behind them, ostensibly in the interest of the women’s ‘safety’.

Some of these rules isolate women from their environment, from fellow prostitutes and from others, with the effect of limiting their contacts. The fact that the victims live together

with suspects and are taken to work also has the effect that the women actually never go outside alone. In addition to the above, isolation is sometimes exacerbated further by the purchase of a new telephone as a ‘gift’, but without the previous contact list of the old telephone. Moreover, independence is in some cases restricted even further by keeping the victim’s passport, making it impossible to travel or to rent a room in the red-light district independently. This happened to at least six women in the studied cases.

Intimidation

In addition to rules, isolation and control, relationships between traffickers and their victims are characterised by intimidation. To underline the importance of the ‘rules’ of the relationship, victims are threatened with violence if they don’t stick to the ‘agreements’. Other reasons for intimidation are related to the women’s work and earnings, or to prevent them from ending the relationship. Suspects also threaten to hurt the victims’ relatives. The seriousness of the threats varies. One of the suspects became very angry when his girlfriend did not answer the phone. Others became angry when the women did not start working early enough. *‘When you get home, I’ll fuck you for that’*, said a suspect over the phone because his woman had stopped by a supermarket before she started working. Another suspect became furious when he suspected his girlfriend was pretending to be sick and therefore could not work. He called her a ‘liar’ and a ‘dirty filthy whore’. He told her that she wasn’t sick and that she had better beware, otherwise he would press her eyes out of her head. Other victims faced death threats when they said they had had enough of prostitution or wanted to end the relationship.

Victims’ statements demonstrate that they are not only threatened directly, but that they can also be intimidated by the reputation of the trafficker, his friends or his family. Furthermore, the fact that the trafficker possesses a firearm – which was the case in half of the investigations – was also perceived as so intimidating that women felt that leaving him was not an option. As one woman put it:

‘He uses it as a statement ... as a kind of threat, like ‘keep in mind that I have a gun... I might use it, too.’

Although there are victims who tell the police that they don’t take the threats seriously – *‘that’s just the way we talk to each other’* – others are truly terrified because suspects give them the feeling that the women cannot live on without them.

Violence

What adds weight to the intimidation is the use of violence or the actual carrying out of verbal threats. The violence varies in terms of the injuries it causes. As one example of violence that does not cause visible injuries: a suspect threw cold water over his girlfriend while arguing. She was already having an asthma attack at the time and he told her that cold water would increase the risk of getting a heart attack. Another woman explained how her partner sometimes grabbed her by the throat, lifted her up and threw her away. Some women are hit only infrequently, while others are beaten up regularly, in a number of cases resulting in a broken jaw or nose. Victims are usually beaten when they ‘don’t behave’. One woman described the moment she tried to end her relationship with her boyfriend as follows:

‘He then smacked me. Like this! Three blows to my head with his fists. Things went black before my eyes three times. I started to cry. Then he said “embrace me, embrace me,

embrace me now". I just did what I was told. Ever since I've never gathered the courage to say that I wanted to leave him.'

In all the relationships we examined we found a combination of controlling and intimidation tactics, and the use of (threats of) violence. There was a considerable amount of variation in the extent to which violence played a (prominent) role. Our findings show that the exploitation of prostitutes is not a single event but a process, combining a variety of acts and tactics (see also David 2007).

Coping Strategies

The above information paints a picture of human trafficking as a phenomenon that can be embedded in intimate relationships in which control, intimidation and violence play an important role. Trafficking is a gradual process, and this gradually created attachment or dependency in the relationships influences the attitude and the response of women in these relationships. When looking at the criminal investigations, we identified various ways in which the women dealt with control, intimidation and violence.

First, several victims took action and tried to get away and/or to end the relationship. Several women fled the country; in most cases the suspects threatened them or their family in order to make them come back. Second, we observed fear and docile behaviour in response to control and violence. Victims became cautious and asked permission, for example, before taking a five-minute break. Fear furthermore caused them to avoid interference by the police, as they were scared that this would put them or their relatives in danger. In fact they tried to find ways to minimise the violence, as one woman describes it:

'I felt hopeless and frightened. I felt threatened...as if there was no way out...not to the left nor to the right. (...) The last possibility I saw was to negotiate with him'.

Third, victims played down what had happened. They blamed themselves for the situation or they thought no serious offences had been committed. They considered their situation to be temporary, for instance, or they said they just often had an argument. One reaction that we often found to explain aggressive behaviour or threats was that this was just how they coped with one another in the relationship, or that this was just part of how they talked to each other.

Fourth, being in love or being emotionally connected caused victims to accept certain behaviour. They attributed this behaviour to the suspect's problematic youth or to a particular disorder. Fifth, some victims did not have an interest in changing the situation or hoped that the relationship would improve, which made them refuse any intervention from outside. Since some women wanted to continue earning money through prostitution, the problems connected to this profession were not acknowledged or dealt with. Furthermore, due to the fact that the women were earning some money - in order to ultimately become independent, or to support relatives - they were unwilling to change their situation (see also Brunovskis and Surtees 2007). In some cases, women were exploited but nevertheless had the opportunity or prospective of earning more money than they would through other kinds of work.

On the other hand, escalating violence caused a number of women to decide that their situation was no longer bearable. One woman tried to flee when she was at work. She closed the curtain as if she had a customer and called a cab. The taxi stopped in front of the building and she got in. However, the taxi was intercepted by one of the trafficker's 'bodyguards' who took the victim back to the trafficker. Thus, threats and violence made some women afraid to end the relationship or situation, while in a number of other cases the violence actually caused the situation to come to light.

Willingness to Report

Similar to cases of domestic violence, victims of trafficking face several obstacles that dissuade them from reporting their situation to the police. Earlier, we described how the women's various ways of coping with their partners' violence leads them to decline any outside interference. Aside from fear of retaliatory violence, some women consider the violence to be a relationship problem, something they have to solve themselves.

On the other hand, there are victims who do request help from the police and who do cooperate in prosecution. Our data show that, for example, an escalation of violence can motivate women to file a report with the police. If the police were already conducting an investigation and can inform the victims that their partner has not saved any money at all, or that their partner has been telling other women the same story, this information sometimes increases their willingness to file a report.

The police reports indicate that victims can take different attitudes to filing a report or cooperating with a criminal investigation. The attachment to their boyfriend, the benefits of the relationship, the shared life, the idea that the situation is not that serious (she is not a victim, it is her own fault), or a feeling of gratitude towards the suspect (who has helped her) can make the victims unwilling to cooperate with the investigation. Also, fresh threats by the partner can make women change their earlier statements. They may contradict or retract their earlier statements, explaining them as the result of anger or rancour. Especially when there is still contact between the women and men (for instance through prison visits), the women can make a complete turnabout with regard to decisions made previously. These findings are confirmed by the results of Helfferich et al. (2011), who studied the determinants of the willingness to make a statement and distinguished offender strategies, police action and the victim's perspective.

The ambivalent attitude of victims towards reporting to the police is illustrated by the story of Anna. This case is one example of the 73 intimate relationships we encountered in the police investigations on sex trafficking. The case also illustrates the relational nature of sex trafficking. The case is based on reports of conversations by Anna with the police, transcripts of intercepted telephone conversations and text messages between Anna and her boyfriend Musa,⁹ and on the court ruling. Anna is a woman who came to work in the Netherlands from an Eastern European country. Musa takes away her money and has been convicted for human trafficking.

Case

Anna reports to the police after Musa has been arrested for human trafficking. She states that she met her boyfriend Musa one and a half years ago. He was an acquaintance of one of her girlfriends and she met him in a bar in the red-light district. Musa worked in that bar and she was also working in the same neighbourhood in window prostitution and he had noticed her on occasion. The couple formed a relationship and later lived together. After some time, Musa stopped working. He asked Anna for money, politely at first, pushier later on, finally hitting Anna when she refused to give him money. After some time they moved to a house of one of Musa's relatives. In the new environment, the violence becomes more frequent. They argue nearly every day and she is beaten about once a week. The arguments concern money and Musa's jealousy. Anna states she didn't report to the police earlier because Musa was intimidating her, for example by demolishing her possessions. She mentions an incident where he demolishes her suitcase to prevent her from leaving. He also threatened to report her because of her tax debts and threatens her with more violence.

A few weeks ago Musa hit me and I got a black eye. (...) I wanted to leave him, but at the same time I was in love with him. Yet I was also scared that one day the beating would go wrong. Several times I was about to

⁹ Anna and Musa are fictitious names.

leave him, yet then at once he was very sweet again. He said he loved me and he wanted to marry me and he wanted to have children together.'

While Anna was working, Musa called her regularly. She states she didn't know why he called her so often when she was working. *'Perhaps because we lived together; I just answered the phone. I thought this was normal. I wasn't surprised that he checked on me every half hour; but later on I thought it was quite frequent.'*

Five days after her report, Anna visits the police again. This time she wants to retract her statements. She wants to do this, because she loves Musa and because she can't find another place to live (and because she dislikes the prosecution procedure). She confirms that everything happened as reported, but she doesn't want her statements to have consequences. She doesn't want Musa to be prosecuted.

'I've known him for a very long time and I know why he has done this. I am fond of him and I don't want to do this to him. I have always loved my boyfriend very much. I would regret it if Musa had to go to prison. I still love him.'

'I've had a lot of influence on Musa, I've changed him a lot, he has stopped using drugs. You can see Musa is looking for a job (...). Everything will be different now' [now that he's been arrested].

This case illustrates how trafficking can take place within an intimate relationship, and how exploitation, violence and affection can play a role in such a relationship, all at the same time. This interaction between victim and suspect of sex trafficking displays several elements that are also typical for domestic violence. First, the combination of intimidation, violence and affection. Second, the role of extreme control in the relationship. Third, a changing attitude towards reporting to the police. This changing attitude can have several explanations: fear and a certain dependency, feeling sorry for the trafficker, the hope for a better future, and not wanting your partner to end up in prison.

Discussion

In this article we explored the relationships that exist between victims and suspects of sex trafficking, using police files of prosecuted sex trafficking cases. We looked at the possible parallels with familiar characteristics of domestic violence to see how knowledge of the latter can contribute to a better understanding of sex trafficking.

Our findings show that intimate relationships exist between the men and women identified in the police files as traffickers and their victims. Suspects and victims 'hang out together', develop affectionate relationships and start living together. These relationships are characterised by forms of control, isolation, intimidation, violence and exploitation. Such characteristics resemble the characteristics of domestic violence. Surtees' research on trafficking in Southern and Eastern Europe shows that, in several countries, a particularly high percentage of recruiters were men with whom the victim was in an intimate relationship (2008: 52, see also Kleemans 2009). Brunovskis (2012: 55) similarly found that 'it is not exceptional for a trafficker to be a friend, boyfriend or husband' (2012: 55). Tyldum (2013) found trafficking situations within transnational marriages. Other studies on pimp-prostitute relationships also found mechanisms that correspond with domestic violence (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002; Hester and Westmarland 2004; Giobbe 1993). Our data show how traffickers keep an eye on victims, set certain rules, and isolate them from others. The relationships are furthermore characterised by intimidation and violence. Nevertheless, the relationships continue for several reasons (fear, love, attachment or dependency). This process corresponds to patterns of domestic violence, in which similar tactics are used and where partners do not split up easily.

Our results also show that how women deal with violence in sex trafficking relationships corresponds to coping strategies among victims of domestic violence. The various responses of

victims to violence or exploitation contain all the elements of a coping process, including the belief in particular explanations for the violence. Thus, we see that the victims play down the violence and control, consider it as something temporary or as a relationship problem (a personal problem), or see it as their particular way of interacting with each other. This, combined with fear, results in relationships that persist. Women do not perceive themselves as victims or do not want to subject their boyfriend to a prison term, which prevents them from calling in help from outside or from filing a report with the police (see also Hester 2000).

An escalation of violence may cause victims to raise the alarm, for instance by notifying the police. However, it frequently occurs that they retract previous statements later on, or that they give a contradictory statement. This ambivalent attitude of victims with respect to accepting police assistance or remaining in touch with the police is often based on fear, affection and economic attachment to the partner. These responses are comparable to those of victims of domestic violence.

Our findings show that the issue of trafficking for sexual exploitation can benefit from an additional perspective. In addition to the image of sex trafficking as transnational organised crime, we emphasise the importance of examining the relational nature of trafficking in certain cases. For this purpose, the perspective of domestic violence offers a useful comparison; this body of knowledge provides valuable insights to help understand the sex trafficking phenomenon and the attitude of victims. This knowledge could for example help identify trafficking cases and assist prosecutorial decision making. Prosecutors may conceivably be reluctant to pursue a case if the trafficker and the victim have an intimate relationship. In such a case, understanding domestic violence dynamics could add a valuable perspective.

Considering sex trafficking from a relational perspective can also explain a number of apparent contradictions. First, trafficking is a process consisting of diverse behaviour and reactions, resulting in (unequal) relationships. Beside violence and control, these relationships can also be characterised by affection and attachment. For this reason, relationships do not simply end when violence occurs. This insight adds the necessary nuance to the familiar academic debate as to whether or not unwilling ‘victims’ are involved, who are forced to prostitute themselves and hand over their earnings against their will. The context of an intimate relationship and shared household provides a more nuanced picture than that of unwilling victims on the one hand, versus independent prostitutes on the other.

Second, human trafficking relationships explain the ambivalent attitude of victims towards cooperating with a criminal investigation. While violence may lead to a report filed with the police, affection or loyalty towards the trafficker may lead to the retraction of statements or to giving contradictory statements. For criminal investigators, it is important to recognise that this ambivalent attitude does not typify an unreliable witness, but typifies complex relationships in sex trafficking cases. A better understanding of this process may help explain the attitude of victims of human trafficking during a trial. It may also serve professionals in different fields who work with sex trafficking victims, with a view to intervention strategies.

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