



All Fine at the EU's Southeastern Front? An Investigation into the Countering of Sex Trafficking on the Island of Cyprus

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Abstract

Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a complex global issue. This article explores this issue in the context of Cyprus, an island jurisdiction within the European Union. The article aims to pinpoint gaps in the process of investigating and prosecuting cases of trafficking in persons for sexual purposes on the island of Cyprus. Thirteen interviews were conducted with representatives from various agencies commissioned to deal with human trafficking on the island, including police, courts, and prosecution services. The findings reveal a corpus of breaches and flaws throughout the process of managing trafficking and its associated victims. These include inadequate identification of victims, ineffective prosecution of offenders, and scarce convictions. In view of these findings, recommendations are provided to improve the overall domestic management of people trafficking.

Keywords: Judiciary; law enforcement; non-governmental organizations; social welfare services.

Introduction

Human trafficking for sexual purposes results from perpetrators seeking to profit from specific populations, mainly women and girls (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022). Victims become entangled due to numerous factors (Cho, 2015; Jac-Kucharski, 2012). Sex trafficking, in its most extreme manifestation, involves the abduction of women to remote locations for sexual exploitation (Fragoso, 2018; Kara, 2009). Recruiters may exploit victims both online and offline, through forced marriages or deceptive relationships, where true intentions are revealed only after sexual exploitation begins (Coster van Voorhout, 2009; Europol, 2021; Reid, 2016). Victims may also be pushed by their families to accept offers to work abroad or they may initiate contact with recruiters, unaware of the impending exploitation (Aghatise, 2004; Di Tommaso et al., 2009; Skilbrei & Tveit, 2008). The motivations for victims accepting offers to work abroad vary, influenced by factors like political instability, poverty, unemployment, and discrimination (Duong, 2014; Hoefinger, 2016). Conversely, pull factors, such as the promise of a brighter future, better quality of life, or improved working conditions, also play a role (El-Cherkeh et al., 2004; Europol, 2016).

Undoubtedly, sex trafficking is a complex global issue involving various methods and conditions, including coercion, deceit, and abuse, complicated by consensual aspects. Emanating from the complexities and entanglements of human trafficking, biased portrayals of victims as passive and innocent have emerged and consequently been criticized by theoreticians and activists alike (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Cojocar, 2016). Indeed, the historical divide between vulnerable women and



malicious men has influenced anti-trafficking discourse, particularly in debates over prostitution (Spanger, 2011). In turn, it is often argued that this discourse is entangled with national and regional interests, further complicating the issue (Soderlund, 2005; Warren, 2012). Moreover, it has also been linked to the enforcement of national security-informed laws, policies, and tactics (Simmons & Lloyd, 2015). Consequently, the current legal tools and frameworks aim to combat human trafficking, with transnational legislation including the European Union (EU) Directive on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Protecting its Victims (Directive 2011/36/EU) playing a crucial role.

The EU defines human trafficking in its legal framework through Directive 2011/36/EU. This directive provides a common understanding and approach to defining and addressing human trafficking across EU member states. Article 2 of Directive 2011/36/EU defines trafficking in human beings as:

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of 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 is further defined in Article 2(3) of Directive 2011/36/EU as: “exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the exploitation of criminal activities, or the removal of organs.”¹ This definition encompasses a wide range of actions and means by which traffickers exploit individuals for various purposes. The EU Directive emphasizes the importance of a victim-centered and human rights-based approach, outlining measures for prevention, prosecution of offenders, and protection and support for victims of trafficking (VoTs). EU member states are required to align their national legislation with the provisions of this directive to ensure a consistent and coordinated response to human trafficking across the EU.

Sex Trafficking in Europe

As already noted, human trafficking in the EU is a multifaceted issue, deeply entwined with migration patterns, socio-economic factors, and legal frameworks. Sexual exploitation remains the most common form of trafficking in the EU, accounting for 41.4% of cases (Eurostat, 2024). A significant proportion of these victims comprises EU nationals, reflecting a domestic element to the trafficking conundrum (Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs, 2023). Additionally, the influx of migrants and asylum seekers into Europe, particularly from conflict zones, generates additional vulnerabilities (Cockbain & Sidebottom, 2022; Gobbi et al., 2023; Kuzmuk, 2024) and further complicates the identification and support of trafficking victims (UNODC, 2022). A case in point is the conflict in Ukraine, which has led to a surge in vulnerable populations susceptible to trafficking (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2023). Indeed, identifying and supporting trafficking victims remain significant challenges (Brunovskis, 2024), especially among undocumented migrants and asylum seekers (Stepnitz, 2012). Also, van Rij and McAlister (2020) foreground the cross-border nature of trafficking within the EU and emphasize the need for better coordination and information sharing between countries. Hence the European Commission's efforts in enhancing cross-border cooperation and data sharing to better address the issue. Also directly related is the role of digital platforms in the recruitment and exploitation of sex trafficking victims. Traffickers exploit online platforms to recruit, advertise, and exploit victims, necessitating stronger cyber monitoring and law enforcement collaboration across the EU (Europol, 2023).

Besides cross-border collaboration, obstacles to domestic responses to trafficking in human beings include a lack of collaboration between criminal justice agencies and inadequate levels of training for employees dealing with human trafficking (Matos et al., 2018). Also, studies suggest that no single local agency (e.g., police) can serve the interests of justice if assistance from partner agencies dealing with trafficking in human beings is not provided (Pajón & Walsh, 2023).

Cypriot Context

Cyprus is an island country in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, situated at the furthest southeastern point of the EU at the crossroads of three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe. Cyprus's economy is small in scale, depending overwhelmingly on service provision, primarily within the banking, financial, and hospitality sectors. Along with these service-based enterprises, a sex industry has been developed. This originally served the British colonialist troops, later accommodating foreign military missions (e.g., British, UN, and Greek), tourists, locals (Constantinou, 2013a), and, more recently, foreign workers. Sexual exploitation of women in Cyprus transpires in both public (e.g., the street, parking lots, pubs, massage parlors, and cabarets) and private spaces (e.g., apartments, houses, and hotel rooms; Constantinou, 2012), and mostly involves foreign women.

In 2022, exploitation primarily involved sex trafficking, targeting women from Eastern Europe, South and Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. The identified foreign VoTs came from countries like Cameroon, Moldova, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Romania, Egypt, India, Nepal, and Nigeria. Notably, traffickers often recruited Russian and Ukrainian women using short-term tourist visas (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2023). Moreover, slow asylum examination procedures were exploited by traffickers who opportunistically detected female asylum seekers (e.g., from Nigeria and Cameroon) and sexually exploited them (Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2020).

Cypriot Legislative Context

In Cyprus, as in England and Wales, there is partial regulation of prostitution. Activities such as nuisances from prostituted spaces (Cyprus Constitution, 1959, cap. 154, s. 188), procurement (Cyprus Constitution, 1959, cap. 154, s. 157), public soliciting for prostitution (Cyprus Constitution, 1959, cap. 154, s. 164(1)(b)), and related commercial activities (Cyprus Constitution, 1959, cap. 154, ss. 156, 164, 165) are penalized. However, individual and voluntary prostitution is not illegal (nor is it formally regarded as sex work, since no such legal occupation exists on the island). This regulatory approach is ambivalent, neither fully legalizing nor penalizing prostitution, leading to questionable practices that exploit and trade foreign women (Constantinou, 2012).

To address the crime of human trafficking and align domestic legislation with EU law (Directive 2011/36/EU) and transnational law (Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2005; United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, 2000), Cyprus introduced two statutory laws in 2007 (Law 87(I)/2007, Combating of Trafficking and the Exploitation of Human Beings and the Protection of Victims Law, 2007) and 2014 (Law 60(I)/2014, Prevention and Combating of Trafficking and Exploitation of Persons and the Protection of Victims, 2014). Law 60(I)/2014 replaced Law 87(I)/2007 and aimed to harmonize domestic law with EU and international standards while better targeting human trafficking. Aligned with Directive 2011/36/EU, Article 17 of Law 60(I)/2014 includes provisions to protect trafficking victims and ensure fair treatment by authorities. It criminalizes individuals who can reasonably assume that the labor or services produced by a victim they use constitute elements of human trafficking offences.

Moreover, via Law 117(I)/2019 (which amended Law 60(I)/2014), the penalties for trafficking in human beings were significantly increased, and a new provision concerning the criminalization of the use of sexual services of victims of trafficking was added (thus rendering the use of services of VoTs a strict liability offence). Unsurprisingly, the criminalization of coerced paid sex is part of a broader transnational effort to prevent trafficking by reducing the demand for exploited services. However, the interpretation and application of this ordinance in the Cypriot context require further analysis (that falls beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on examining the current domestic approach towards managing trafficking in human beings).

Criminal justice administration in Cyprus is governed by the Criminal Code and the Criminal Procedure Law. It involves District Courts (single judge), Assize Courts (three judges), and the Supreme Court (three judges). Trials follow an adversarial system, with judges arbitrating between opposing parties presenting their cases based on evidence and legal procedures. Section 74 of the Criminal Procedure Law mirrors features that are found in the common law system of England and Wales (Kyprianou, 2009); however, decisions in human trafficking cases rest solely with the judiciary, which many times acquits accused individuals due to a lack of sufficient evidence beyond reasonable doubt (Constantinou, 2013b).

The present study examined how EU and international legislation addressing human trafficking was transposed and implemented at the domestic level. In particular, it explored whether enforcing the law benefits trafficking victims. Overall, the study aimed to investigate whether the local criminal justice system, in a practical sense, was fit for purpose in addressing cases of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Methodology

The collection of primary data involved conducting semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) with 13 study participants from organizations with a role in helping to combat trafficking. These included the police, the courts, Social Welfare Services, prosecution services, Mental Health Services, migration, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The interview questions were designed to help understand the (broader) criminal process of human trafficking cases in Cyprus. Themes included: (a) the identification of cases and VoTs, (b) the process of supporting victims, (c) the current legislation governing trafficking in persons, (d) the process of investigating trafficking cases, (e) the presentation of cases before Courts, (f) the approach to trafficking cases by the prosecution and the judiciary, (g) the collection and use of statistical data by the relevant bodies, and (h) the coordination of the relevant services during the investigation and processing of trafficking cases.

Data collection occurred in 2020. Throughout the data collection process, anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality of study participants were secured (King & Horrocks, 2010). The details of participants were not recorded in any document, except their signature on the informed consent form, furnished before the interview commenced (and destroyed six months after the interview date). Interviews were not recorded (Rutakumwa et al., 2020), to allow participants to feel more at ease and less inhibited. However, notes (average of 4–8 pages) were made by the researcher throughout the interview process and outstanding responses were transcribed verbatim.

Once all primary data (notes from 13 interviews with study participants) were collected, they were processed according to directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) by stage of the criminal justice process. Specifically, the detection, investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of sex trafficking cases. Thus, the categories were predetermined; however, as new codes manifested from the analysis of the interview scripts, they were grouped to form themes and added to the original coding scheme accordingly. All interview notes were read line by line, and their content was inductively placed under the most relevant categories on a spreadsheet.

Findings

As noted earlier, the phenomenon of trafficking in human beings is multifaceted and addressing it effectively requires synergy between a diverse set of actors and services. This research therefore focused both on the operation (and performance) of each entity assigned to handle a specific aspect of human trafficking and on their wider coherence. The impact of these two parameters (unilateral operation and synergy of entities) on the process of detecting and prosecuting trafficking cases was also examined. In the following subsections, findings are presented thematically: (1) the organization and operation of the entities involved in countering sex trafficking, (2) the detection of cases of trafficking in human beings, (3) pre-trial support and protection of (potential) victims of trafficking in persons, (4) investigation and criminal prosecution, and (5) the adjudication of trafficking cases.

Organization and Operation of Designated Entities

The interviews revealed several core factors causing delays and hindering the state's ability to effectively deal with the phenomenon of trafficking in persons, particularly the successful criminal prosecution of wrongdoers. During data analysis, the following elements emerged: (a) understaffing of three main agencies—police, prosecution, and the courts; (b) insufficient training of staff on human trafficking of all entities under study; (c) lack of quality assurance mechanisms for the services provided by those entities; (d) incomplete processing and analysis of statistical data on trafficking by the stakeholders; (e) insufficient communication between the entities, covering all ranks from the highest to the lowest; (f) weak cooperation between frontline actors; and (g) instances of strained relations between the entities and their corresponding actors. In an example of the latter, relations between the Cyprus Police Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and Social Welfare Services were markedly heated. Both parties accused the other of not acting with professionalism and “pushing” duties and tasks to each other (notes from interviews with the representatives of the Social Welfare Services and the Cyprus Police Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings).

Detection of Cases of Trafficking in Human Beings

Findings revealed that an all-encompassing and uniform detection mechanism was absent, although a wealth of indicators and suspicious activities linked to trafficking were widespread. This concerned all actors in the criminal justice system. Data collection and analysis on human trafficking were barely utilized by the police, who had not exploited the wealth of information held by other frontline actors contacting VoTs and perpetrators daily. Also, the police (the Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, in particular) were found to be unable to respond to the inflow of data (potential intelligence) they received (± 100 different pieces of information per year). Thus, chiefly reactively, they followed only concrete complaints (completed offences) filed by VoTs. Illustratively, the Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings received, on average, up to 50 pieces of information annually on suspicious financial transactions linked to trafficking in persons from the Unit for Combating Cover-Up Offences. However, it only investigated a tiny fraction of them (notes from an interview with a representative of the Cyprus Police Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings).

Reportedly, the understaffing of the relevant police departments (e.g., Aliens and Immigration Service, Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings) poses an obstacle to identifying victims in ongoing cases. For example, the Nicosia Aliens and Migration Police Unit had conducted no checks for marriages of convenience between June and November 2018, although dozens of cases had been submitted for investigation by the Civil Registry and Migration Department. Meanwhile, the district units of the Aliens and Migration Service did not have the ability to investigate airports' messages about suspicious cases that may have been linked to trafficking offences. Even where checks were conducted, there was an inability to collect the required

evidence to prove the commission of an offence, since any inquiries carried out by the police remained at a superficial and, thus, rudimentary level (notes from an interview with a representative of the Aliens and Migration Service).

Apart from the police departments/services mentioned above, other state agencies (e.g., Labor Inspection Department) that should assist the state in countering human trafficking were found to be ineffectual, lacking notable input into the overall countertrafficking equation. This was due to insufficient knowledge on countertrafficking at these agencies, which offered no staff training, and trafficking cases being afforded low priority by their respective management. This being the case, and because frontliners lacked the tools and dedicated time for detecting and relaying suspicious trafficking cases, their detection of these trafficking cases remained minimal. As reported by an officer of the Department of Labor Inspection:

We have so many things to do with so few staff that they force us not to have the issue of trafficking in human beings among our priorities. But even if we did, labor inspectors would not know what needs to be done on their behalf on this issue. (Notes from an interview with a representative of the Labor Inspection Department)

It is also worth noting that the procedure followed for identifying a person as a potential victim of trafficking was highly ineffective. Social Welfare Services, for example, were unable to respond in a timely manner (e.g., delay of up to two months) in many cases when other state (e.g., Asylum Service) and non-governmental (e.g., KISA, CARITAS) bodies referred trafficking cases to them. Meanwhile, according to the collected data, the communication mechanism between the agencies was problematic both administratively and logistically. According to an NGO representative, Social Welfare Services did not accept either emails or phone calls, only written notes communicated by fax, which often malfunctioned. This practical impediment, coupled with the difficulty of finding an officer to whom a potential victim's case can be referred, rendered the entire victim identification and referral process ineffective. This was vividly conveyed by an NGO member:

Altogether the structure and culture of welfare services bring about many obstacles to us. How can you act professionally and actually cater for victims' needs when the end receiver [Social Welfare Services] of our services close almost all paths of communication ... when they only work from 8 to 14:30 and even at this restrictive time framework locating a social worker to speak to is close to impossible. (Notes from an interview with a representative of Caritas Cyprus—NGO)

Relatedly, regarding inter-agency communication and collaboration, the issue of competence/responsibility for identifying victims was yet to be resolved. Social Welfare Services (citing vague elements from Law 60(I)/2014) argued that the identification of potential victims should be carried out by the police (Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings).² The police (citing Law 60(I)/2014 and relevant European law) noted their law and order role, stating a law enforcement authority cannot be the first entity which receives and assesses the situation (victimhood) of a potential victim. They argued this should be done by victim-centered entities such as Social Welfare Services. While neither the Multidisciplinary Coordinating Group (local committee comprising one representative from every entity involved in tackling trafficking) nor the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator (Ministry of Interior) have the legal authority to solve such practical obstacles, they persist.

Pre-Trial Support and Protection of (Potential) Victims of Trafficking in Persons

VoTs require support and protection to enable them to assist law enforcement and prosecution services, should they decide to participate in criminal proceedings. However, several challenges were identified in providing adequate pre-trial support and protection. According to Mental Health Services, due to understaffing, VoTs did not receive the level of individualized psychological support they should have. This critically affected the mood and ability of victims to cope with the lengthy and painful criminal proceedings (court cross-examination in particular). Specifically, the following comment was made:

We see victims of sexual exploitation ... unfortunately, the support we provide them as a State is superficial, we do not have the necessary resources and infrastructure to establish a comprehensive support package, from the beginning which is their handling by the Social Welfare Services to the end which is their rehabilitation In all actuality, the victims who testify in court draw more strength from their own experience, and not, expectedly, from our trivial psychological support. (Notes from an interview with a representative of Mental Health Services)

Almost all stakeholders stressed the need for further backing and support for VoTs at all levels, especially psychologically, socially, and economically. Similarly, not a single case was identified where a victim of trafficking received any form of training, as provided for by Article 57(1)(b) in Law 60(I)/2014 in the framework of augmenting the rehabilitative potential of victims. This meant that it was not possible to maximize the chance of convincing victims to remain on the island and actively participate as witnesses in the criminal process.

Regarding the provision of housing, it was found that VoTs were only offered basic services because all entities focused on sexual exploitation, not other forms of exploitation. As a representative of the NGO, Cyprus Stop Trafficking, revealed: “besides food and bedding, unfortunately, we provide almost no support to these individuals” (notes from an interview with a representative of Cyprus Stop Trafficking—NGO). Indeed, as far as shelter was concerned, both state and non-state entities offered nothing but food and housing to victims. As NGO workers and civil servants testified, this led to psychosocial and economic strain for victims, who resultantly left the island prior to testifying in court.

In addition to the issue of psychological support for victims, the level and quality of protection provided to them was also studied. Findings showed there was no security in the locations victims were hosted, apart from the state shelter, where there was satisfactory building and perimeter security. While the State Witness Protection Plan (where witnesses in criminal cases receive elevated protection and 24/7 security) was a potential alternative to fill this security gap, at the date of this study, only one case of trafficking had ever been included in this scheme. Inquiring further into this issue, it was found that public prosecutors did not make such requests. Regrettably, this was either due to the complexity of the procedure involved (with which many officials were not familiar) or to their workload, which made it even more difficult to initiate such a procedure.³

Investigation and Criminal Prosecution

As this study’s findings have shown, the officers of the Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings have built a level of expertise in the field. However, due to their small number (11 persons) and geographical constriction (situated only in Nicosia, at the Police Headquarters), they do not have the capacity to singlehandedly investigate all trafficking cases in Cyprus. Indeed, the investigation of cases of trafficking in persons is yet to be centralized, since about one out of three cases ($\pm 30\%$) being filed nationwide is investigated by district crime investigation departments. This, added to the fact that officers in the district departments lack proper training and expertise, leads to the substandard investigation of many trafficking cases.

Further, a noted portion of trafficking cases is not investigated with a victim-centered approach and/or handled with due sensitivity, given the fragile context in which VoTs are detected. Consequently, solid evidence (e.g., concrete written statements) and other relevant forensic material (e.g., DNA on clothing and instruments) is not always collected by the police. In view of this, trafficking cases may be prosecuted by prosecution services under other laws (such as living on the earnings of prostitution in the Penal Code) that are less complex to prove in court.

Additionally, there is no division of responsibility by area among the members of the Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. All members of the Office who take on investigative duties investigate all types of trafficking in persons (labor exploitation, human organs, sham marriages, solicitation, etc.). They are not separated/specialized in specific types of exploitation on the spectrum of trafficking in persons (e.g., focusing only on cases of sexual exploitation). This study also found members of the Office had no knowledge or formal training in financial crime investigation, despite almost all trafficking cases requiring financial investigation. Unfortunately, that aspect of the investigation was merely left unattended.

Similarly, another issue arose as to the application of Article 17 of Law 60(I)/2014, which provides for the penalization of persons who knowingly use the sexual services of VoTs while suspecting that such services are made available due to coercion. Interestingly, the said provision has never been used to criminalize the use of sexual services because, as it was affirmed by a police officer, “the law does not clarify the instances and circumstances in which one can reasonably assume that the services are indeed product of exploitation This assumption is highly subjective” (notes from an interview with a representative of the Cyprus Police Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings). The officer added that clients of sexual services may be used by the police and prosecution as prosecution witnesses; therefore, they cannot be charged under the discussed article.

Adjudication of Trafficking Cases

The last stage of the study concentrated on the trial of trafficking cases. The findings indicated a corpus of key issues regarding the effective presentation of evidence in courts and the enhancement of proving the guilt of the accused. Several elements were found to correlate with the determinants of securing a conviction. Specifically, it was found that: (a) a number of judges may have lacked awareness of the very particular context of trafficking cases (e.g., victims’ vulnerabilities, opacity of victims’ consent), prohibiting full appreciation of the complexities of trafficking; (b) case and language complexity may have resulted in a lack of accuracy in the interpreting during trials involving heterolingual witnesses (who, when appearing as one group in a case, may speak three different languages); (c) judges were usually not aware of international or comparative case law and (as trafficking cases are difficult to adjudicate and may be some judges’ first attempt) they may have been reluctant to convict to avoid subsequent exposure to the Supreme Court, if an appeal followed; (d) judges tended to seek corroborating evidence, despite the fact that Article 14(1) of Law 60(I)/2014 explicitly states that such evidence is not required; (e) no requests had

been made to the Judicial Authority for permission to accept remote witness testimonies via videoconferences; and (f) there was no consistency in the way trafficking cases were presented in court.⁴

Elaborating on the issue of consistent presentation of trafficking cases in court and providing some insights into how this inconsistency could be ameliorated, a representative of the court stated:

It is best for the prosecution first to present all witnesses and only at the final stage of calling prosecution witnesses to call the trafficking victim to testify. Also, immediately before the victim's testimony, the forensic psychologist must be called as a witness. In this way, the court's awareness of the vulnerable position of the victim, the special circumstances that surround the case and the context in which offenses had been committed, will be elevated Any gaps in the testimony of other witnesses can be filled in by the victim's testimony. (Notes from an interview with a senior Criminal Court Judge)

Regarding issues arising from the (appropriate) presentation and documentation of human trafficking cases, a prosecution services representative noted certain elements appeared to debilitate the state's ability and effectiveness to secure convictions. Those were found to be: (a) the lack of training of prosecutors, (b) the lack of baseline cooperation between the prosecutor and the investigating officer during the police investigation phase, and (c) the infrequent and poor contact with victims (by prosecutors) before the witness's testimony.⁵

General Discussion

This study aimed to gain an understanding of how human trafficking cases flow through the justice system in Cyprus. Through 13 interviews with practitioners in a range of relevant roles, the study identified hindrances, such as understaffing, inadequate training, and communication gaps among key agencies involved in countering sex trafficking. These obstacles also reportedly manifest in other EU contexts. Similarly, domestic detection mechanisms were found to be lacking, with a reactive approach by the police and minimal cooperation among state agencies. Victims faced challenges in receiving support, both psychologically and socially, and shelters provided only basic services. Investigation and criminal prosecution were hampered by a lack of centralized efforts, training gaps, and subjective assumptions in applying relevant laws. The adjudication of trafficking cases faced challenges, including judges' limited awareness and inconsistencies in case presentation. Furthermore, prosecution services encountered obstacles, including a lack of training, limited cooperation with the police, and infrequent contact with victims before testimony. Overall, the study highlighted systemic issues in addressing human trafficking in Cyprus and emphasized the need for improvements in various aspects of the process.

As noted earlier, several of the findings echo those of other research. These include understaffing of agencies assigned to combat trafficking; their inadequate coordination (Pajón & Walsh, 2023) and consequential partial inoperability (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, 2023); and inadequate legal aid and guidance provided to VoTs, coupled with the lack of training of prosecutors, judges, and social workers (Council of Europe Group of Experts on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2020; Matos et al., 2018). Further, this study's findings provide us with an in-depth understanding of the role and actual impact government entities have on sex trafficking. The perspectives of the frontline personnel in this study are particularly important as official reports, documented policies, and "fact-sheets" do not always correspond to the real prevailing situation of human trafficking (Constantinou, 2012).

Implications for Practice

This study has unearthed a series of gaps in the criminal processing of trafficking cases. Considering this, a body of corrective measures are highlighted and briefly explained accordingly.

Training of Officials on Trafficking Issues Related to Their Specific Duties

Training was a focal point for all services involved, not only government officials. Moreover, knowledge is valuable in taking rational actions and making decisions. Therefore, it would be beneficial for all stakeholders to submit requests for specific training to address their needs to the National Coordinator against Trafficking in Persons.

Transfer of the National Coordination of Actions Against Trafficking in Human Beings to the Ministry of Justice

The Cyprus national referral mechanism was found to be lacking in terms of cooperation and communication between stakeholders. This situation caused obvious weaknesses in the proper treatment of trafficking cases. National coordination is therefore an absolute necessity to combat trafficking in persons and protect its victims. As the Ministry of Justice is the service

par excellence in the prevention and suppression of crime, transferring responsibility for the national coordination of actions against trafficking in human beings to the Ministry may be more effective.

Systematizing Meetings Between Stakeholders for the Exchange of Information

Interviews with stakeholders revealed a difficult climate in terms of cooperation among them. Although a guide to the national victim reporting mechanism has been developed and widely circulated, it did not appear to be sufficient to establish a standardized and coherent approach to countering trafficking in human beings. Considering this, and the importance of honest and effective communication between stakeholders, meetings between the stakeholders could be systematized (and intensified) through memoranda of cooperation. Also, such meetings would be productive if they explicitly involved frontline officers, who could accurately identify the source of (and often solve) problems. These meetings should also include information dissemination and exchange, to partially fill the current gap in relation to the collection of valid information.

Creation of a Common Digital Platform for Stakeholders

The study findings indicated that data on trafficking in persons lack uniformity with respect to their collection, analysis, and presentation. A common digital platform could store non-confidential information relating to cases of trafficking in persons. The system should also be able to host posts (e.g., circulars) and discussions (interaction) between users. In this way, holistic, multidimensional, and direct information will be conveyed to all stakeholders.

Operation of a Center for Immediate Response and Assistance to Victims of Trafficking

As stakeholders identified, delayed responses in cases where potential victims are referred to Social Welfare Services have become a serious issue. This lack of support is a tipping point for almost all actors and, unfortunately, has a negative impact on the well-being, dignity, and integrity of VoTs. It may also impact VoTs' intention to cooperate with law enforcement authorities. In addition, the importance of direct victim support derives from Cyprus's legal obligations under European legislation (Article 11, Directive 2011/36/EU) and international conventions (Article 12, Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, 2005).

Based on participants' comments, the ideal scenario would be to establish a center, staffed by at least one officer from each of three services: the Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, the Social Welfare Services, and the Mental Health Services. The center could undertake a set of actions stemming from each service's area of responsibility. This could enable officers to act jointly (e.g., identification of a potential victim, risk assessment, communication/coordination with other bodies) and achieve faster identification/rejection of victims, timely investigation of complaints, and immediate coverage of victims' needs. They could also convey reliable information to victims on the progress of their case.

Separating Duties for Police Working with Victims and Trafficking Suspects

The cooperation between a victim of trafficking and the police is largely based on the victim's sense of trust in the police. Moreover, the members of the Office of Combating Trafficking in Human Beings who take part in anti-trafficking operations are the same individuals who will subsequently seek the cooperation of victims in criminal proceedings. Therefore, the building of trust between the two parties may be shaken. For this reason, it is not recommended that the persons involved in these actions also undertake interviews with victims arising from anti-trafficking operations.

Providing Specialized Seminars and Advisory Manuals for Investigators, Prosecutors, and Judges

Justice officials often do not have the time and means to maintain the necessary constant contact with contemporary international developments in the field of trafficking in persons. Therefore, local authorities should examine the prospect of conducting specialized seminars. Manuals should also be provided for investigators, prosecutors, and judges. Together, these could cover all parameters of the offence (e.g., vulnerability of VoTs, obscure victim consent) and provide guidance on case law from international and national courts and other useful sources (e.g., best practices from other countries' services, such as investigative techniques).

Secondment of Specialist Prosecutors for Complex Cases

Trafficking in persons is a complex offence with substantial transnational ramifications, which make adducing evidence difficult and time consuming. Therefore, it is vital that the prosecutors who undertake this difficult task have the time, experience, and knowledge needed to carry it out effectively. This would be better achieved by specialized prosecutors who were not assigned to heterogeneous cases. Furthermore, if certain prosecutors specialize in offences related to trafficking in

persons, they will also be able to cooperate more closely with police investigators, so that gaps in the presentation of cases to court are minimized.

Promotion of the Provision for Victims' Testimony via Videoconference

The phenomenon of many trafficking victims leaving Cyprus before their case is heard is a substantial problem for the prosecution. This problem could be addressed, in part, by applying Article 36A of the Evidence Law (1994), cap. 9, as amended by Law 122(I)/2010, which provides for videoconferencing of witness testimonies.

Avoidance of Court Delays and Judicial Downgrading of Trafficking Cases to Lower Courts

It has been observed that a significant number of trafficking cases are not heard by assize courts, but by district courts. This practice raises two fundamental problems: (a) the level of penalties that can be imposed is lower and (b) the ability of the district court (one judge) to hear complex cases (like trafficking) cannot be equated with that of the criminal court (three judges). Therefore, the Legal Service could direct cases of trafficking in persons to criminal courts. Furthermore, prosecution services could communicate to the courts the importance of avoiding delays (mainly for retaining the primary witnesses) via the Attorney General, and urge them to expedite the overall procedure.

Limitations

Although this study used a purposive sample of suitably experienced professionals, the relatively small sample size of 13 interviews may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and perspectives present in the broader population (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). It is also important to note that interviewer subjectivity can influence the data collection and interpretation processes (Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, although participants' contributions were anonymous, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the risk of social desirability bias, whereby participants may alter their responses to be viewed more favourably (Krumpal, 2013). Therefore, the findings of the study should be assessed in light of these limitations.

Despite the limitations, this study sheds light on significant challenges and systemic issues on countering sex trafficking in Cyprus throughout the entire process. From detection to pre-trial support, investigation, and adjudication, the study uncovers a multitude of obstacles hampering effective anti-trafficking efforts within the local criminal justice system. The identified factors, including understaffing, insufficient training, poor communication, and limited inter-agency collaboration, highlight the urgent need for systemic improvements.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore whether the criminal justice system in Cyprus was fit for the purpose of processing cases of trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation. The findings underscore the complexity of addressing human trafficking, emphasizing the importance of a coordinated and specialized approach. The implications for practice, such as enhanced training, centralized national coordination, systematized stakeholder meetings, and the establishment of a common digital platform, aim to address these challenges comprehensively. The study's emphasis on the victim-centered approach, specialized training, and the application of underutilized legal provisions reflects a holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of human trafficking cases. Overall, the study provides valuable insights and a roadmap for systemic improvements to address human trafficking effectively, especially in small island contexts such as Cyprus.

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¹ Directive (EU) 2024/1712 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 June 2024 amending Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, added the following text: "or the exploitation of surrogacy, of forced marriage, or of illegal adoption."

² Interview with a representative of Social Welfare Services

³ Interview with a representative of Public Prosecution Services

⁴ Interview with a senior Criminal Court Judge

⁵ Interview with a representative of Public Prosecution Services

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