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# “Victims of Trafficking”: The Feminisation of Poverty and Migration in the Gendered Narratives of Human Trafficking

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that the feminisation of migration has heightened the awareness of human trafficking, yet the feminisation of poverty is a social concept that is yet to be fully understood within the context of human trafficking. The false notion of “return” has been given as a solution to those individuals who are “out of place” or have been displaced as “victims of trafficking”. This article will discuss the Right to Remain visa applications of 12 women who were trafficked from post-Soviet countries to Israel, by examining the impact that gender, level of poverty and each woman’s decision to migrate has had on her life. In addition, this article will analyse the life experiences of the 12 women who experienced human trafficking. It will explore the idea that each woman is a “victim of trafficking” and that, conversely, this may be understood as a means to negate a more nuanced understanding of women’s mobility. Finally, this article will provide an intersectional analysis of trafficking flows in the world today.

**Keywords:** trafficking; slavery; gender; inequalities; poverty; migration

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## 1. Introduction

Human trafficking is a social phenomenon that has existed for centuries, but it has only recently come to the forefront of social, political and media attention. “Trafficking” may be defined as an illegal method of recruitment and/or transportation of people through the use of force and/or coercion, which will lead to their exploitation [1]. This definition encapsulates a broad spectrum of experience ranging from, for example, women being forced to sell sex when they were told they would be given work as waitresses,

to men working as agricultural labourers who are paid less than their daily living expenses, to children forced to work as domestic servants. These are just three examples of the meaning of human trafficking, and it is important to note that they do not exist in isolation, as abuse usually takes place in multiple forms. Individuals initially hired for domestic work explain that later, their traffickers sometimes decided to sell them for sexual services to make more money or to sexually abuse them within their own homes [2].

The visibility of trafficking has come about because of the feminisation of the image of the “victims” of trafficking and the media focus on sexual exploitation. To date, non-governmental organisation (NGO)-based research into trafficking for sexual exploitation of adult women has focused on three main objectives: awareness raising [3–8], highlighting individual governments’ neglect of the issue [9–12] or quantifying the routes and experiences of women [13–16]. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has contributed international figures and data analysis (e.g., [17]), which provide evidence about this global social problem.

Greater awareness throughout the world about human trafficking has, subsequently, awakened global political concern about this serious crime. In the United States, the Department of State created the Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP), in order to penalise those countries who they felt did not respond to the crime of human trafficking appropriately [18]. Critics of the TIP report suggest that it is an exercise that the United States has undergone in order to list its political “friends” and to alienate those who will not co-operate with its political agenda beyond the issue of human trafficking [19–22]. However, when Israel was defined as a Tier 3 country (in 2001), NGOs used this to demonstrate to the Israeli government that there was a global perception that the State of Israel was not concerned about women’s rights [23]. The Israeli government has resolved that, in order to better recognise women’s rights, in terms of trafficking for sexual exploitation, it would take the necessary steps to improve Israel’s reputation, so that it would be recognised in the “American TIP Report for 2005 among the group of states that act to eradicate the trafficking in women, and the rehabilitation of its victims” [24]. Note the use of the term “victims” in this statement. However, Chaikin argues for a more practical explanation of the Israeli change in policy [25]. She suggests it was only when the U.S. government suggested that, “no support payments would be paid to Israel, unless Israel takes concrete steps to address the problem” that Israel began to make changes [25]. The TIP report explains that through financial penalisation, these countries will be penalised until the “correct” response to trafficking should be made. Those nations who do not comply with the American model are then implicitly cast as corrupt, ineffectual or complicit with organised crime in their respective states.

Although trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is clearly a form of gender-based violence, it has not been theoretically analysed to the same extent that other forms of gender-based violence, such as rape during warfare, have been [26–30]. Attempts have rarely been made by scholars to conceptualise the context in which trafficking emerges beyond a supply and demand model or to interrogate the inherent social inequalities that create the social conditions that create the foundation of human trafficking. As Richardson *et al.* [31] have noted, “many aspects of sexual trafficking remain poorly understood, even though it is now a priority issue for many governments”. Similarly, Kelly [32] has argued that research “needs to move beyond simply establishing that there is a problem, and more attention needs to be paid to more nuanced studies of the organization of trafficking, its impacts on individuals, gender relations and communities”.

With these concerns in mind, this article aims to serve a dual purpose. First, it will examine the social inequalities that contribute to human trafficking. Second, it will discuss the feminisation of poverty and migration and how these social variables contribute to the pervasive narrative of the “victim” of trafficking. This article will argue that a simplistic reading of trafficking as the forced movement of women against their consent is incomplete, and it ignores the complex reasons why many women seek to begin the process of obtaining employment that eventually ends up becoming a form of human trafficking. While the data presented here act as a snap-shot in time, the narratives weave a story that link the past, present and future, and it constructs an image of each woman as a complex figure, whose life has been systematically impacted by her experience of poverty.

## 2. Methods and Context

The primary data for this article is comprised of 12 letters, which were written as part of a visa application for the Right to Remain for one year in Israel, by women who had been trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation from several post-Soviet countries to Israel.<sup>1</sup> At the time this research was conducted, the Right to Remain visa was the only option available to women who had been working illegally in Israel, who wanted to remain in the country and who did not want to “return” to their country of origin. The Right to Remain visa applications contain a section that is open ended, inviting the individual to tell her story and to write about her life experience. These “letters” were written without the aid of support workers in order to ensure that the letters were not biased, as previous applications had been denied, because they sounded like they had been influenced by support workers. [23]. The women who wrote these letters gave their permission to the NGO that they were working with to use these letters as research data. The NGO collaborated with the author to complete this research when the individual women who wrote the letters were not available for consultation. The 12 letters were written by the 12 women that the NGO was supporting at that time and who had consented to having their letters analysed. The letters vary in length from between 300 and 2000 words, and the majority of the letters are around 1000 words. The remainder of the application form, which includes demographic information about each woman, was not supplied in order to protect the identities of each woman.

The translation of the letters from Russian and Ukrainian to English was conducted by two translators,<sup>2</sup> who worked separately, though 3 of the letters were translated by both of them. Both of the translators worked closely with the author, who entered into discussions with the translators at various points, where clarification about some material or a more detailed interpretation of the letter needed to be made. A thematic analysis of these applications was carried out highlighting the themes and issues that were used to critically evaluate the debates that surround the problem of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. In addition, several interviews were conducted with 3 NGO employees, who worked for 3 different NGOs (one Israeli, 2 based in the United Kingdom), who support women who had been trafficked. In order to contest the silencing of women’s voices when they are deemed “victims”, this article focuses on the words of the women who wrote the Right to Remain letters and represents them

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<sup>1</sup> The larger study also explored the narratives of women who had been trafficked that were displayed on the websites of NGOs and anti-trafficking organisations in Europe. It analysed those narratives for common themes and compared and contrasted the themes between the 2 data collection sites (see [18]).

<sup>2</sup> Both translators were professional members of The Institute of Translation & Interpreting (ITI).

not only as “women who have been trafficked”, but in their multiple interpellations as migrant workers, family members, individuals who have hopes and aspirations, women who have acted with agency, as well as women who are survivors of sexual violence, commodification and exploitation. The Right to Remain letters form part of the analysis, as it questions the way the authors of the letters portray their lives and their experiences, while keeping their goal, which is the Right to Remain in Israel, in mind.

The Law of Return (established in 1950) allows Jewish immigrants to settle in Israel, thus, “during the 1980s, the overwhelming majority of immigrants to Israel (101,000 between 1979 and 1983) arrived from Eastern European countries, predominantly from the Soviet Union” [33]. This first major wave of migration from the former Soviet Union (fSU) set a pattern of chain migration from the fSU to Israel [33,34]. After 1989, more Soviet Jews immigrated to Israel, “resulting in 800,000 new immigrants to Israel” [35]. According to Hughes and Denisova, “Russian and Ukrainian traffickers used this cover to bring 10,000 women into Israel for the sex industry”, which “has since the 1980s, grown into a US\$450 million a year industry, which is dependent on trafficked women from Eastern Europe” [35]. Israel, like the United Kingdom, is primarily a destination country for human trafficking [36]. The UNODC [37] rates the incidence of trafficking to Israel as “very high”, whereas the United Kingdom is in the next category, classified as “high”, although these definitions are not quantified.

The focus of the Israeli Parliament [24] report into the extent of trafficking in Israel makes it clear that most of the women trafficked to Israel in the 1990s and 2000s are from the fSU [25]. A great deal of the provision of care for these women is recommended to be in Russian in order to aid their comprehension of the services that are available to them [24]. However, this acknowledgement of trafficking from the fSU has been detrimental to women from other countries who have also been trafficked, but not recognised as such, and who are then denied the right to apply for the Right to Remain, which is a temporary one-year visa in the first instance [38]. This means that the image, however accurate, of who gets trafficked into Israel has already been shaped by the services that have been provided.

Prior to 2000, the UN Human Rights Committee reported “women brought to Israel for the purposes of prostitution...are not protected as victims of trafficking but are likely to bear the penalties of their illegal presence in Israel by deportation” [10]. They follow this with the announcement that “in March 2000, the Knesset Committee passed the Equality of Women Law, which states that every woman is entitled to protection from violence, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and trafficking in her person” [10]. However, their conclusion is that “both the government and the traffickers are treating these women as if they do not have human rights” [10]. Media appeals have focused on the slavery aspects of trafficking with a reminder to the Jewish majority that “once we were slaves”, too [39]. However, the issue is often understood as an immigration issue with the focus on the trafficked women’s and traffickers’ nationalities, ignoring the question of who is buying sexual services [40]. The Knesset Committee [24] commissioned its own report on trafficking, which that reported public knowledge of trafficking was gleaned “primarily from reports in the media that were frequently accompanied by photographs of half-naked women and girls”, and it was perceived that the “issue concerned foreign, Russian women, who had arrived in Israel with the purpose of engaging in prostitution, and it was therefore justifiable to ignore the phenomenon”. The report surveyed public attitudes on trafficking, “especially among men... [there was] a forgiving attitude towards the customers of the trafficked women” [24]. This contrasts with the U.K.’s new legislation placing the focus of blame on the men who buy sex (Crime and Policing Bill,

2008). Israel's first specifically anti-trafficking law was passed in 2006 to outlaw human trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation.

### 3. The Feminisation of Migration and Poverty

We are living in the “age of migration” according to Castles and Miller [41]. Certainly, transport links are ever increasing, and human movement is documented through ever more rigorous systems, making it all the more visible. However, we are also living in the age of “securitization of migration” with “strong” states increasing security, surveillance and increasingly militarising borders [42]. In recent years, the term “feminization of migration” has been asserted (also used by Castles and Miller [41]). The term is misleading insofar as it suggests an absolute increase in the proportion of women migrants, when, in fact, it is argued that by 1960, women already made up nearly 47% of all international migrants, a percentage that increased by only two points during the next four decades, to about 49% in 2002 [43]. Although a net feminisation of flows has occurred in certain regions, what has really changed in the last few decades is the fact that more women are migrating independently in search of jobs, rather than as “family dependants” travelling with their husbands/partners or joining them abroad [44]. Certain pathways are being travelled nearly exclusively by women who are migrating alone for work.

In addition to this change in the pattern of female migration, the other significant change taking place concerns the level of awareness on the part of migration scholars and policy-makers as to the significance of female migration and the role of gender in shaping migratory processes and, most importantly, the increasingly important role of women as remittance senders [45]. The feminisation of poverty is closely aligned with the feminisation of migration. Women's increasing presence in the workforce and the increasing diversity of family units in which females are the main or only financial provider in a family have meant that women's responsibility to generate an income is increasingly visible. It was the increase of income poverty in female-headed households that Pearce [46] described as “the feminization of poverty”, coining a phrase that became popular in development studies in the 1980s and later being utilised in the United Nations' Beijing Platform for Action [47]. The term has been instrumental in providing a language with which to explore the gender-based division of paid and unpaid labour and the existence of dual labour markets. It is not without its critics, however, and even those who use the term recognise that it can lack the detail and specificity needed to make it useful to achieve change [47]. Sassen [45] links the feminisation of poverty and the feminisation of migration through her theory of the “feminization of survival”; where inter-country and cross border migration activities are “revenue-making circuits developed on the backs of the truly disadvantaged” and “households and whole communities are increasingly dependent on women for their survival” [45]. It appears that, while there has been an increase in state and family reliance upon remittances, it has often not been coupled with increased support for female migrant workers. Despite data indicating the increase of female migration in some areas, for example to and from Southern Europe [48], Agustín [49] argues that the idea of the feminisation of migration is itself the product of a 20th-century gender stereotyping that consisted of ignoring women's movements, while reinforcing the myth of the tough, lone male migrant. When female migration is visible, it is often in sexualised or exploited scenarios, like trafficking, which reinforce messages about the vulnerability of female migrants. The construction of “migration” in itself is a distinction based upon class, “race” and ethnicity. Even the terminology of the debate misrepresents the

actual movement of people when “the word ‘migrant’ tends to be used to signify non-European” [50]. To avoid misrepresentations of the individual’s experiences, any study of migration “must also pay attention to the ‘difference’ of social positioning in terms of migration, racialization and class subordination...the use of the gender category must avoid homogenizing women’s experiences and practices and must be undertaken in relation to how gender intersects with other social divisions, such as ethnicity, ‘race’ and class” [48].

As Yuval-Davis [42] argues, globalisation has had a two-fold effect on the lives of women. For some, it has meant new opportunities, roles and access to alternative spaces not previously permitted to them, yet, in turn, it has also created “new kinds of conservatism”, where claims to “authentic culture” restrict women into certain “traditional roles”. The disproportionate effect of economic restructuring on women, combined with increased demand in receiving countries for domestic workers, care workers, sex workers or semi-skilled jobs that require “nimble fingers” and a willingness to work informally or for proportionally low wages, has meant that there has been an increase in the opportunities for female economic migrants, albeit often in specifically gendered and often low paid roles [44,51–53].

Migration can also be understood as resistance and transgression, if women are utilising it to “escape from oppressive or violent environments, to transcend traditional sex-role constraints and to create a ‘better life’ for themselves” [44]. Conversely, women may leave their natal homes to migrate to work only to send remittances home and live as part of social networks that continue to regulate their behaviour [54]. However, there are those in the “kinetic elite” [55] for whom mobility is relatively easy, routine and potentially mundane, where national borders are crossed without difficulty [56]. For others, especially undocumented migrant workers, their experiences of migration can be “profoundly marked” by their journeys, their “trajectories fraught with dislocation and the traversing of borders” [57]. Thus, within the feminisation of migration, there is a “plurality of migrants” passages [57]. Often, the term “mobility” reflects the movement of people and goods in a clearer way than migration, which suggests a simple movement from Region A to Region B without indicating the complexity of flows and exchanges that take place.

#### **4. Undocumented Migration**

The relationship between undocumented migrants and borders is always precarious, “resulting from the constant conflict between state efforts to control mobility and people’s desire to inhabit the possibilities opened up by globalization” [58]. For many, globalisation has meant an increased awareness of capitalism and consumption, but this has not been combined with the means to attain the economic ability to consume, and often, in this situation, borders are felt ever more acutely. Massey *et al.* [59] argue that the imbalance created by the number of people wishing to migrate in comparison to the limited visas and permits available creates “a lucrative economic niche for entrepreneurs and institutions dedicated to promoting international movement for profit, yielding a black market in migration”.

McNevin [60] argues for a reconstruction of the notion of “belonging” to create an alternative conception of migration and illegality, one that moves away from territorial boundaries and reflects the movement of people throughout history. One of the great ironies of “illegal migration” is that many people migrate along pre-existing pathways where others from their country have gone before. These pathways can be created historically by colonial influence and the moving of people to provide

services to those European countries who chose to exert influence over other countries. Yet, now, when individuals try to migrate along these historical pathways, they are deemed criminal, and the same countries attempt to keep them out.

Anthias [61] emphasises how the feminisation of poverty and migration is not the final answer to the complexity of women's experience of transnational movement. The networks and flows of trafficking pathways to the U.K. demonstrate this. The 1990s saw women coming from the former Yugoslavia to Western Europe; the early 2000s were characterised by women from post-Soviet countries being trafficked to Western Europe. Yet, the late 2000s and early 2010s have seen a change in trafficking flows. In-country grooming and the movement of young women has been highlighted in the U.K., though it may be argued that this issue was always present, but rarely discussed. Women are being brought regularly to Western Europe from West Africa and South East Asia.

Countries that were once "sending" countries, in that the individuals who were being trafficked were leaving those countries, have now become "receiving" countries, with Thailand now experiencing trafficking of women from Burma into Thailand. Historically, Thailand was a "sending" country; however, it has now become a "receiving" country, because its economic status has changed in contrast to those countries surrounding it. Social and economic structures of a society may expedite and create barriers to the flows of people [62]. Thus, the demand for cheap labour and cheap sex workers creates a demand and a profit margin that become worth investigating in the eyes of the traffickers.

## 5. Return and the "Victims" of Trafficking

The idea of a female "victim" of trafficking who is in need of "rescue" and "return" is a pervasive image that is often conjured up and negates scholarly attempts to establish a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of trafficking [21,63,64]. I deliberately problematise the word "victim", as the term simplifies the issue of trafficking and many individuals prefer to be known as "survivors" of trafficking. The voices of individuals who have been trafficked are often silenced by their status as "victims" or sexualised "others" [65,66].

To escape the simplification of the identity of the "victim" it is important to examine how women represent their identities, subjectivities and decision-making processes in the narration of their experiences in Right to Remain letters. Agency, as I will discuss, is a contentious and much neglected term in the discourse on human trafficking. This is somewhat surprising, given that its antonymous notion, "victimization", forms a fundamental aspect of "the main analytic framework within which trafficking is commonly discussed and researched" [67].

The "victim of trafficking" is explored as a useful means by which the destination state can diffuse and subvert the power the undocumented migrant has to expose the fallacy of "the bounded state" [18]. Although identity is an intersectional process, individuals can, at times, articulate themselves through forms of "essentialized versions of identity". If we take the "victim of trafficking" to be an essentialised and static identity, we can respond to its portrayal, as Anthias [61] has suggested, by questioning what this identity "enables" or "disables", what boundaries a victim's identity reasserts or maintains. Anthias's question encourages us to look beyond the temporal moment of victim identity, to question what brought a person to enact that identity and to question what purpose that identity serves at that present time. The data presented in this article are from a single moment of time where an identity is

enacted for a specific purpose. Analysing it with Anthias's enquiry in mind means it can speak to an agentic act of self-narration that critically explores the boundaries of a "victim" identity.

Within the construct of the "victim of trafficking", there emerges the narrative of the highly gendered "innocent" or "naive victim", who is absolved of guilt because of her lack of agency [68]. Standing alongside this initial trope are lesser known, arguably more realistic, narratives, where the situated identities of women emerge as a complex negotiation of familial responsibilities, reasoned decision-making and responses to neglect or violence that can be seen in the Right to Remain letters. These narratives are accompanied by emerging hopes and aspirations.

Sadly, these alternative versions of discourses about human trafficking are rarely heard and are being rendered invisible by the media-preferred sexualisation of women who are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation [65]. The "dominant story" of trafficking that has emerged through the media, NGO work and research has primarily been constructed to raise awareness and shock governments into action [32]. While these aims are laudable, their dominance does lead to other versions of the experience being silenced. This is problematic, because it can artificially limit help and support for women who have experienced human trafficking [21]. Kelly [32] reflects that, "the good intentions of NGOs are rooted in a belief that by viewing women as 'forced', this will in turn mean they are seen as 'deserving victims' by the community, and reintegration will be unproblematic. This optimism is not supported by what we know about other forms of violence against women...[it is also to] circumvent the increasingly ambivalent, if not hostile, attitude amongst Western governments to migrants and asylum seekers. But 'special cases' have to be 'special'—different from the majority. In the process, some trafficked women will be designated as 'deserving' and others less so." Indeed, Jobe [21] has argued that the way women obtain help is through a repetition of the dominant narrative, whether it fits their experiences or not. Despite this, the Right to Remain letters do appear to express other forms of resistance, agency and individuality, which distance the women from the dominant homogenised view of human trafficking.

The figure of the "trafficking victim" can serve multiple purposes. It can facilitate the control of female migration through the representation of "trafficking victims" in awareness campaigns and media reports, which sends the message to women that they need protection [69]. The rhetoric of colonialism is evoked through the sentiment that women who are the "other(s)" need protecting from men who are the "other(s)" [18,70]. To support the logic of limiting women's mobility, the women involved must be understood as potential victims of exploitative forces, because "to depict female agency—especially embodied by women in sex work—would be displeasing to a moralizing position, which must maintain that women need protection from 'trafficking,' and if trafficked, they need to be 'rescued'" [71]. The benevolent state protects its citizens by assisting "victims" back to their country of origin, thus also "protecting" those individuals from traffickers.

The label of "a victim of trafficking" also allows a distinction to be made between undocumented migrants who deserve the state's protection (who have been victimised) and those "illegal immigrants" that do not. Women's status as victims "reinforces the notion that one cannot engage with citizenship as a process, but only with citizenship as formal legal status administered by an omniscient state" [72]. The women cannot enact the rights of the citizen; rather, they must passively wait for the state to rescue them.

However, the "victim" identity is also employed by the women writing the letters. This troubles the "chosen/forced" dichotomy often applied to trafficking [73]. In the Right to Remain letters, many women

report experiencing prior neglect, violence or abuse, which they often link to trafficking. Thus, they do construct themselves as “victims” of their pasts before they were trafficked. For example, Magdalena conceptualises her past as having direct links to her experience of trafficking. She writes that, “...it all started from my not being able to stay with my father”.

One of the letter writers, Hannah, points to the evidence of veiled knowledge about her sex work, reporting that she was told that she would have, “...a maximum of two or three clients a night”. One way to retrospectively construct hope is to cast her understanding of the proposed sex work as naivety, which we will see has been employed within several of the letters. Magdalena speaks about the promises that were made to her, saying that she was made to believe that she would live in a villa with a cook, but “this was all a fairy tale.” However, it is worth noting that she could have used the term “lie”, but instead, she constructs the misrepresentation of her future work and what she believed as childlike and outside reality. Rather than blaming her traffickers, there is a sense that she feels she should have known it was a lie. Public opinion also appears to suggest that naivety is part of a trafficked woman’s socially conceptualised personality. In Russia, public responses to women trafficked for sexual exploitation “reflect anecdotal research findings on social attitudes that...the girls were naïve and foolish to be tricked in the first place” [74]. As Kelly’s insights intimate, the construction of an individual or group victim identity, with the related ideas of innocence and naivety, naturally promotes an image of helplessness and the responses of “rescue” or “protection” [32]. These strategies, while removing blame from the individual, also inevitably lead to the restriction and control of women’s movements. In the letters, the authors may desire to represent themselves as individuals who did not deliberately conspire to break the laws of Israel and were either misled, coerced or unaware that any illegality was taking place. There may also be a desire to demonstrate a good reason why they chose to be smuggled in to Israel. These reasons can be seen to be tied into other narratives that appear to comply with certain gendered understandings of familial responsibility.

An examination of the letters supports such inferences. Out of the twelve letters, five women name an ill dependent that needed their help as the reason why they were seeking employment. Four of the women have children, and three of those children are described as ill or as having medical problems. Anja has a niece and grandmother, both of whom she is left to care for, during which time her niece suffers from a fever and loses her hearing. Her niece is given as the reason why she migrated to Israel to earn money. She reports that she wanted to earn money for an operation for her niece, and thoughts of her niece sustain her while she was working. Lena has both an ill brother and an ill child. References in the letters to a family member is usually presented in the context of, firstly, an attempt to explain how economically difficult her home life was and, secondly, why an ill child or family member creates a justifiable reason to travel abroad to earn money for healthcare, which is not free in her country of origin.

The notion of a woman, especially a mother, leaving her sick child with someone else to go to work in another country can be read as either a betrayal of her role as a mother or it can be seen as the ultimate devotional self-sacrifice. In Laura’s letter, she writes that she, “...was willing to do anything for [her] son’s sake”. This can be seen as part of what Chamberlain describes as female migration narratives, which locate the female protagonist in relation to others, family members, partners, friends [75]. Chamberlain compares this to male migration narratives, where men present themselves as “autonomous agents” [75]. Chamberlain goes on to argue that her female respondents did not define themselves by their own agency, their own decision-making processes, needs or desires [75]. The paradox of trafficking is that

women embody a series of “contradictions and tensions...women try to negotiate and to stay loyal to a set of selves—like mother, wife, or victim—that are usually not compatible with the more dominant narrative of trafficking” [76].

Magdalena and Hannah report being asked by the traffickers whether they had children or not. Magdalena was told, “...if women didn’t have children, they won’t have the motivation to work”. The traffickers appear to believe that a woman may work harder or tolerate more unbearable working conditions if she works for her child rather than for herself alone. Thus, traffickers are incentivised to recruit women who have family ties. However, despite the truth of this claim, Andrijasevic argues that women who agree to sell sex to support their children use this as a way to socially distance themselves from women whom they perceive to be “real” prostitutes. Thus, women who sell sex for other, more “selfish” reasons are perceived as examples of women who have strayed farther from their gendered identity [67]. In addition, a focus on alleviating themselves from poverty in the narratives has been suggested as a means to enable the respondents to distance themselves “from sex work migration and hence also from being perceived as prostitutes” [67].

Familial obligations emerge as a central theme in the Right to Remain letters. These obligations can be direct demands made by family members, feelings of responsibility or a desire for the transformation of their relationships with others, for example to become more economically successful, so that their parents will be proud of them [77]. Anja suggests that there is a direct cause and effect between her niece becoming ill and her entering Israel. She says, “...in the winter, I had a terrible incident after which I ended up in Israel.” Anja does not appear to leave for Israel for quite some time after the incident happens, and other events take place in between; however, in her narrative, there is a direct cause and effect between the moment (that her niece became very ill) and her arrival in Israel. Hannah records the numerous processes that she went through before she decided to move to Israel, but she never actually mentions an affirmative decision. She pragmatically concludes that: “I knew I didn’t have any other place to go really, and I needed to go abroad [to earn money].” Once again, her narrative raises questions regarding “choice” and demonstrate how, in this narrative, it is superseded by familial responsibility. Tara clearly positions herself within a family matrix when she writes, “I made enquiries [about work in Israel] because my family needed money. My mother urgently needed to have eye surgery.”

Lena is the only woman to express pleasure at the thought of travel, and for this, she appears to retrospectively judge her own “naivety”, which may be her way of enacting a victim identity through the language of naivety [68]. All of the other women construct the decision to leave their homes as an obligation or a necessary evil, and they must leave their more traditional, spatial position in the home because of extreme or difficult situations. Naturally, it must be assumed that not all women who are trafficked come from a background of violence and/or poverty and elect to be smuggled into Israel based on the premise that their life situation is bleak. However, Dickson’s research has suggested that there is a disproportionately high prevalence of poverty and previous experiences of violence in the life histories of women who have been trafficked [13]. We should accept the fact that there are some women who are trafficked that are young, independent women who want to see the world, experience what life has to offer and who see recruitment by traffickers as a way to expand their horizons. One woman named Lena said: “They came up to me and offered me money to come with them to work as a maid in a hotel, and they said that I would earn \$1000 a month. This was a great deal of money, and I could not dream of [making

as much money] in my home country. I resigned from my work, and within 3 days, I was flown to Egypt. I was even happy that I would get to see two other countries other than my own.”

Lena’s ironic self-judgment of “even being happy” leads us to consider that she now understands what she was feeling at the time in a different light. Subsequently, she writes about the reality of her experience with some bleak irony.

While Lena’s story is qualified by references to her ill brother and her child with medical problems, her agency and perception of the future, as well as her hopes are displayed in this quotation. She can be seen as “acquiring mobility as a struggle for new subjectivity” [77]. While there is still no specific decision expressed, she is clearly mapping the path to her future with her actions and expectations. To some degree, she is also escaping from her current life situation, in which she was living with her abusive husband and the rest of her family [44,48].

Magdalena does make the decision to migrate quickly, and she articulates this in her letter. She says that the decision to leave is tempered by certain qualifying statements in an attempt to reduce her own agency and decision-making power. She writes:

“I don’t know why [I decided to leave], but maybe it was because of my father, who I had fights with every day, or maybe it was because of the fact that my step-mother had two kids to take care of, and it was clear that I was a burden on her. But, within a few hours, I decided I will try it.”

The “it” she refers to is a decision to move to Israel to work in prostitution upon the recommendation of a friend. While Magdalena’s narrative, despite its ambivalence, is by far the most assertive about decision making, it is also positioned within a matrix of family, limited options and an inability to exercise agency. “I don’t know why”, she remarks, as if her motives were also unknown to her. She disassociates herself from the decision, possibly to disassociate herself from its outcome. Yet, Sarah, in contrast, explains how she saw an advertisement for work in Israel and says “I told my sister I wanted to go.” Her sister explained that the job will be working as a sex worker, and she states “I didn’t care at that stage what work I would be doing. I agreed to go.” Yet, even this decision comes after a life history that includes neglect, violence, childhood sexual abuse, motherhood and poverty. Her statement “at that stage” demonstrates she had come to a point where she no longer cared about her life situation due to what she had already been through.

She suggests that she “did not care”; this could be read as a suggestion that she cannot afford the luxury of caring or that things were so bad, she was beyond caring for herself. She may also be deploying naivety in that she had not thought through the consequences of her actions because of her situation, and thus, she uses a form of disassociation from the outcome of her decision through the same mechanism as Magdalena did. However, one might also conceptualise her act as an example of further self-sacrifice within a familial obligation, not only because she needed to earn money for her child, but also to reciprocate the affective bonds her sister has provided for her by paying for her and her child to live. She says: “my sister could not support my son and I forever”.

In Lena’s letter, she looks for work abroad, is approached by “some people” who offered her well paid work as a maid, which she accepted, and “within three days [she] was flown to Egypt.” Her lack of concern about the details about the job, combined with the speed at which she is recruited, suggests a lack of knowledge of what to expect and also a naivety surrounding the decision that she has made. At no point does she speculate that this was a very quick way to be offered and to accept work abroad. There is a sense that some traffickers generally work quickly in order to keep women interested in the

job or, in Magdalena's case, once the decision was made, she was given a week before she left. She said that, "She lived in a flat that some woman had rented for us; perhaps this was done so that we wouldn't leave".

In her interviews with women who had been trafficked, Andrijasevic reports that women, "...systematically glossed over the episodes of violence they were subjected to so as not to undermine their self-presentation as active agents" [67]. Yet, in contrast, in the Right to Remain letters, women report acts of violence and often document several incidents. This can be seen as a difference in the materials analysed and the purpose of the material, as well as a strategy employed by the women to illustrate reasons why the authors were "forced" to migrate and deserve assistance or, once again, to indicate that they lacked choice and that they are thus not culpable for their undocumented migration.

A lack of choice or a sense that the outcome of the decision was not their fault because they had no other options can be found in several Right to Remain letters. Often, the options are presented to the women, and then, the conclusion to be smuggled to Israel is expressed as the only true option available to them. Hannah writes, "I didn't have any other place to go," while Sarah reports, "I left my son at my sister's home, and I went to Israel because I had no other choice."

The alternative construction of agency and choice in interviews demonstrates how the Right to Remain letters elicit alternative narratives when they are compared to other research methods. This suggests that there is some conformity within the letters with the "dominant narrative" of victimhood and a reduction in the expression of "choice", but not necessarily of agency. Yet, agency is not completely obscured in the narratives; rather, it emerges as a negotiated part of the integration of gendered commitments to the home, familial obligations and other types of choice, which are located within the parameters of limited options.

## 6. Conclusions

Changes in the movement and visibility of women in the global labour market have created the idea that we are now experiencing a form of feminisation of migration. Due to the increasing and disproportionate effects of poverty on women throughout the world, this has meant that many women will seek to migrate either as individuals or to migrate and to send remittances to their family in their home countries. In response to these societal changes, the "victim of trafficking" phenomenon has risen as an ever increasingly visible representation of the mobility for women in the world today. The "victim of trafficking" is an identity that responds to the increased mobility and economic burden placed upon women, while it simultaneously generates anxiety about the violence experienced by the undocumented female migrant. In her mobility, she traverses boundaries of gender and of state-controlled territorial boundaries. Her victimisation and helplessness allow a reassertion of gendered boundaries. The identity of the trafficked woman portrayed by the media in many ways correlates with the identity developed in the Right to Remain letters. However, there are several points of divergence. The writers of the letters show how their pasts are linked to their trafficking experiences and that the violence and neglect that they faced in their childhoods has an impact upon the decision-making process. They explore the everyday experiences of poverty that have forced them to migrate and expose them to a network of profit making at work in the form of those individuals who traffic women across borders. They deconstruct the boundaries of the category of "trafficked woman" by demonstrating that they have a more holistic

understanding of their identities, their pasts and the experiences that have brought them to Israel. Yet, they also display a specifically gendered way of constructing their own identities and decision-making processes, which fall within the parameters of acceptable gendered understandings of the world. When events or actions compromise these understandings of their world, they then use methods of transgression and disassociation to maintain the self-construction of their identities. Agency is present in their narratives, but it is negotiated through accepted norms and tempered by a lack of “true choice”. In this way, we conclude that the authors of these letters acknowledge that they must present themselves as victims, so that the state may then “save” them.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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