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Violence as a Tool Within Criminal Enterprises of Trafficking of Women for Sexual Exploitation

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Abstract

This article examines violence as a tool used within criminal enterprises of trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. Its use is not seen as an isolated or incidental phenomenon but is placed in the broader context of women's vulnerability to violence linked to structural inequalities, socio-economic marginalization, and persistent culture norms. In this context, criminal enterprises involved in human trafficking exploit both individual vulnerability and broader socio-economic conditions, institutional dysfunctions, and specific cultural norms. In this article, data obtained from court decisions are combined with findings from a separate field study that employs qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. Viewed through the prism of enterprise theory, it is shown that violence against women within this criminal activity has a functional role and serves an economic purpose. The findings reveal that various techniques of coercion and submission are used as control mechanisms to maintain victims' compliance, reduce the risk of business interruption, and ensure the profitability of criminal enterprises. Additionally, parallels between the coercive techniques employed by traffickers and the methods used in general violence against women were identified. In conclusion, the article highlights the need for multidisciplinary responses that integrate criminal justice measures, victim protection, social support, and policies aimed at reducing structural inequalities. It underscores the importance of future research on the relationship between violence against women and vulnerability to coercive control and exploitation.

Keywords: violence against women criminal enterprises; human trafficking; sexual exploitation; Bulgaria

1. Introduction

Human trafficking is one of the most profitable forms of organized crime worldwide, with women and girls disproportionately affected by various forms of exploitation and abuse. Research shows that this criminal activity, driven by well-organized networks, is increasing in the 21st century as a result of economic and demographic inequalities, rising conflicts, and global climate change [1]. In criminology and the sociology of deviance, it has long been established that violence is a core structural element of organized crime [2,3]. Indeed, the use of violence within organized crime operations is even considered axiomatic [4]. However, numerous factors determine whether organized criminals deploy violence. Chief among these are the type of illegal activity in question and the structure of the illicit market [4] (p. 37). Violence is most often used to expand illegal activities, protect against other organized crime groups, or ensure order within the organization. Trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation is typical of organized crime groups operating in business



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or governance types of structure [5]. In these specific contexts, violence is directed predominantly against women within the structures themselves. Violence is defined as a hallmark of human trafficking [6], making this phenomenon an illustrative example of how various forms of violence are essential to the functioning of specific organized criminal enterprises.

Independently, both violence against women and human trafficking constitute severe criminal offenses. According to UN Women, approximately 30 percent of women aged 15 and older have experienced physical or sexual violence at least once; concurrently, women and girls continue to make up the majority of human trafficking victims—accounting for 61 percent of the global total in 2022—with the vast majority trafficked for sexual exploitation [7]. Furthermore, an analysis using data from the IOM Victim of Trafficking Database reveals that 54 percent of victims reported experiencing physical and/or sexual violence during their exploitation, with 25 percent of female victims specifically reporting sexual abuse [6] (p. 2).

Although human trafficking is sometimes defined as an extreme form of violence against women [8], in this text, violence against women will be analyzed as an important tool in the functioning of criminal enterprises that traffic in women for sexual exploitation. Often in the public sphere, violence against women within these structures is perceived merely as an emotional outburst or a byproduct of the traffickers' activities. The article argues that violence against women (in its various forms) is not an incidental act but a functional operational tool, constituting a key element necessary for the successful operation of the criminal enterprise. Violence within these illicit networks, in many cases, is not physical but psychological, economic, or sexual. Traffickers deploy these specific forms of violence, exploiting social, cultural, and biological differences to exercise control and maximize profits. Various forms of violence against women (psychological, economic, physical) are an integral part of the activities of traffickers who take advantage of the lack of awareness and recognition of violence in some social groups.

Grounded in the premise that violence against women serves as a tool for the functioning of criminal enterprises, this analysis examines three main aspects of the phenomenon:

- The violence as a mechanism of control and subordination: investigating how specific coercive techniques stabilize and secure the daily operational activities of the criminal network.
- The economic logic of violence: analyzing how the deployment of violence serves as a tool to minimize business risks and safeguard illicit revenues.
- The intersection of gender and marginalization: examining the influence of structural factors and social inequalities that position women as the primary “asset” within the criminal enterprise.

These three analytical aspects are contextualized by referencing trafficking coercion techniques with broader, general patterns of violence against women in Bulgaria.

The article analyzes criminal groups through the enterprise paradigm, highlighting the structural similarities between legal businesses and illicit organizations. Within this framework, organized crime is analyzed as an economic activity operating on market principles to maximize profit and minimize risk [9]. According to this perspective, economic relations—rather than personal connections—form the basis of organized criminal activity. In this sense, the entrepreneurial structure is a defining element of organized crime [10]; consequently, to successfully combat this phenomenon, illicit networks must be conceptualized precisely as criminal business enterprises [11]. While criminal entrepreneurs, unlike their “legitimate brothers,” must expend greater effort to ensure market survival [12], violence serves as a primary tool to achieve this. Consequently, violence emerges as a key element that enables criminal entrepreneurs to manage operations within a specific illicit market [13], such as trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.

In the article we will focus on the trafficking of women from Bulgaria to Western European countries and their exploitation by male traffickers. While we acknowledge that male victims are also subjected to these forms of violence, they remain outside the scope of this study. Research shows that on a global level, women make up the majority of victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation—as much as 91%—and are three times more likely than men to be subjected to physical or extreme violence by traffickers [14]. At the same time, data indicates that the majority of human traffickers, including those operating within the sphere of sexual exploitation, are men [14]. Notably, when organized crime groups are involved, the vast majority of cases (68%) feature men and women working in tandem as traffickers [5]. While studies indicate that female perpetration in human trafficking is significantly higher than in other comparable offenses [15]—with a substantial number of female suspects involved specifically in sex trafficking operations [16]—the core execution of physical control and violence is still overwhelmingly carried out by men [17].

Studies [18,19] demonstrate that Bulgarian organized crime has specialized in this type of trafficking, which not only generates substantial revenues for criminal organizations but has also evolved into a profound social and criminal phenomenon within the country. Shelley [20] explicitly categorizes Balkan crime groups under the “Violent Entrepreneur Model”—one of six distinct business frameworks utilized by traffickers globally. Characteristically, this approach involves recruiting women from Eastern European and Balkan countries, exploiting them within Western Europe, and maintaining constant, coercive control to generate substantial illicit revenues.

2. Materials and Methods

This study utilizes data obtained from two distinct research projects. The first is dedicated to criminal enterprises, focusing specifically on human trafficking for sexual exploitation from Bulgaria to Western Europe; the second investigates the broader issue of violence against women within Bulgaria. Synthesizing these two datasets allows for a reconstruction of the logic behind violence against women as a tool for criminal operations, framing it within the wider context of women’s vulnerability to violence.

Within the framework of the first study, a case-law analysis of organized crime cases was conducted. The selection of court cases followed a purposive, institutional access-based sampling strategy. The case selection was guided by a two-tiered legal qualification criterion. First, the scope targeted files involving Bulgarian criminal networks operating as large-scale organized crime groups. Second, a thematic relevance filter was applied to isolate cases involving human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Applying these criteria to the material obtained through official information requests resulted in a comprehensive corpus totaling 44 cases. This body of legal data comprises 7 cases with final judicial rulings, alongside a broader set of 37 organized crime case files, 19 of which explicitly included human trafficking for sexual exploitation among the charged offenses.

Court cases offer scholars great analytic purchase and means for empirical and theoretical formulation of statements [21]. Some authors even define them as “paradigmatic artifacts of modern knowledge practices” [22] (p. 2). According to researchers, the scientific value of these legal sources derives from distinct characteristics such as multitemporality, dialogic nature, multiple truths they embrace, multivocality, and social productivity [21]. Court cases document the specific operational dynamics of human trafficking networks, allowing for the identification of systemic characteristics regarding both the functioning of these criminal enterprises and the precise role that violence against women plays within them.

The second study is part of the project “Violence against Women: Typologies, Economic and Social Consequences”. For the qualitative field research, participants for the

interviews and focus groups were selected based on purposive expert sampling—involving individuals holding expertise in, or substantive experience with, the subject explored in the study [23]. As noted by Palinkas et al. [24], purposeful sampling prioritizes individuals who possess firsthand experience with the phenomenon of interest and are capable of providing nuanced insights, thereby aligning with the study's analytical requirements. Recruitment was conducted via two distinct channels: initially, formal institutional contact was established by sending detailed project briefings and invitations to the experts' respective organizations; additionally, peer-to-peer recruitment was utilized, capitalizing on the research team's existing professional connections to engage specific key informants. Between 7 August 2024, and 21 January 2025, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from diverse sectors addressing violence against women, including the judiciary, policymakers, state institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, and trade unionists. Additionally, six focus groups were held in September 2024, engaging a total of 63 key stakeholders from the police, the prosecutor's office, the judiciary, investigative bodies, the Social Assistance Agency, and civil society.

To complement the qualitative findings, the study integrates empirical evidence from a nationwide quantitative survey titled "Violence against Women." The fieldwork, completed between 16 January and 24 February 2025, targeted the adult population of Bulgaria (aged 18 and older). While the survey instrument was conceptualized and constructed by the project's academic team to mirror its core theoretical hypotheses, the data collection process was implemented by a professional sociological research agency using a countrywide grid of regional interviewing teams. The survey utilized a rigorous three-stage stratified random cluster sampling design, achieving a final validated sample size of 1017 respondents. Data collection was executed via face-to-face on tablets. To ensure statistical objectivity and eliminate selection bias, standardized random-route counting protocols were enforced for household identification, followed by randomized respondent selection within each household. The final sample demographic parameters were aligned with the latest official census data provided by the National Statistical Institute.

To examine the empirical material, the study employed thematic analysis, relying on the structured approach formalized by Braun and Clarke [25] for detecting and interpreting shared patterns of meaning across textual data. This methodology was selected due to its inherent flexibility, which facilitated the integration of hypotheses established prior to the fieldwork. The entire dataset was managed and systematized via NVivo 15.

The coding process was initiated with a deductive orientation, utilizing the conceptual prism of the criminal enterprise paradigm to guide the reading of the texts. As the interrogation of the data advanced, an inductive lens was introduced to isolate narrative segments that expanded beyond the boundaries of the original hypotheses. This approach optimized the synergy between theory and data-driven insights, maximizing the analytical relevance to the overarching research objectives [25]. The analysis operated at a semantic level, focusing on the explicit, manifest statements articulated by practitioners and documented in legal records.

The two data streams were integrated during the themes-generation phase through a process of methodological triangulation: the evidence of the mechanisms used for physical and psychological subjugation was documented through the legal case files, while the field interviews provided the necessary context regarding the broader issue of violence against women and their vulnerability.

Ethical Considerations

The questionnaires and methodology applied in this research underwent a formal approval procedure by the Ethics Committee of the Bulgarian Sociological Association. All

participants were fully informed about the study's objectives, notified of their right to withdraw at any stage, and provided their voluntary informed consent prior to participation. Digital audio recordings were conducted only upon receiving the explicit consent of the respondents. Access to the court files was granted with the authorization of the presidents of the respective district courts in Bulgaria, subject to the author signing non-disclosure and ethical declarations guaranteeing that the materials would be used strictly for scientific research purposes. To maintain confidentiality in the text, alphanumeric codes were assigned to all in-depth interview (iDI) transcripts and focus group (FG) contributions. Similarly, judicial materials were anonymized with all personal and identifying geographical data removed. All datasets from both studies are securely stored in compliance with data protection protocols by the project leader.

3. Results

3.1. Violence as a Mechanism for Control and Submission

Viewed as a criminal enterprise, human trafficking represents an operation demanding absolute control over its 'assets'—in this case, women subjected to sexual exploitation. Evidence from court cases regarding how criminal networks operated reveals that control was exercised by men. The Belgian police report states:

"During these investigations, we were able to establish that the trafficking of young prostitutes from Bulgaria is well organized and obeys certain rules. A "reception structure" was established in Brussels, in the full sense of the word. Older ladies were tasked with accommodating the girls in bars and organizing their work, while the collection of money and the control over the girls were entrusted to men." (Police report 1)

The analysis of judicial data reveals an evolution in the methods of violence deployed by traffickers. In the 1990s to the early 2000s, physical violence was much more frequently utilized during both the recruitment and exploitation phases. Since the beginning of the 21st century and especially after Bulgaria's European Union accession in 2007, as Bulgarian traffickers successfully penetrated and consolidated their presence within Western European criminal markets, the reliance on physical violence dropped significantly, giving way to "soft" non-physical mechanisms of control. However, victim testimonies within the judicial records reveal that the implementation of control techniques is an integral component of the operations and internal dynamics of the criminal networks. These mechanisms are most prevalent at the critical stage of ongoing exploitation—there was always someone monitoring the implementation of the activity; the women were forced to strictly account for the money received, and on a certain day, they were obliged to hand over all their earnings to a person designated by the group leader.

During the recruitment phase, the majority of the interviewed women were subjected to diverse techniques of deception and subjugation. Witness testimony reveals how traffickers recruited girls:

"They [the traffickers] lie to them, take them to cafes, and induce them into prostitution, promising that they will buy them properties in [a large Bulgarian city] and the surrounding villages, and also that they will split their earnings in half. In this way, they manipulate them." (Interrogation report-Witness 1)

Another common used technique is the "lover boy" method, whereby the trafficker deliberately establishes an emotional or romantic bond with the victim, subsequently leveraging manipulative pretexts to induce her into the exploitation process. In most instances, the victims are led to believe that this arrangement is merely temporary—a means to accumulate capital for shared future goals, such as launching a business or getting married. In these scenarios, women become entangled not through physical violence,

but as a direct consequence of coercion and psychological manipulation. Furthermore, certain cases reveal that women cohabiting with a trafficker are faced with the reality that to support themselves and their children, they must enter prostitution under their partner's control. This is the case of one of the victims, who shared during interrogation that at the age of 18 she became pregnant and married the father of her child. After a few years of living together, her husband suggested that she start working as a prostitute in the Netherlands, where this activity is legal. Forced by circumstances, she went there, where a friend of her husband placed her in a window brothel. During the interrogation, the woman said: *"I have to tell you that at first it was very difficult for me to do this work, but my husband managed to calm me down every time and present this job in a positive light"*

Another victim shared during her testimony:

"I was a waitress in a cafe in [a medium-sized city in Bulgaria] and [trafficker], nicknamed [...] wanted to be my boyfriend. He suggested that I go with him to work in Germany. I should mention that before he made me this offer, he gave me a lot of money and was very nice to me. And I accepted his offer because I was very much in love with him. He told me that I would have to keep men company and that I was not obliged to have intimate relations with them. I believed him and decided to go." (Interrogation report-Victim 2)

In instances where psychological manipulation fails, perpetrators escalate their tactics to physical violence. In one of the identified cases, a young woman entered a relationship with a man who initially displayed supportive behavior, only to later demand that she will engage in prostitution abroad. When she resisted, the perpetrator utilized physical violence to break her resistance and force her into exploitation. In another case, a woman, shortly after moving into the home of a partner with whom she had formed a deep emotional attachment, discovered that she was to be trafficked for sexual exploitation. Upon her refusal, the partner initiated severe physical and sexual abuse, orchestrating collective sexual assaults by other men. In her testimony before a judge, one of the victims recounts the systematic cases of violence that she and other women experienced:

"They beat us with metal pipes, batons—something like a police baton. They gave drugs to the three girls; they gave me more alcohol. They did this so we would relax more and they could fulfill their desires. There were perversions, such as sexual acts; anal acts were performed with the handle of a shovel. This lasted for more than two years." (Interrogation report-Victim 6)

Through these extreme forms of violence, traffickers systematically shatter the victims' resistance, enabling long-term exploitation.

Deception and violence are also utilized in cases where women are recruited under false pretenses. Women travel abroad, anticipating legitimate jobs such as waitressing, domestic work, or caregiving. Upon arrival in the host country, they are unlawfully confined, their identity documents are confiscated, and through various forms of violence, they are forced into sexual exploitation networks.

There are also significantly more severe cases where women are abducted or directly handed over to traffickers by family members or close acquaintances. A distinct characteristic of this recruitment method is that the victims often originate from socio-economically marginalized, multi-child households, predominantly within the Roma ethnic community. Within this specific sub-sample, cases emerge where family members commodify the victims, selling them into trafficking networks. Reflecting on the years of exploitation, the victim described above concludes:

"He [her husband] told me I wasn't worth much money anymore and that he wasn't interested in me anymore. [...] He's the father of my child and I thought he loved

me, but then I realized he didn't respect me and that to him I was just a commodity."
(Interrogation report-Victim 1)

Despite the recruitment patterns described, the primary manifestations of coercive control and subjugation occur during the exploitation phase itself. Because these criminal operations take place within a foreign state—where any reporting to law enforcement by the victims poses a risk to the criminal enterprise—maintaining total control becomes paramount, prompting traffickers to rely on various forms of violence. While physical force is still deployed, it is no longer the primary mechanism of control. The judicial data demonstrate that to guarantee operational continuity, traffickers utilize several core techniques of subjugation:

Fostering dependency through manipulative techniques. Traffickers frequently demonstrate affection and supportive behavior toward their victims especially at the beginning of the relations—particularly within the ‘lover boy’ model—often establishing a shared household. This strategy engenders a deep psychological dependency, leading the victim to perceive the abuser as her sole source of security. Concurrently, the deployment of psychological violence, including systematic threats and humiliation, remains a constant and pervasive element of the illicit activity. Along with this, economic dependence is also created—the money the woman earns is collected by the trafficker.

In the vast majority of exploitation cases, perpetrators maintain control through a dual mechanism: false promises of financial benefits and arbitrary financial penalties and violence or threats of violence. The manipulative scheme involving promises of material benefits is evidenced by statements from the victims’ interrogations. A victim of sexual exploitation recalls the actions of the criminal group:

"I remember one case when [another victim] was still working for him [the trafficker]. He had lied to her, claiming that he had bought her a car. In reality, he had merely rented a car for the duration of her stay in Bulgaria. When she left for Brussels, he returned the car to the rental company. He knew that this would keep her motivated to continue working for him." (Interrogation report-Victim 1)

The testimonies of all the victims confirm that all the money they earned was taken by the traffickers, who promised to keep it and return it to them in Bulgaria, or invest it in purchases such as real estate and vehicles. In practice, however, none of these promises were ever fulfilled.

In certain instances, to facilitate control and maximize productivity, traffickers supply victims with drugs, thereby inducing or exploiting dependency. In other cases, perpetrators bind the victims through debt, demanding the reimbursement of greatly inflated transportation, accommodation, and living expenses.

The use of control methods similar to those used by traffickers was also established by data from the second study, which focused broadly on the problem of violence against women in Bulgaria. Psychological violence and the creation of dependency are characteristic features of violence against women—a dynamic established both through the in-depth interviews and focus groups conducted within the project “Violence against Women: Typologies, Economic and Social Consequences”. The dependence that the victim has on the abuser can be financial, psychological, emotional, or all of these. Experts interviewed point out that from their work with victims of violence, financial dependence is an invariable part of these individuals’ lives. Consequently, they call for greater attention to be paid to different forms of abuse, rather than focusing solely on physical violence:

"We have had cases where the man does not allow the woman to work at all, thereby undermining her independence and preventing any contact with other people." (iDI-42)

“Financial abuse is a mandatory element of this violence. It starts with isolation from your environment, making you doubt whether you are even a worthy human being, and ultimately leads to mandatory financial dependence.” (iDI-45)

The study participants reported that, in their view, public recognition in Bulgaria is largely limited to physical violence against women, often neglecting other dimensions such as psychological and financial abuse. This observation was confirmed in the narratives in all focus groups and almost all interviews.

“I would like to add that victims of physical violence are much more likely to realize that they are being abused and to seek help. In contrast, in cases of psychological or economic violence, individuals do not always recognize themselves as victims, meaning they are unlikely to contact the police or report it to 112. This is the primary reason why physical violence appears to be more common in documented cases” (Participant 06, FG-01)

“R: Unfortunately, it is very worrying that the girls’ families also normalize psychological violence, and definitely slapping as a form of physical violence as well. If their families normalize all this, there is actually no way out of the situation. These women are economically dependent on the man’s family, making it extremely difficult to break away. In society, and in more educated circles, physical violence is generally not tolerated, but psychological and economic violence are not understood in their entirety and are therefore absolutely accepted.

I: And what exactly is meant by psychological violence?

R: Threats, surveillance, harassment, limiting contact with friends and the outside world. Even the threat of physical violence is a form of psychological violence.

I: Yes, control over behavior.

R: Exactly, control over behavior, yes.” (iDI-32)

Data from both studies underscore that female victims—including both those trafficked for sexual exploitation and survivors of domestic violence—are in a state of economic and emotional dependency on their perpetrators, which constitutes a primary barrier to their attempts to escape the abusive environment. Furthermore, being subjected to absolute control, these women typically lack independent financial resources and stable accommodation. The interviewed experts reflected extensively on their direct experiences working with victims of violence against women:

“They [the victims] have this thought: ‘It’s hard for me to report my partner—where will I live then? How will I manage financially? I might not be working because he doesn’t allow me to, and our bank accounts are only in his name. How will I find the money to survive?’” (iDI-30)

“...violence begins with the victim being deprived of their economic independencea. . .” (iDI-22)

The combination of emotional, psychological, and economic dependence on the abuser creates a barrier difficult for victims to break, even if they are willing and consider reporting it. Economic and psychological dependence creates objective and subjective obstacles for victims of violence and are exploited by traffickers and abusers.

Isolation and the deprivation of freedom of movement constitute another mechanism of control and violence against women. Typically, at the onset of the exploitation phase, traffickers take away the victims’ mobile phones, financial resources, and identity documents. This action effectively severs all communication with the outside world and restricts the women’s mobility. Consequently, this mitigates the risk of the victim attempting to escape or seek external help. A pervasive narrative further reinforces this isolation: victims are led to

believe that local authorities will treat them as criminals rather than casualties. They are threatened with immediate arrest or deportation for lacking valid documentation, effectively neutralizing the police as a potential avenue of rescue. Testimony from one of the victims reveals that control and isolation also existed between the women themselves:

“They subjected us to psychological abuse. They wanted us to think that the other girls earned more money and they forbade us to talk to each other about it” (Interrogation report-Victim 3)

Another victim of sexual exploitation describes her stay in Hanover, Germany:

“[A woman responsible for the accommodation] explained to me that I had no right to go out. It was like a house, where I ate and worked. There’s an entrance door to the establishment that locked. They kept me locked up there.” (Interrogation report-Victim 2)

Dutch police officers also describe in case reports similar isolation of some of the girls:

“According to the victim, she was quite limited in her freedom of movement. [The trafficker] preferred her to only work and sleep. She was absolutely not allowed to have contact with other Bulgarians. According to the complainant, [the trafficker] was afraid that he would lose his ‘cash cow’.” (Police report 2)

Data from the second study on the general picture of the problem of violence against women in Bulgaria reveals that, the restriction of mobility, according to the experts who participated in the interviews and focus groups, is a prevalent mechanism deployed by perpetrators of intimate partner violence.

“Isolation from the environment, isolation from loved ones, parents, brothers, sisters, and so on. Then comes the doubt about how much you are worth as a person. . . Then an attempt to dismiss you from your job so that you fall into financial dependence. These are the steps. . .” (iDI-45)

This claim can be supported by quantitative findings from the nationally representative study “Violence against Women” in Bulgaria reveal that 43% of respondents reported knowing women whose partners prohibit contact with peers and colleagues. This indicator demonstrates that the restriction of personal autonomy and freedom of movement remains a structural reality for a substantial proportion of women within the domestic sphere in Bulgaria.

Threats against family members function as another highly effective tool for maintaining control over victims. This psychological violence is frequently directed not only at the woman itself, but also at relatives or children remaining in the victim’s country of origin, creating a climate of fear that paralyzes any impulse toward escape or resistance. One of the victims told the investigating police:

“From the beginning, I was crying in the window; I had never done this job and I couldn’t stand it. [The trafficker] threatened me, saying that if I didn’t work properly, he would bring my little sister and put her in the next window. In that situation, I forced myself to do it.” (Interrogation report-Victim 3)

To reinforce this trap, traffickers create a narrative of impunity, convincing the victims that the network enjoys police protection and that institutional recourse is impossible. By reducing the likelihood that victims will seek external help, criminal networks minimize their legal exposure and safeguard the continuity of the illicit enterprise. One of the victims, in her statement to the Belgian authorities, said:

“He [the leader of the criminal network] instills fear in all the people who ‘work’ for him. I can assure you that all the girls who work for him have no choice but to continue doing

so. That is why they are often forced to pretend to be carefree and not to show that they are working under duress. Everything here is a matter of life and death. That is why it took me so long to decide to speak out [. . .]. This is not only about my own survival, but also about the lives of my loved ones.” (Interrogation report-Victim 4)

The second study shows similar techniques aimed at subjugating women and placing them under strict control through fear. This creates purely psychological barriers to sharing experiences of violence.

“The main reasons for not reporting cases are the mindset of the society we live in as well as fear, which should not be underestimated. This fear leads to acquiescence, silence, absolute submission, acquiescence to the environment in which these women are placed to live.” (iDI-10)

Manipulating maternal fear regarding the safety and legal custody of children represents a core tactic of coercive control among intimate partners. Experts participating in the focus groups and in-depth interviews highlighted cases where women have suffered years of domestic abuse, trapped by manipulation and threats that any attempt to leave the relationship would result in taking their children away from them.

“Very often, abusers blackmail their victims with threats that they will make them out to be crazy, force them into drug addiction, or take their children and everything they own—telling them that their lives will be over if they file a complaint. A victim often lives with the fear that if she does complain and an investigation begins, he will follow through on all these threats, leaving her with no way to provide evidence in her defense, especially if he possesses compromising photos or similar material.” (Participant 8, FG-01)

Weaponizing potential contact with law enforcement is another tactic utilized by abusers (similar to the technique used by traffickers) to discourage victims from reporting abuse. Experts have reported instances where women endured systemic violence for years, fully convinced of the futility of police intervention.

“But abusers start claiming they know everyone, including the entire police force. They say a complaint won’t lead anywhere because he is a big businessman with a lot of money. Victims live with the conviction that it is pointless to file a complaint because the businessman will just crush it.” (Participant 10, FG-01)

The combination of fear for their life and the family’s safety and the perceived absence of institutional protection operates as a powerful deterrent to reporting, trapping women within a cycle of long-lasting subjugation and abuse.

3.2. Economic Logic of the Use of Violence

Criminal enterprises engaged in human trafficking perceive victims as assets for revenue generation, meaning that maintaining subordination through coercion serves an economic function. Within this illicit business model, the deployment of violence is functioning not as an emotional impulse, but as a calculated tool designed to enforce discipline, instill intimidation, and neutralize attempts to escape or cooperate with law enforcement. Physical or psychological violence serves to minimize the likelihood of victims disrupting the exploitation phase, thereby underwriting a continuous stream of revenue for the trafficking network. Consequently, violence functions as an operational mechanism designed to protect the traffickers’ initial capital investment and guarantee the accumulation of future profits.

Furthermore, violence serves a protective function for the illicit market. By displaying violence, the criminal enterprises maintain internal discipline while simultaneously mitigating the detectability of their illicit activities. Should a victim attempt to escape, the

violence inflicted upon her functions as a warning to ensure the compliance of other victims. Consequently, various forms of violence are an integral component of the economic model of trafficking of women, wherein the human body is commodified as a means of generating income. One of the victims shared during her interrogation:

“Considering that I had been around [the trafficker] and his friends for over 5 years, I am fully aware of what they are capable of. I remember once [the trafficker] beat up [another victim of sexual exploitation] in front of me and for no serious reason.” (Interrogation report-Victim 4)

In this context, punitive measures serve as a mechanism for maintaining the structure of the enterprise and are used to exploit victims. Punitive actions have a dual logic: beyond their immediate function of punishing and subjugating the individual victim, it exerts a deterrent effect. They demonstrate to the wider group that any infraction of the rules or defiance of the traffickers will result in severe punishments. To achieve this preventive effect, in many cases, the victims are subjected to demonstrative punishments in the presence of their peers. Even rumors of such violence create fear and discourage any resistance. One of the victims of sexual exploitation explained why she could not refuse and had to sell sex:

“I had heard bad stories about girls who refused—that they killed them, or broke their arm or leg, or something else bad happened to them. That is why I was afraid to refuse.” (Interrogation report-Victim 2)

The punitive actions become critical during the exploitation phase, as the majority of conflicts occur after the victim has been transported to the destination country. By enforcing immediate, visible consequences, traffickers effectively minimize the risk of escalating resistance and subsequent insubordination among the wider cohort. Another victim recounts to police officers during questioning in Brussels:

“I’m showing you the cigarette burn scars that I still have on my arm and shoulder. [The trafficker] inflicted them on me merely to show others that I was his property and that he could do whatever he wanted with me.” (Interrogation report-Victim 5)

Information extracted from court cases identifies several main reasons for imposing penalties. Violation of rules related to financial control triggers the most severe punitive measures. Specifically, victims are sanctioned for attempts to deceive the trafficker, either by concealing earnings or by stealing money from clients—actions that undermine the financial stability of the enterprise. Severe sanctions are also imposed upon victims who maintain prolonged contact with the same client or engage with them outside designated working schedules. Such interactions are penalized because they directly subvert the strategy of isolation, erode the trafficker’s coercive control over the victim, and create a risk of escape.

Judicial records indicate that the reasons for imposing penalties include being late or not showing up for work, alcohol consumption, wearing inappropriate clothing, and refusing services to clients. The penalties are particularly severe when services are rendered below the prices established by the traffickers. Through this mechanism, perpetrators prevent price-cutting within the sex market, minimizing the unfair competition that could trigger conflicts between criminal enterprises.

The gathered evidence identifies several primary modalities for penalizing non-compliant victims. The most common among these are monetary fines, which in some instances are fixed in advance, establishing a standardized punitive tariff within the enterprise. In many cases, monetary fines are combined with physical violence. Judicial records document a practice where traffickers forcibly cut or shave a victim’s hair following a rule violation. This act functions as a humiliation designed to stigmatize the non-compliant

individual and serve as a public warning to others. In other cases, victims are locked within isolated rooms, deprived of food, and subject to systematic psychological abuse. Additional punitive mechanisms encompass threats, collective sexual assault (gang rape), and targeted degradation. Case insights reveal that traffickers frequently deploy violence arbitrarily, independent of any specific infraction; this unpredictability serves to induce a state of perpetual fear. In one examined case, a victim testified that she was brutally raped by the traffickers, who inserted a shovel handle into her anus.

However, instances of extreme sadism or lethal violence remain relatively scarce across the studied court cases. This observation highlights the economic logic of the enterprise: because the victims represent the sources of revenue, the violence is economically constrained. It functions as a mechanism to optimize compliance and maximize profitability, rather than a means that risks destroying the revenue-generating asset itself.

3.3. The Role of Gender and Marginalization

The cases and forms of violence examined so far primarily targeted women whose vulnerabilities are constructed and reinforced within their home countries by a combination of socio-economic and cultural factors. In many regions of origin, especially in smaller settlements where employment opportunities are limited, women face a higher risk of poverty. Consequently, these structural deficiencies render them susceptible to manipulation, deception, and illusory promises of “a better life”. Empirical insights from judicial records substantiate that a large part of victims originate from marginalized households, frequently suffering from deprivation regarding basic subsistence needs. Within the Bulgarian context, poverty, unemployment, and the lack of opportunities for gainful employment emerge as the primary structural prerequisites driving women into the networks of human trafficking [19].

Information from police witness statements indicates that the majority of young women who were trafficked for sexual exploitation by the organized crime group under investigation were from a poor socio-economic background and were targeted using the recruitment methods described above:

“[The traffickers] recruit girls for sexual exploitation who are socially disadvantaged and face difficult family situations, predominantly from the [name of the region] region. The [traffickers] induce them to provide commercial sexual services under the promise of material benefits, such as money and real estate, while also luring them with promises of marriage.” (Police report 3)

In addition to economic factors, sociocultural norms regarding gender roles in society also have a significant impact, which can limit their access to education, professional development, and social support [26]. This applies particularly strongly to marginalized minority groups, such as the Roma in Bulgaria. According to the experts who participated in the second study, a patriarchal model operates within a large portion of Roma families and is accepted even by women; consequently, they do not recognize themselves as victims of violence:

“Because at the tender age of 18 or 20, with no opportunities to enter the labor market, prostitution remains [their only option], leading directly to the most severe forms of violence against women, such as trafficking for sexual exploitation. This is particularly prevalent in the marginalized communities we work with. [...] Socio-economic factors—such as women having limited access to education or being withdrawn from school at an early age to enter early marriages—greatly increase their dependency and trap them in cycles of violence [...]” (iDI-32)

“Ethnic minorities, especially the Roma, represent high-risk groups where violence often remains completely invisible. [...] intervention and outreach must be carried out within these communities, particularly among less-educated segments and those bound by rigid cultural traditions...” (iDI-34)

“...when it comes to Roma women in particular, society often believes that any hardship or violence they experience is entirely justified. [...] For them, the burden is twofold—marginalized both on the basis of their gender and their ethnic origin.” (iDI-30)

Criminal enterprises capitalize on these patriarchal structures and gender inequalities. By operating within environments where women are relegated to subordinate, financially dependent, and socially unequal positions, traffickers find pre-conditioned structures that facilitate the imposition of coercive control over their victims.

The cultural and family environments in which these women are socialized influence their vulnerability to violence. The study “Violence against Women” demonstrates that within small settlements outside the capital and major urban centers traditional norms impose a subordinate status for women. The experts who participated in the study are convinced that although there is an improvement in the situation with equality (especially in terms of professional fulfillment), patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded within the Bulgarian society. To illustrate this, respondents highlighted a case wherein parents returned their daughter to an abusive spouse, prioritizing the preservation of the integrity of the family over individual safety. Another expert shared the case of a young woman trafficked abroad for sexual exploitation, whose parents refused to support her out of concern for public opinion:

“Family members often play a critical role; in one tragic case from [city name], the situation unfortunately ended in death. Driven by the fear of public shame, the parents completely abandoned their responsibilities after their daughter became trapped in this sphere [sex trade]. They flatly refused to cooperate with authorities, and unfortunately, it was impossible to save the girl.” (iDI-10)

According to a large portion of the participants in the interviews and focus groups, the patriarchal norms of the past are still strongly prevalent in the Bulgarian society. Under these rigid norms, decision-making is strictly monopolized by men, and women have a subordinate role and must be in service and subservience to men.

“On a societal level, I think that patriarchy still exists in our country, and the majority of the population accepts rigid gender roles—where men’s activities and pursuits are viewed as their priority and responsibility, while a woman’s duty is to handle housework and everything traditionally expected of her gender.” (iDI-23)

In addition to gender inequality, cultural normative frameworks that foster societal tolerance for violence against women tend to create conditions that facilitate the actions of abusers, including traffickers. According to the experts, in Bulgaria, there is a widespread understanding that relationships between partners—even when characterized by systemic abuse—constitute strictly private, domestic affairs. This concept dictates that intimate partner conflicts should be contained within the household, actively discouraging the intervention of external social or institutional actors. There is a pervasive belief that only women bear the responsibility for maintaining family cohesion; consequently, any effort to exit from an abusive partnership is stigmatized as a failure that breaks the family. This cultural framework is compounded by victim-blaming dynamics, which attribute the genesis of the abuse to the victims themselves.

“Very often, women who are victims blame themselves for certain negative reactions, including physical and psychological abuse by their husbands.” (iDI-11)

“Probably, society has largely adopted such a mindset, that if the victim has allowed herself to a certain behavior, then it is her own fault.” (iDI-22)

“There are also many people who are worried they may bring shame to themselves, bring shame to the honor and dignity of the family, if one may think a family where there is violence has any such [honor and dignity], but they do not turn to the institutions. I think a very large number of victims do not turn to the institutions.” (Participant 9, FG-01)

Ultimately, the individual undergoes a process of double victimization—initially abused by the perpetrator, and subsequently marginalized by the broader social community. Drawing upon their field experience, the experts involved in the study reveal that this way of perceiving domestic abuse is a norm in Bulgaria, rather than an exception. The findings demonstrate that the sociocultural context fosters an environment that facilitates the systemic normalization of some forms of violence against women.

“Well, unfortunately, and purely culturally, when we watch a news broadcast in the evening on national television, we can draw the conclusion that it is not only in the most ethnic communities, but this is something that Bulgarians are proud of—the patriarchal society, etc. [. . .]. I think our country gives good opportunities for women to develop professionally. But in other aspects of life this is definitely not the case”. (iDI-20)

This structural inequality, combined with the traditional status of the male breadwinner, contributes to the failure to recognize non-physical modalities of abuse. Both in interviews and in focus groups, experts shared that in their experience, they often observe situations in which women are not recognized as victims if there is no direct physical violence, rendering psychological and economic coercion invisible. The experts' claim that Bulgarian society, including a large part of women, recognizes only physical violence as violence is also confirmed by the data from the quantitative survey. According to 12.5% of Bulgarians, controlling the finances of their wife/girlfriend is rather not violence, and for 2.9% it is not violence at all. Furthermore, nearly half of the respondents (48.3%) are personally acquainted with women whose finances are entirely monopolized by male partners. Additionally, 23.1% know women who are forbidden from engaging in employment, and 22.7% are aware of instances where women are restricted from pursuing further education. These percentages serve as a symptom of a tacit societal tolerance for female subjugation and financial control, actively compounding women's vulnerability to trafficking networks.

4. Discussion

Various forms of violence—physical, sexual, psychological, and economic—accompany the exploitation of female victims trafficked for sexual purposes. Empirical insights from the study show that perpetrators increasingly rely on non-physical modalities of coercion, deploying tactics of control that bypass visible physical aggression yet achieve psychological compliance. These observations are consistent with other studies that reveal coercive and controlling methods [27–29], including emotional and financial dependencies and drug control [30] used in human trafficking. The evidence presented demonstrates that violence within criminal networks is not an arbitrary or chaotic phenomenon. Within a criminal enterprise, violence functions as a mechanism designed to guarantee operational productivity, mitigate internal conflicts, and prevent financial losses. It possesses an economic utility, serving as a tool for the execution of the illicit business.

The article goes beyond the idea that treats violence merely as an attribute of organized crime; instead, it conceptualizes the multi-dimensional abuse inflicted upon female victims as a calculated instrument that secures the operational continuity and economic optimization of the criminal enterprise. Contextualizing the violence deployed by traffickers within

the framework of traditional gender roles and structural gender inequalities allows us to identify the persistence of certain cultural norms that criminal networks successfully capitalize on. In this manner, the text contributes to existing research [31,32], which demonstrates that the coercive control exercised over women diverges from attacks on partners or competitors in criminal business. Instead, it underscores that trafficking-related violence is a manifestation of gender inequality and the persistence of deeply entrenched cultural norms and attitudes that limit women's rights and autonomy.

The analysis of court cases underscores the mechanisms of violence in action, while research conducted within the project "Violence against Women: Typologies, Economic and Social Consequences" reveals the cultural legitimization that makes them possible. We have demonstrated how criminal enterprises of human trafficking successfully exploit persistent social prejudices and the normalization of violence against women. Empirical evidence suggests that the cultural framework normalizing aggression against women remains a critical determinant that offers an operational instrument for exploitation. The fact that violence against women continues to be perceived as "normal" in certain situations in 2025 confirms that the attitudes exploited by perpetrators are not temporary phenomena, but deeply rooted structural factors. These enduring attitudes compound women's vulnerability to human trafficking and facilitate their exploitation. Women and girls are frequently subjected to sexual violence, psychological coercion, threats, and subjugation aimed at enforcing and sustaining dependency. In many instances, deeply ingrained social stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes toward women drive their marginalization and limit their opportunities for protection and support. These statements are validated by another recent study of trends in human trafficking in Bulgaria, which identifies two main factors for female vulnerability to violence and exploitation: on one hand, macro-level socio-economic structural deficits—unemployment, educational deprivation, and the "culture of poverty"—have institutionalized the marginalization and polarization of vulnerable social groups; on the other hand, micro-level exposure to violence within the immediate domestic environment erodes individual defenses, amplifying the vulnerability to victimization [18].

By identifying mechanisms of control utilized within sexual exploitation and embedding this phenomenon within the broader context of violence against women, this article contributes to the under-researched issue of the relationship between systemic violence against women and human trafficking. Reid et al. [33], for example, have demonstrated that exposure to intimate partner violence increases the risk of victimization within human trafficking for sexual exploitation. The present article confirms this observation, illustrating that this type of violence and human trafficking share common dynamics—both involve an element of coercive control that is facilitated by power imbalances and the prevalence of abuse.

5. Conclusions

Violence within the criminal enterprises of trafficking of women for sexual exploitation cannot be understood as an isolated or incidental phenomenon. The various forms of violence constitute a tool used to sustain the activity by maintaining power relations within the structure, reducing the risk of structural disruption, and maximizing profits. The coercive control exerted over the victims functions as a mechanism for safeguarding both the activity and profitability of the criminal enterprise.

In the Bulgarian context, trafficking networks exploit the socio-economic precarity, as well as cultural norms and ineffective institutional responses leading to secondary victimization rather than providing prevention and protection. In this context, criminal enterprises of trafficking of women for sexual exploitation capitalize on both individual vulnerability and broader institutional gaps.

Conclusively, these findings indicate that successfully combating human trafficking requires an integrated approach that synchronizes criminal prosecution with social support for vulnerable groups. This framework must encompass prevention and protection measures; policies aimed at reducing structural inequalities and changing attitudes that make violence against women a sustainable phenomenon in society. Without addressing the structural and cultural forms of violence—where systemic socio-economic exclusion is reinforced by cultural norms that normalize dependency and heighten individual vulnerability—comprehensive victim protection remains unattainable.

6. Limitations and Future Research

The themes discussed in this paper do not encompass the entirety of the analytical insights that could be extracted from the complete datasets. Ultimately, the selection of the presented themes was delimited by their capacity to address the core research questions of the current study.

Since the qualitative materials were analyzed and coded by a single researcher, the subjective position of the author introduces a degree of interpretive bias [34]. To mitigate this, the coding process was anchored to an operational codebook structured around the study's theoretical framework [35]. While the thematic development reflects a singular interpretive lens, analytical reliability was maintained by strictly basing the findings on the chosen theory and the direct textual evidence from both the case files and the interviews/focus groups. This link between theory and data ensures that the final arguments remain structurally grounded and robust.

The intersection of violence against women and human trafficking for sexual exploitation warrants further in-depth investigation. This necessity is particularly acute in source countries such as Bulgaria, where human trafficking is an endemic problem and where deeply embedded cultural and socio-economic asymmetries contribute to the persistence of violence against women. Although this study focuses exclusively on trafficking in women from Bulgaria, its observations and analytical conclusions provide a valuable foundation for future comparative research across different global regions where this form of exploitation remains a critical issue.

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