social sciences

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Female Offenders in Human Trafficking: Analyzing Roles in a Spanish Sample

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Abstract: Offenders convicted of trafficking human beings for sexual exploitation involve a high percentage of women compared to other similar offenses. Previous studies have searched for explanations for the dynamics of the illegal sex market and the coercion experienced by victims during the process of exploitation and exit. This article analyses the content of 58 judicial decisions involving a sample of 148 women convicted in Spain of trafficking in human beings between 2017 and 2024. Two main dimensions are explored: the criminal organizations performing the sexual exploitation phase in Spain and the characteristics, positions, and roles of women traffickers within the criminal organizations. Half of the sample occupies leadership roles, while the other half consists of supporters, especially in larger trafficking networks. Regarding the positions and roles of women offenders, supporters and partners in crime are at higher risk of being coerced due to the nature of their roles or partnerships.

Keywords: women traffickers; women convicted for human trafficking; offending; women offenders

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Citation: Giménez-Salinas, Andrea. 2024. Female Offenders in Human Trafficking: Analyzing Roles in a Spanish Sample. *Social Sciences* 13: 605. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13110605

Academic Editor: James O. Finckenauer

Received: 3 September 2024
Revised: 30 October 2024
Accepted: 31 October 2024
Published: 5 November 2024

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1. Introduction

Gender perspective in criminological research has been understudied due to the small representation of women in the most prevalent criminal behaviors: sexual violence, domestic violence, etc. Today, a growing interest in the gender approach provides new insights into criminological explanations of deviant behavior, offering new challenges in gender-based practical and rehabilitating strategies to reduce future delinquency (Kruttschnitt 2016; Marang'a 2022; Voorhis 2012; Wardrop et al. 2019).

Female participation in criminal activities varies according to crime typologies. Financial crimes, frauds, and some property crimes are more overrepresented by women than others because of the nature of the offenses, which do not involve violence and risk assumption (Chernoff and Simon 2000). In contrast to economic or financial crimes, organized crimes have been traditionally accomplished by men, and women have performed a secondary role, usually associated with collaborating or covering functions. However, recent studies in organized crime indicate that women have increasingly participated in those criminal activities over time and perform more significant roles in criminal organizations (Kienast et al. 2014; Siegel and De Blank 2010; Wijkman and Kleemans 2019). They seem to be included in different relevant nonviolent tasks and occupy significant positions inside the networks, contrary to what was traditionally known about mafia-type organizations (Diviák et al. 2020, 2023; Kienast et al. 2014; Kleemans et al. 2014; Requena et al. 2014). Specifically, trafficking in human beings, drug trafficking, and money laundering are the illegal markets where we find the highest percentage of women (Selmini 2020; Willis and Rushforth 2003).

Trafficking in human beings involves an extremely high percentage of women, especially when the purpose of the trafficking is the sexual exploitation of victims (Kleemans et al. 2014; Requena et al. 2014). Data coming from the latest international reports (UNODC 2022) show that 40% of persons globally convicted of trafficking in human beings (including

sex, labor, and other types of exploitation) are women, 58% are men, and 2% are minors. If we contemplate the rate of women's participation in trafficking for sexual exploitation independently, that figure increases considerably. This is a huge percentage if we compare sex distribution to other criminal activities, where women represent around 10–15% of the convicted population (Smith and Kangaspunta 2012).

Additionally, the gendered-market hypothesis (Wijkman and Kleemans 2019) suggests that the organizational context and market demand for different illegal activities influence the roles and participation of women in criminal enterprises. In this regard, some criminal activities would be more women-inclusive than others, depending on the tasks and skills needed for running the activity. In other words, women will be involved in certain types of crime where their roles and skills would be appreciated and advantageous for the criminal market. Wijkman and Kleemans (2019) demonstrated in a study of 150 criminal organizations that women have better opportunities in markets such as human smuggling or trafficking in human beings compared to others such as drug markets due to the nature of the work. The caregiving roles and safety of clients are duties that tend to be better performed by women, so their abilities are particularly valuable for those tasks. This study and some conducted in other criminal organized activities also show that women often use their close social relationships (family ties, partners, etc.) to facilitate their roles in crimes and perform broker positions between the legal and the illegal worlds (Requena et al. 2014; Calderoni et al. 2021).

Many questions regarding the over-involvement of women in trafficking in human beings need more accurate explanations based on empirical research. Some reports claim that more empirical research in the field is needed due to a lack of knowledge based on empirical samples (Kienast et al. 2014). Difficulties in accessing samples of perpetrators or victims could explain the knowledge gaps and the research bias. Additionally, many studies have been conducted by non-governmental organizations with a more emotional approach pursuing strong political support for anti-trafficking policies (Kienast et al. 2014). Our study is in line with some others that have undertaken the search for answers about the role and explanations of women's involvement in organized crime activities. A better understanding of women's participation in these types of crimes may lead to more tailored solutions aiming to protect the victims of sexual exploitation in the future.

1.1. Roles and Tasks Inside Trafficking in Human Beings Organizations

In recent decades, some significant studies have analyzed the role of women in trafficking in human beings. Those who have gathered empirical data about the role of women in active organized crime groups have reached the following conclusions. On one hand, the role of women in criminal networks has been underestimated for many years due to a belief that their involvement was accessory and always in a subordinated position to the masculine figure. Studies by Diviák et al. (2023) and Selmini (2020) show that women play a significant role in criminal networks, occupying leadership and cooperative positions (Mancuso 2014; Requena et al. 2014; Siegel and De Blank 2010). On the other hand, women are not equally participating in all organized criminal activities; it has been proven that they are more present in certain types of activities due to the tasks performed. For example, Wijkman and Kleemans (2019), after a revision of 150 cases in the Dutch Organized Crime Monitor covering from 1994 to 2011, concluded that women play a significant role in "gendered-markets" or activities such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, human trafficking, and fraud due to the nature of the work. Those activities match feminine skills and social roles; consequently, they play a brokerage role in social relationships to facilitate transnational crimes and connections to legal society (Siegel and De Blank 2010; Wijkman and Kleemans 2019).

Regarding women's roles in trafficking networks, some studies conclude that women play key positions within human trafficking networks, from supportive and collaborative roles to leadership ones in the international domain (Siegel and De Blank 2010; Requena et al. 2014). Siegel and De Blank (2010), based on data collected from 89 court files

in Dutch courts in 2006–2007, analyzed the role and activities of women in trafficking networks. They concluded that female roles can be categorized into three typologies regarding their position and their relationship with leaders: (a) supporters, who act as subordinates to the leading traffickers and follow their orders either under threats or voluntarily; (b) partners in crime, when women cooperate with leaders on an equal basis in tasks and activities needed for the business; (c) madams, who have a central role in organized crime activities, coordinating tasks, managing prostitutes, and controlling finances.

This study also highlights the role of women in Nigerian networks, especially those with international connections. However, Mancuso (2014), in a study of Nigerian networks, demonstrated that not all have leading roles or significant ones; some others play secondary positions conducting subordinated tasks. Age, experience in the field, and the possession of international contacts are facilitating factors promoting members to higher positions in the organization (Mancuso 2014; Wijkman and Kleemans 2019). Two typologies were extracted after a network analysis of Nigerian sex trafficking organizations regarding their betweenness centrality (brokerage): (a) one type of madam with a high hierarchical position in the network who is able to plan all the phases due to its international contacts and financial means; (b) another type of madam who acts predominantly in the exploitation phase and its economic capacity depends on the financial gains obtained by the victims' exploitation (Mancuso 2014). On the other hand, Campana (2016), after analyzing two Nigerian cases, concluded that the Nigerian trafficking network structure is less centralized than expected. On the other hand, madams play a key role in generating victims' demand for sexual exploitation and, for that purpose, they are in closer cooperation with recruiters than transporters, whose services are outsourced when it is needed.

Regarding the most prevalent tasks performed by women in trafficking networks, Wijkman and Kleemans (2019) found a wide variety of them. They found that the most prevalent consisted of collecting money, housing victims, controlling during work, exploiting victims, taking away and keeping passports and travel documents, recruiting outside countries of destination, connecting with potential customers, pursuing minors to work in prostitution, transporting to customers or workplaces, and arranging forged travel documents and travel tickets. Less frequent were the following tasks: giving work instructions, buying work-related items for the victims, renting prostitution rooms, performing administrative accounting, enrolling in escort agencies, and creating/managing internet advertisements.

1.2. Pathway to Offending in Sex Trafficking

Another significant question that should be answered to have a deep understanding of women offending in human trafficking is their motivation, especially because a proportion of them may have been victims of trafficking in human beings (UNODC 2020; Villacampa and Torres 2015). Several studies illustrate that being cooperative with their perpetrators is sometimes the only way to survive and gain freedom (Kienast et al. 2014; Wijkman and Kleemans 2019).

From the scarce research conducted in this field, it seems that there are three pathways leading to female participation in the trafficking business:

1. *Previous victimization*: indirect or direct involvement is a consequence of risk factors suffered in childhood or adolescence such as a negative familiar environment, victimization (physical or sexual abuse), drug or alcohol abuse, or negligence. They can influence future criminal behavior by developing traumas or can facilitate opportunities for crime (abandonment, partner abuse, etc.). Due to these vulnerabilities, certain women may be more prone to cooperate with traffickers for survival. In these cases, there is a blurred line between victim and perpetrator. In the study of Wijkman and Kleemans (2019), these cases represent a minority (7.5% of the sample of 138 women).
2. A way to *climb the ladder* to a free life or a more convenient way of making money, being already a victim of human trafficking (Kienast et al. 2014). Often this transition

from victim to perpetrator may come from a romantic relationship with leaders (Broad 2015; Wijkman and Kleemans 2019).

3. The implication of being *forced by offenders*: other studies add a third category of convicted women whose involvement in criminal responsibilities becomes a consequence of being forced by their traffickers (Villacampa and Torres 2015). In the context of coercive participation, Broad (2015) demonstrated that one recurring profile of women traffickers was characterized by performing secondary or low-level roles in criminal networks, which increased the likelihood of identification. This wide exposure can also explain our previous argument related to the high proportion of women convicted in this trafficking compared to other organized crime offenses. The main conclusion of UNODC (2020), when analyzing court decisions about traffickers who were previously the victims of trafficking, is that traffickers use victims to shield themselves from persecution. They use victims to perform illegal exploitation activities such as the recruitment of new victims, maintaining control over victims, the collection of the proceeds from the exploitation, and the advertising of services. The motives revealed by the victims to perform offending roles are the following: seeking alleviation from their own exploitation, securing the trafficker's affection, and having no choice but to obey the orders. In a few cases, economic gains and climbing the ladder within the hierarchy of the criminal organization were also motives.

These previous studies, suggesting a thin line between being victims and offenders, often underestimate that some women may be involved in trafficking offenses of their own free will or for economic reasons. This dimension should be carefully considered when examining women's pathways to crime.

The study presented aims to analyze a Spanish sample of women convicted of trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation. This has been carried out by other studies: Siegel and De Blank (2010) and Wijkman and Kleemans (2019) with Dutch samples; Le and Wyndham (2022) with women traffickers in Vietnam; and Zywiec (2012) in the United States. Some others have analyzed the strategic positions of women in trafficking networks (Mancuso 2014; Diviák et al. 2023). In Spain, two studies have been conducted analyzing a sample of women traffickers. Rodriguez-Lopez conducted a quantitative study with a sample of 43 women convicted of human trafficking between 2015 and 2018, and Villacampa and Torres (2015) conducted a qualitative study of 45 women convicted in Spain of trafficking in human beings in the same period.

We aim to analyze a wider sample in a more recent period (2017 to 2024) to confirm the results provided by previous studies in Spain and other countries. The analysis will be limited to the information provided by the judicial decisions, mainly related to the characteristics and modus operandi of traffickers during the period investigated to prove their criminal responsibility in the Spanish territory. Information about their past, immigration process, and international connections with other criminal organization members is extremely scarce. As a consequence, the main objective of the article is to analyze a sample of women convicted of trafficking in human beings between 2017 and 2024. The analysis will include two main dimensions: first, the criminal organizations performing the sexual exploitation phase in our country; second, the characteristics, positions, and roles performed by women traffickers in the criminal organizations. The overrepresentation of women convicted for the trafficking of human beings has been interpreted with different arguments. Some authors stress the advantages of having women in the trafficking business to understand the figures (Diviák et al. 2023; Wijkman and Kleemans 2019; Requena et al. 2014) and other authors highlight the blurred frontiers between victims and perpetrators in this kind of network due to the captivity context intrinsic to these offenses (Broad 2015; Kienast et al. 2014; Villacampa and Torres 2015). Our data sources do not allow us to confirm or refute previous positions or identify women's pathways to crime. However, we do provide valuable indicators that can contribute to advancing the debate and discussing the findings under these two positions and guide further research approaches to provide empirically based answers.

1.3. Method

We have gathered information about 148 women convicted for trafficking in human beings included in 58 judicial decisions published between 2015 and 2024. The inclusion criteria used to select the sample from judicial decisions were the following: (a) women convicted of trafficking in human beings for exploitation; (b) trafficking in human beings conducted by organized crime groups (including more than two members); (c) judicial decisions from different Spanish courts available in a public database (CENDOJ) published between 2015 and 2024.

The sample consist of 148 adult women convicted at least for trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation in the period of the study. Their women's countries of origin can be grouped into three main geographical areas: Africa (mainly Nigeria and Guinea), Latin-American countries such as Venezuela, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Colombia; and Eastern European countries such as Romania and Bulgaria.

The information available about perpetrators was deposited into a database but the information collected is limited to the modus operandi of the organized crime group and the roles performed by its members. Since the information is to prove the criminal responsibility of perpetrators, information about the members' pasts or detailed information about the dynamics of the organization is missing. With this limitation in mind, we gathered information about the following variables related to the women convicted:

- Judicial decision identification.
- Adult/minor: the information available in the judicial decision does not include the exact age, just if there are minors or adults.
- Nationality: country of origin and nationality.
- Prostitution: if they were prostitutes at the time of the offense.
- Victims: if they were victims of trafficking in human beings before the offense was conducted.
- Conviction: if they are convicted by a court decision of trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation.
- Familiar bonds: if there was a family or intimate relationship between the female offender and a member of the organized crime group.
- Tasks performed in the trafficking execution. We created some categories adapted from Wijkman and Kleemans (2019) to the national context. Some of the tasks were combined into one category because they were performed by the same person, especially in small criminal organizations. The available information allowed us to classify the tasks into the following categories:
  - Coordinator: when the woman has a leadership role in all activities, either directly or through other members.
  - Collecting money: when the woman is exclusively responsible for collecting the gains of the victims in the workplace.
  - Front woman: woman performing economic activities on behalf of another person.
  - Housing the victims: when the woman pays the rent of a house and houses the victims during some phase of the sexual exploitation.
  - Controlling during the work: when the woman oversees the victims' work.
  - Housing victims and controlling during the work: usually, the two tasks are performed simultaneously. The victims often live with those who are in charge of their control.
  - Recruiting outside the country and travel: usually those tasks are performed by the same person, in charge of recruiting and facilitating the victim's transportation to the destination country.
  - Transportation to consumers or the workplace: when the woman is only in charge of victims' transportation to any place, especially the workplace.
  - Club owner or manager: the woman is in charge of the workplace where sexual exploitation is conducted.

- Number of members convicted in the judicial procedure: members (being men or women) convicted of trafficking in human beings.
- Role occupied in the organization: Leader or madame, partner in crime, or supporter.

As regards the analytical plan, the information was coded in a database and descriptive analyses were conducted for the variables collected.

2. Results

2.1. Characteristics of Criminal Organizations Analyzed

Before presenting the results, we should take into account that the real size of the organizations, measured in terms of the number of persons convicted by the judicial decision, is always underestimated for two reasons: (a) the number of convicted persons is always smaller than those investigated; (b) the subjects investigated in the networks are usually those who live and carry out their activities in Spain, the international links are rarely identified and investigated because they require international cooperation and additional information from the suspect.

As we can see in Table 1, the most prevalent organization's size ranges from four to five members (44.9%). In less proportion, there are organizations composed of two or three members (35%), usually linked by familiar bonds or intimate partnerships. Larger criminal organizations (more than six members) represent 19.8% of the sample.

Table 1. Size of the organized crime groups of the sample (n = 60).

Number of Members	Number of Organizations	Percentage (%)
2	12	20
3	9	15
4	14	23.3
5	13	21.6
6	2	3.3
7	2	3.3
8	2	3.3
9	3	5
10–19	2	3.3
20	1	1.6
Total	60	100

This profile distribution aligns with the trends observed in the UNODC's global annual reports (UNODC 2022, 2023). On one side, there are small networks managed by one person or a pair of partners operating on equal terms. By contrast, there are larger criminal organizations (comprising more than four members) that exhibit a more distinct division of labor, with women occupying roles ranging from leadership positions to subordinate tasks essential to the operation (such as housing, transportation, and monitoring sexual exploitation in the workplace). Our study specifically excluded lone traffickers, often referred to as *lover boys*, as our sampling criteria focused on women involved in criminal groups (more than two members) adhering to Europol's definition of an organized criminal group.

Medium-size organizations (comprising 4–5 members) constitute the most prevalent criminal groups in the sample. These results are not directly comparable to previous Spanish studies since they did not consider this specific dimension. However, when contrasted with international studies, such as those conducted by UNODC (2020), differences emerged. According to the UNODC's (2020) analysis of court cases, female traffickers are more often involved in criminal organizations composed of pairs (intimate partners) (43%) than in business-type organizations (37%), where men have a preeminent role. No evidence of

this trend has been detected in our data, since 20% of the women are involved in small organizations consisting of two members, and the rest are included in bigger or business-type organizations. This observation is further reinforced by the distribution of tasks performed by women, who are predominately involved in subordinated tasks rather than leadership roles. These results should be interpreted taking into account that these cases represent trafficking organizations investigated in the Spanish territory, which means that (a) the judicial decisions published in the public database (CENDOJ) tend to overestimate the decisions of the courts dealing with the most serious cases (Giménez-Salinas and Landa forthcoming), and (b) the sample of court cases used by UNODC may include individual traffickers rather than exclusively organized criminal groups.

Regarding the sex distribution of members, from the 300 members involved in 60 organized crime groups, 50.7% are men and 49.3% are women. These results are consistent with other studies that highlight the increasing involvement of women in organized crime activities, especially in the trafficking of human beings for sexual exploitation (Kienast et al. 2014; Selmini 2020; Siegel and De Blank 2010; Wijkman and Kleemans 2019; Willis and Rushforth 2003). Approximately half of the individuals convicted of trafficking in human beings in our sample are women. This percentage is higher than that reported by Rodríguez-López (2022) (40.95%), although this difference may be attributable to differences in sample size. Both figures show significant female participation compared to other studies (30% UNODC 2020), 32% in the UK, 18% in the Netherlands, 23% in Portugal and 32% in France (Broad 2015). This participation rate could be explained by the high concentration of trafficking activities conducted in Spain compared to other countries (UNODC 2022). But it can also be partly explained by the limitations inherent in the data source because Spanish judicial decisions tend to underrepresent active members involved in the trafficking process in other countries, who cannot be investigated and convicted within Spain.

2.2. Nationality of Women Traffickers

The women in the sample originate from three main geographical regions: Africa (54.1%), Europe (27%), and Central and South America (18.9%). Nevertheless, the distribution of countries shown in Table 2 reveals that a significant proportion, 51.4%, of women are from Nigeria. Romania is the second most represented country with 12.8%, followed by Russia (8.8%), Venezuela (7.4%) and Colombia (4.1%). The remaining countries are less represented in the sample.

This national distribution is similar to the one provided by Rodríguez-López (2022). However, small differences between periods can be explained by changes in the implementation of migration policies, in the demands for victims, in illegal immigration policies, etc. Additionally, the countries of origin of victims and traffickers are very similar and follow similar trends (UNODC, etc.).

Table 2. Distribution of women by country of origin.

Country of Origin	Frequency (n=)	Percentage (%)
Brazil	1	0.7
Latvia	1	0.7
Spain	2	1.4
Guinea	2	1.4
Moroco	2	1.4
Uruguay	2	1.4
Nicaragua	3	2.0
Bulgaria	5	3.4
Paraguay	5	3.4

Table 2. *Cont.*

Country of Origin	Frequency (n=)	Percentage (%)
Colombia	6	4.1
Venezuela	11	7.4
Russian Federation	13	8.8
Romania	19	12.8
Nigeria	76	51.4
Total	148	100

2.3. Women Traffickers: Roles and Tasks Performed

Table 3 shows the sample distribution of the roles performed by the women traffickers within the organization. Approximately 25% have a leading role within the organization, with a high degree of autonomy in the Spanish territory. It should be noted that 79% of these leaders are involved in Nigerian networks, characterized by clear leadership in the Spanish territory. They are usually in contact with recruiters (mostly family members in the country of origin) to ensure the delivery of new victims to Spanish cities where they perform street prostitution, which is the most precarious form of sex exploitation in Spain.

Table 3. Distribution of women's roles as traffickers.

Roles of Women Traffickers	Frequency (n=)	Percentage (%)
Madame	37	25
Partners in crime	34	23
Supporter	77	52
	148	100

The percentage of women in *leadership* positions in our sample is comparable, but slightly higher than in other Spanish studies (27.9% Rodríguez-López (2022) and higher than in some international studies (i.e., 11% Siegel and De Blank 2010). This could be due to the time elapsed between the studies and the concentration of Nigerian women leaders, who represent 50% of our sample. In particular, 79% of the leaders are included in the Nigerian networks analyzed. These cases display a clear female leadership within the Spanish territory, through their exploitation activities are facilitated by close contact with recruiters, often family members, in the country of origin. Based on the judicial information gathered, this leadership role involves a high degree of autonomy within Spain, as has been found in other studies (Siegel and De Blank 2010; Mancuso 2014). However, there is limited information on the criminal connections in the country of origin, which makes it difficult to determine their degree of autonomy within the global network. The data do not indicate whether they must report to other members (male or female) with a higher status. Some judicial decisions in cases from Nigeria provide information about the transfer of large sums of money from different European countries to leaders in Spain. This could be consistent with Campana's (2016) argument that Nigerian madams play a peripherical role in international Nigerian networks, where they create demand for exploitation in destination countries. As a result, they maintain close relationships with recruiters to ensure a steady flow of potential victims. What remains empirically unclear in our study is the role of Nigerian madams at the international level and their relationships with other high-level members within these networks.

Women who are *partners in crime*, performing equal positions with other women or men, represent 23% of the sample. They are involved in small organizations of between two and ten people of different nationalities (Colombia, Paraguay, Romania, and Venezuela). Concerning their mutual relationship, 40% of these partners in crime share familiar ties,

mostly intimate. Regarding the division of labor, women are usually responsible for monitoring the living conditions and supervising the exploited victims. Men, on the other hand, tend to perform other tasks that involve less direct contact with the victims. These findings illustrate how intimate relationships can serve as a clear pathway to crime for many women across a range of criminal activities. Family and romantic partners have traditionally been a common way to increase involvement in organized crime activities (Requena et al. 2014; Calderoni et al. 2021). A high percentage of members are related by blood or intimate relationships, which not only facilitates the recruitment of new members but also helps sustain the criminal business and build trust in clandestine and hostile contexts (Calderoni et al. 2021; Lampe and Johansen 2004). What remains less understood is whether this partnership in crime is a matter of free choice, especially when women have a history of prior victimization. Many studies suggest a possible lack of sufficient empirical data to support this conclusion (Broad 2015; Villacampa and Torres 2015). Further research with direct access to perpetrators is needed to better understand these co-offending relationships. Broad (2015) states that a significant number of female traffickers are involved in intimate relationships with male traffickers, relationships that often involve coercion and abuse. Similarly, Villacampa and Torres (2015) suggests that some women interviewed in prison were forced into criminal activities because they were victims of trafficking themselves. Further empirical research is needed to determine the extent to which these women are willing participants and understand the circumstances under which they develop these activities.

In total, 51% of women have subordinated (*supporters*) roles within the sample; they have limited autonomy and are assigned tasks by leaders. Additionally, 12 out of 76 supporters performed prostitution activities at the time of the police investigation. That information is not always available from the judicial files, which means that this proportion could be higher in reality.

The subordinated tasks performed by women traffickers have been classified into eight categories. As shown in Table 4, the most frequent tasks involve (a) housing the victims and controlling them during work (29.05%): these women either house the victims in their own homes or in accommodations rented by their criminal partners, where they control the victims, both at home and in the workplace. Sometimes, women who supervise the victims at the workplace do not reside with them; instead, they perform these tasks in the clubs or on the street, where prostitution takes place. These women represent 23% of the sample and, usually, they engage in sexual services themselves. In this context, we identified 17 women out of 148 perpetrators who were also working as prostitutes at the time of the judicial process. This suggests that they were simultaneously overseeing the victims and working alongside them as coworkers. This dual role may indicate that these women could be coerced into performing supervisory activities on behalf of the traffickers, likely due to their proximity to the victims. Additionally, this coerced surveillance may offer additional advantages to traffickers, such as maintaining a lower profile and being less visible to law enforcement, particularly in cases where sexual exploitation occurs in public spaces, as is the case for the majority of the sample.

Additionally, beyond supervisory activities, a small percentage (7.43%) of women are responsible for transporting victims from one location to another to ensure continuous supervision, especially when they must travel to and from the workplace. This task is more frequent when sexual services are conducted on the street, as is the case in most instances within our sample due to the increased risk of police intervention. In contrast, when prostitution takes place in clubs, transportation is not always necessary because the victims may reside inside or near the club.

Table 4. Distribution of women by task in the criminal organization.

Role in the Organisation	Frequency (n=)	Percentage (%)
Club manager/owner	6	4.05
Collecting money	1	0.68
Controlling during the work	34	22.97
Coordinator/leader	31	20.95
Front women	1	0.68
Housing victims	1	0.68
Housing victims and controlling them during the work	43	29.05
Recruiting outside the country and travel	20	13.51
Transportation to consumers or workplace	11	7.43
Total	148	100

In the case of tasks involving control and transportation, we notice indicators that raise doubts about the possibility of coercion in exchange for certain advantages. As Broad (2015) noted, a wide percentage of women involved in human trafficking often occupy lower-level roles such as transportation or controlling the victims. Such roles increase their exposure to law enforcement and the likelihood of being arrested. Our findings support this argument, since a higher percentage of women convicted were supporters (51%), and all cases have been identified by police or NGOs due to their interactions with victims engaged in prostitution on the street or through police inspection in clubs and bars. This is the most visible aspect of this phenomenon, representing the tip of the iceberg in the broader context of sexual exploitation. This result should also be connected to Campana's (2016) argument about the dynamics of trafficking in human beings' networks, where the roles of monitoring and control of the victims are among the most significant critical tasks necessary to ensure the survival and operation of sex trafficking networks.

On the other hand, 13.51% of women were responsible for recruiting victims from their countries of origin, either directly or by employing local residents. They usually reside in Spain but remain in contact with compatriots or family members in their home countries who assist in identifying and introducing new victims in vulnerable situations. Regarding recruitment, there are differences based on the countries of origin and the organization's size. In Nigerian organizations, for example, madams hold clear leadership during the exploitation phase, but they maintain contact with family members or colleagues in Nigeria to source new victims. In contrast, larger organizations, which often employ members of different nationalities, assign women to subordinated roles, such as providing infrastructure and economic support for travel to the destination country. In these tasks, there is no clear evidence to suggest whether their involvement is voluntary or coerced.

Finally, the most significant case identified in the sample involved a Russian network comprising 20 convicted members. In this case, women appeared to hold autonomous roles within the network, particularly in the ownership and management of clubs. However, the available information from the judicial decision indicates that these women acted as front figures on behalf of the Russian men who controlled the business through several women strategically placed in different clubs and houses. The women were responsible for conducting the economic and logistical operations as front figures, allowing the key male members to remain hidden and distant from police surveillance.

3. Conclusions

The overrepresentation of women convicted for the trafficking of human beings is well-documented in various reports and is further evidenced by this study. It is also evident that trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation relies more heavily on women than men than other crimes due to the specific division of labor within this illegal activity. Our study reveals a high percentage of convicted women who perform leading roles (half of

them) and the other half serve in supporting roles. From a criminal business perspective, trafficking networks need women more preferably than men to perform most of the tasks essential for conducting sexual exploitation, which supports the gender-based hypothesis (Wijkman and Kleemans 2019).

What remains unclear are the pathways that lead women to engage in such a coercive and exploitative business where boundaries between free choice and survival through exploitation are often blurred. While this study does not provide definite answers to these questions, it offers valuable information that can help explore the explanations for women's involvement in sex trafficking. Previous studies (Broad 2015) have indicated some facilitating factors leading to offending, including victimization, intimate partnerships, and coercion. Further research should examine these factors in relation to the internal dynamics of trafficking networks, considering the size of the networks and the roles and tasks undertaken by women.

Small networks are often composed of two partners in crime who share responsibilities. In these cases, intimate relationships present a significant risk factor for women's offending that should be carefully considered when explaining their participation in crime. In contrast, larger organizations have a higher proportion of women performing supporting tasks, especially in monitoring and control tasks, which are essential for the survival of these networks. In such cases, coercion may be an explanatory factor of women offending as it provides significant advantages for the business and its leaders. The economic dynamics of trafficking human beings for sexual exploitation require substantial effort in monitoring the victims, given that it is a long-term activity whose profitability depends on continuous exploitation. The effort is influenced by factors such as the nationality of the victim and the degree to which immigration is involved in the trafficking process as well as a consistent influx of victims recruited from their country of origin. Therefore, the most crucial roles within the networks are those of recruiters and individuals who control and ensure the ongoing exploitation of victims in the destination country (Campana 2016). Additionally, subordinate tasks are particularly vulnerable to manipulation by male leaders who seek to perform these duties while minimizing their personal exposure.

More challenging is to understand the pathways to crime for those in leading roles (25%). Lone leaders in the destination country may either be running the business independently or in collaboration with an international network. In these cases, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of their level of autonomy or their potential dependence on higher international hierarchies, where women leaders can be acting on behalf of other members.

More information is required to fully understand the pathways to crime and the degree of freedom women have in choosing their roles and positions within criminal organizations. The boundaries between victimization and offending need to be carefully understood using evidence-based research that maintains a neutral stance without being overly protective. This is crucial for accurately identifying and protecting victims, as any of them may currently be serving sentences on behalf of other members who continue to operate the organizations. To comprehensively understand criminal boundaries, it is important to consider multiple dimensions: the types of organizations, internal dynamics, global connections, the women's role, their history of victimization, and the legal framework of victim protection, which may contribute to the over-reporting of certain activities.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Universidad Pontificia Comillas 2022/30 (28 March 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original data presented in the study are openly available in https://www.poderjudicial.es/search/indexAN.jsp.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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