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Roles of Offenders in Human Trafficking in Greece: Insights from Experts and Offenders

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Purpose:

The present paper discusses the roles and self-perceptions of individuals who have trafficked human beings in Greece by integrating their self-reported accounts with expert insights concerning the motivations, gendered pathways leading to offending, and mechanisms of control. The study addresses a critical gap in offender-focused studies on human trafficking in the Greek and wider European context by exploring motivations, organisational structure, recruitment methods, and feelings of guilt/denial among offenders from a gender perspective.

Methods:

The current research is qualitative in nature, with semi-structured interviews with 14 incarcerated offenders (7 males, 7 females) together with 5 anti-trafficking experts being conducted as part of the EU-funded ASIT project (Adequate Support Measures for Victims and Offenders of Trafficking in Human Beings). The interview material was categorised by themes to identify common patterns and divergences between the male and female offenders.

Findings:

The results show the experts' insights complement the offenders' self-reported accounts, which frequently include denial, minimisation, and the redirection of responsibility. Several women in the sample often reported having been coerced or manipulated by relatives or partners, while male offenders framed their actions as normal business arrangements. Offenders of either gender many times blurred the line dividing victimhood and offending. Continuous demand as a structural driver of trafficking and a variety of offender profiles were described by experts across Greece.

Research Limitations:

The small sample size and reliance on self-reported accounts limits the findings' generalisability.

Practical Implications:

By bringing offenders' perceptions into focus, the study helps with understanding the dynamics of human trafficking in Greece and provides

evidence for policy as well as prevention and rehabilitation strategies within the correctional and judicial systems.

Keywords: Trafficking in human beings, Greece, offenders, gender

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Vloge storilcev trgovine z ljudmi v Grčiji: vpogledi strokovnjakov in storilcev

Namen prispevka:

Prispevek obravnava vloge in samozaznave storilcev trgovine z ljudmi v Grčiji z združevanjem njihovih izjav ter mnenj strokovnjakov glede motivacije, spolno specifične poti v kriminaliteto in mehanizme nadzora. Študija naslavlja pomembno vrzel v raziskavah, usmerjenih na storilce trgovine z ljudmi, tako v grškem kot širšem evropskem kontekstu, saj preučuje motivacije storilcev, organizacijsko strukturo, metode novačenja ter občutke krivde ali zanikanja z vidika spola.

Metode:

Raziskava je kvalitativne narave in temelji na polstrukturiranih intervjujih s štirinajstimi zaprtimi storilci – sedmimi moškimi in sedmimi ženskami – ter petimi strokovnjaki s področja boja proti trgovini z ljudmi. Intervjuji so bili izvedeni v okviru projekta ASIT (Adequate Support measures and Improved capacities in countering trafficking in human beings), ki ga financira Evropska unija. Z uporabo kvalitativne tematske analize intervjujev so bili identificirane skupne značilnosti ter razlike med moškimi in ženskimi storilci.

Ugotovitve:

Rezultati kažejo, da strokovni vpogledi dopolnjujejo izjave storilcev, ki vključujejo zanikanje, minimizacijo in prelaganje odgovornosti. Ženske so pogosto poročale o prisili ali manipulaciji sorodnikov ali partnerjev, medtem ko so moški storilci svoja dejanja predstavljali kot sporazumne poslovne dogovore. Pri obeh spolih je bilo zaznati zabrisovanje meje med vlogo žrtve in storilca. Strokovnjaki po vsej Grčiji so kot strukturni dejavnik trgovine z ljudmi izpostavili stalno povpraševanje ter raznolikost profilov storilcev.

Omejitve/uporabnost raziskave:

Majhen vzorec in zanašanje na samozaznave storilcev omejujeta posploševanje ugotovitev.

Praktična uporabnost

Z osredotočanjem na zaznave storilcev prispevek poglablja razumevanje dinamike trgovine z ljudmi v Grčiji ter ponuja empirično podlago za oblikovanje politik ter preventivnih in rehabilitacijskih strategij v kazenskem in pravosodnem sistemu.

Ključne besede: trgovina z ljudmi, Grčija, storilci, spol

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this article, trafficking in human beings (THB), commonly referred to as human trafficking, in Greece is explored through the voices of individuals incarcerated for offences associated with THB, together with experts engaged in combating THB. Via a gender lens, the study aims to shed light on how individuals become involved in trafficking activities and how they interpret their actions. A contribution to the underexplored field of THB offender-focused studies is thereby made, highlighting the role of gender in pathways leading to THB coupled with self-perceptions of culpability.

The research was carried out as part of the ASIT project (Adequate Support Measures for Victims and Offenders of Trafficking in Human Beings), co-funded by the European Union's Internal Security Fund (ISF). ASIT focuses on improving responses to trafficking by supporting first-line practitioners who interact not only with victims but offenders. The research themes that guide the study are interconnected and aimed at better understanding THB in the Greek context. First, the study seeks to explore how experts and frontline practitioners describe THB offenders. Second, analysis of THB cases shows how THB offenders explain and justify their own involvement in THB, which is then contrasted with perspectives held by experts in the field. Whether these accounts differ between female and male offenders is an additional area that is considered. Together, the goal is to examine THB-related offending from multiple standpoints and provide a more comprehensive understanding of THB in Greece.

Drawing from interviews with incarcerated men and women, coupled with experts working on efforts to combat trafficking in Greece, the article offers insights into the motivations, justifications and perceived roles of those involved. By so doing, it contributes to broader discussions on how trafficking networks operate and how gender shapes who becomes involved and who is held accountable.

Following the introduction, the article proceeds with a literature review, methodology, findings from both the offender and expert interviews, and a discussion. It concludes with reflections on future research, including the importance of combining interviews of offenders with the systematic study of police and legal files.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Ever since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the conversation surrounding THB has drawn greater public attention, especially upon the rise of the *white slave trade* – a term which often portrayed the victims as young, innocent girls who had been lured or kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery (Bruckert & Parent, 2002). Although such framing helped put trafficking on the international agenda, it has narrowed the public's understanding to just sexual exploitation. While this has illuminated the gendered roots of the issue, it has also created a

narrow picture of forced prostitution, oversimplifying the broader reality of trafficking as a complex socio-economic and criminal phenomenon (Chuang, 1998). As a result, other forms of exploitation – such as forced labour, domestic servitude, criminal exploitation, and coerced begging – were marginalised in early discussions. The fact is that trafficking is not performed by individual perpetrators. It is tangled up in a much wider network of crime, often entailing other activities like drug smuggling, arms trading, and money laundering (Aronowitz, 2001).

Beyond trafficking for sexual exploitation, another major topic of discussion is the link between trafficking and migration where the line between the two concepts is not always easy to determine. As Skeldon (2000) observes, in many contexts the boundaries between legal labour migration, irregular migration, and trafficking are not sharply defined, with networks operating across the categories, defying clear distinctions. The described grey area is part of ongoing debate in the international literature on the distinction between *Trafficking in Human Beings* and *Smuggling*. Aronowitz (2001) outlined four key elements he believed can clarify these issues from a legal perspective and in a broader context:

- smuggled persons travel voluntarily; trafficked persons may be coerced;
- trafficking involves long-term exploitation;
- trafficked persons often become dependent on organised groups; and
- trafficked persons may be recruited for other criminal purposes.

The United Nations (UN) formalised a comprehensive definition in 2000 when introducing the Palermo Protocol. Here, the UN separates trafficking from consensual migration or consensual sex work, with Article 3(a) defining THB as an activity encompassing the:

> *the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.*

The UN's definition considers three elements: acts, means and purpose. Paragraph (b) of the mentioned article stresses that a victim's consent is irrelevant if coercion is involved.[1] Still, when it comes to applying this definition in practice, things can become murky. The line between trafficking and smuggling is namely often blurred, in turn impeding a precise differentiation between them (Aronowitz, 2001). Laczko (2005) states that this is not simply a legal issue since it is also a problem in research. Even with the UN's definition in place, the field continues to struggle with conceptual clarity and methodological limitations in empirical research. Studies on THB offenders accordingly often show both theoretical and definitional inconsistencies, especially where trafficking and smuggling overlap .

1 *"The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used".*

From a theoretical standpoint, globalisation is widely acknowledged to be a key driver of THB by reinforcing global economic inequality and loosening labour protections. For some scholars, global capitalism's restructuring has acted like a Trojan Horse by fuelling displacement, lowering wages, and deepening poverty, all while simultaneously increasing demand for low-cost goods and services, thereby intensifying pressures on labour that can facilitate exploitative practices (Kempadoo, 1998). Drain (2019) applies systems theory while exploring how these inequalities play out. She argues that trafficking networks deliberately exploit deep-rooted structural and social vulnerabilities (Drain, 2019). Clark (2003) echoes this point, describing trafficking as a '*particularly egregious criminal activity*' where perpetrators go after the most vulnerable people in society. In the end, the push for survival and the pursuit of profit appear like two sides of one coin, impacting both victims and offenders.

Interestingly, some studies reveal individuals who at one stage were trafficked may later appear as offenders, especially when traffickers coerce victims to perform illicit acts or exploit their vulnerability as a mechanism of control (Shared Hope International, 2020), albeit this is not a uniform pattern and varies considerably across contexts. Accordingly, investigating the way offenders view their own roles is very important. It is exactly here that the difference between smuggling and trafficking really starts to show. Trafficking victims many times end up relying on the same organised networks that exploited them and subsequently become pulled into criminal activities apart from trafficking. Research on the views held by offenders themselves is thus crucial, particularly when those who were previously trafficked remain economically, socially or psychologically dependent on trafficking networks. In analysis of such accounts, the concept of "defence mechanisms" is relevant, which in criminological research refers to the psychological or discursive strategies by which offenders justify, rationalise, minimise or deny their involvement in harmful conduct. Such mechanisms may include denial of responsibility, attribution of blame to victims or circumstances, or the normalisation of exploitative practices, and are closely related to theories of neutralisation in criminology (Petruccelli et al., 2017; Sykes & Matza, 1957).

Some research suggests that in instances of debt bondage, entailing force, threats, or a lack of alternative options, previous victims might become involved in the process of facilitating the recruitment, transport, or control of others in the very same trafficking networks (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2020; Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons, 2020; Viuhko, 2019). This significant point distinguishes trafficking from smuggling because the former involves a process of exploitation and dependency that can last a long time, often creating a situation where once-victims continue to be part of criminal networks (UNODC, 2020). The described pattern is especially seen in trafficking for sexual exploitation. As de Vries and colleagues note, some victims – under threat and constant coercion from their traffickers – are forced to recruit others, effectively grooming new victims to help sustain the operation (de Vries et al., 2023). Viuhko (2018) reveals how traffickers do not always fit the mould of the stereotypical criminal such as highly organised, violent, profit-driven members of transnational criminal syndicates. Her analysis instead shows

traffickers may operate within intimate, familial, or trust-based relationships, and might not conform to the image of professionalised organised crime actors. In fact, they could themselves be a former victim, or even a romantic partner of those they are exploiting. She describes how most convicted traffickers do not match the 'ideal offender' archetype, and that the range of individuals engaged in trafficking diverges significantly from the stereotypical image of highly organised, mafia-like criminal actors.

To better understand how trafficking works, it is useful to examine the actors who underpin it: the offenders. In her research, Denton (2016) sheds light on how traffickers in the United States of America often operate. Surprisingly, they do not always rely on force; instead, using personal relationships and community ties to gain trust and recruit victims. Such complexity led Aronowitz (2001) to describe trafficking networks as highly variable systems. They can involve a wide range of players, with levels of organisation that shift dramatically from case to case. Within this flexible structure, he identifies several distinct roles traffickers tend to fall into, including investors who finance the operations, recruiters who identify and lure victims, transporters who facilitate movement, enforcers who maintain control, debt collectors who ensure repayment using coercive means, and money launderers who transform illicit gains into 'normal' profits.

Sidun (2019) holds a similar view, stating that *'regardless of the level of complexity of trafficking organisations, the majority share similar structural features and follow a business plan that is made up of individuals tasked with various responsibilities'* Expanding on the roles outlined above, Sidun proposes further functional categories within trafficking networks. The first is the Broker, the go-between who connects recruiters with employers. The second is the Employer (or procurer), who ultimately buys the victims before either exploiting them directly or selling them on to others. She also notes the role of Corrupt Public Officials, who help move things along by supplying forged travel documents or bypassing legal controls. Informers are another key player by gathering intel on border security, immigration protocols, and police operations. There is even the category Supporting Personnel, made up of locals at transit points who offer housing or other logistical support (ibid., 2019). Still, not every trafficking operation is highly organised. In fact, many exhibit fragmentation and operate by way of loose, ad hoc networks. These setups often lack clear hierarchies and tend to be more opportunistic in nature (Bruckert & Parent, 2002).

The literature on trafficking mainly considers the perspective of male offenders and female victims, thereby continuing to reinforce the view that, in essence, women are victims more than offenders (Wijkman & Kleemans, 2019). However, emerging research indicates women have a complex and occasionally, ambiguous role in trafficking. In criminal trials, some female offenders have framed their trafficking experiences in terms of victimisation. As Russell (2018) states, '*Very few articles... address the female exploiter. Recent literature has addressed the effect of gender on conviction and penalties...*'. The mentioned trend is nonetheless unsurprising. There is a noticeable lack of data-driven research on trafficking offenders in general, and most existing studies tend to concentrate specifically on trafficking for sexual exploitation rather than for other exploitation forms or

offender profiles more widely. According to Russell's (2018) extensive synthesis of 1,231 human-trafficking articles published between 2000 and 2014, the literature disproportionately focuses on sexual exploitation and victim experiences, while empirical research on offenders and other forms of exploitation remains limited. Globally, data challenge the widely held belief that it is mainly men who carry out trafficking. In fact, women are often found among the ranks of traffickers, a reality that continues to be overlooked in academic and policy discussions.

Wijkman and Kellemans (2019) report that around the world 38% of individuals suspected of THB are women, and in regions like Central Europe and East Asia female suspects are twice as common. The assumption that trafficking roles are divided strictly along gender lines is thereby challenged.

Research shows that female traffickers often hold central and operational roles in trafficking networks rather than merely assisting male perpetrators (Wijkman & Kleemans, 2019; UNODC, 2020). Many are directly involved in recruitment, surveillance, collecting payments, arranging travel documents, and even managing operations (Wijkman & Kellemans, 2019). A US-based study of trafficking cases between 2006 and 2011 found almost no difference in the '*network centrality*' of male and female traffickers, which means women had just as central and influential roles within trafficking networks as men did (Denton, 2016). The same study established that women accounted for 32.4% of the 373 offenders identified. Yet, when research is focused on female offenders, it often leans into the relational aspects – how women become involved through their partners, family, or acquaintances – which can overshadow their active, sometimes dominant roles in these networks. Gimenez-Salinas (2024) stresses the need to consider a female perspective to not just understand women's involvement in trafficking, but also to examine how the justice system treats them differently. Notably, in about 73% of cases women who were involved in trafficking had a co-offender who was also their romantic partner (Wijkman & Kleemans, 2019). Only a small portion (around 7.5%) of convicted female offenders had themselves previously been a victim of sexual exploitation. This finding challenges the assumption-based narrative that most women involved in trafficking were likely former victims (ibid.).

One of the biggest gaps in trafficking research is the lack of solid, data-driven studies, especially on offenders. As Weitzer (2014) mentions, high-quality research has been relatively absent thus far, with most academic publications being either broad overviews or critiques. He argues that the field relies too heavily on reports from governments and non-govermental organizations, that often do not have rigorous empirical backing. The little research available tends to focus on trafficking for sexual exploitation, often overlooking other forms like labour trafficking. Russell's (2018) review of trafficking literature from 2000 to 2014 backs this up, revealing that most studies focus on victims, not the systems or individuals behind the exploitation. She stresses the need for more offender-focused research, especially studies that use quantitative data to investigate network structures and patterns of reoffending. In their review of social work scholarship on trafficking in human beings, Okech et al. (2018) observe that research has largely looked at victim protection and service provision, while empirical research on dynamics, offender characteristics, and the structural drivers of trafficking remains limited.

They also state that access to reliable data on offenders is limited primarily due to barriers to obtaining information from state and government sources. To move forward, several scholars have emphasised the need for collaborative, practitioner-informed approaches that bring legal, criminological and social work perspectives together (Okech et al., 2018; Weitzer, 2014; Russell, 2018). In other words, research on trafficking is strengthened when conducted by way of multidisciplinary collaboration and supported by agency-based, real-world data.

In Greece, trafficking in human beings is mainly criminalised in Article 323A of the Greek Penal Code ("Poinikos Kodikas", 2019), which defines trafficking in line with international standards such as the Palermo Protocol. However, trafficking-related activities are often prosecuted in conjunction with other offences, including the facilitation of illegal entry to the country (Article 323), participation in a criminal organisation (Article 187) and offences linked to sexual exploitation (Article 349), reflecting the complex and multilayered nature of trafficking operations. Official data on trafficking is compiled by the National Referral Mechanism coordinated by the National Centre for Social Solidarity. According to recent reports, in 2023 Greece identified 370 victims of trafficking in (US Department of State, 2025), including both sex trafficking and labour trafficking cases, while earlier reports recorded 278 victims the year before, indicating ongoing detection efforts (US Department of State, 2024). Sexual and labour exploitation are among the most commonly detected forms of trafficking in the country. Existing Greek research on trafficking has chiefly concentrated on victim protection, legal frameworks, and institutional responses, while empirical studies examining offender motivations, profiles, and self-perceptions are limited (Council of Europe, 2023).

3 METHODS

The presented study adopts a qualitative research design based on semi-structured interviews with individuals who had been convicted of offences related to THB in Greece, and with experts working in the field of combating THB. The research was implemented between June 2024 and April 2025 by researchers at the Centre for Security Studies (KEMEA). The interviews with the experts were performed in order to outline the THB phenomenon in Greece and clarify specific aspects. Meanwhile, the interviews with the offenders explored their motivations and their accounts of being involved in THB-connected activities.

3.1 Participant Selection

To examine THB in the Greek context, the research employed in-person interviews led by a coordinating researcher. Participants were divided into two main groups: individuals who had been convicted or accused of THB-related offences, and professionals with expertise in this area. For both groups, the main criterion for participating in the study was the interviewee's willingness to participate voluntarily after being fully informed about the study's scope and procedures.

Expert participants who were selected by the directors of the organisations participated in the survey, including members of the Hellenic Police who investigate

THB cases, as well as public sector professionals who work for organisations with experience in victim protection and support. Their selection was made based on their professional background. Two experts were police officers who work on THB cases, while the other three experts work in the field of victim protection.

Two criteria were carefully considered in the selection of offenders:

- Their conviction or pre-trial detention for offences under Article 323A (Human Trafficking), Article 323 (Facilitation of Illegal Entry), Article 187 (Criminal Organisation) or Article 349 (Crimes against sexual freedom and crimes of exploitation of sexual life/pimping) of the Greek Penal Code ("Poinikos Kodikas", 2019). It was also decided to include offenders who had been charged with related offences like facilitating transport since interviews could reveal involvement in activities that turned into trafficking.
- Sufficient knowledge of Greek, French or English given that the interviewer(s) were fluent in these languages and could then conduct interviews directly without needing a translator.

Participants were selected by prison psychologists and directors, who facilitated access to individuals who met the criteria. The final sample included 14 participants (7 women, 7 men) held in separate correctional facilities.

3.2 Ethical Framework of Research

The study strictly adhered to ethical protocols in line with human subject research standards and the ethical guidelines of the ASIT programme. Approval was obtained from each prison board and its respective director. All participants were informed of:

- The voluntary nature of their participation.
- The anonymity and confidentiality of their responses by removing all personal data and identifiers from them. While transcribing the responses, pseudonyms were used to preserve the participants' anonymity and prevent them being identified, i.e., E1–E5 for experts and O1–O14 for offenders. For experts, the pseudonyms correspond to their professional background as follows: E1–E2 are law enforcement professionals, while E3–E5 are practitioners working in victim protection support.
- Their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

During the interviews, the researchers adopted a trauma-informed and non-judgmental approach, particularly in the prison setting. The aim was to create a safe and friendly environment that respected participants' responses and vulnerabilities.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures

A semi-structured format was preferred for the interviews because *'while the structured interview has a formalised, limited set of questions, the semi-structured interview on the other hand, is flexible, allowing new questions to be brought forward*

during the interview as a consequence of what the interviewees have said' (Ruslin et al., 2022). Therefore, the semi-structured interviews (SSI) method was determined to be the most appropriate for capturing participants' perspectives, enabling the individual views to be explored beyond general perceptions of the THB phenomenon.

The SSI consisted of an interview guide with a main question set that formed the conversation and might give rise to follow-up questions. The interview guides for offenders included themes concerning their motivations and their role in the THB chain. Each interview lasted 1 to 2 hours approximately. To account for gender dynamics and facilitate the participants' comfort, interviews in the women's prison were conducted by a female researcher while those in the men's prison by a male researcher.

In the interviews with the experts, the interviewees were given the questionnaire in advance. The predefined questions revolved around their professional experiences, the operational challenges, and existing institutional responses for fighting THB and supporting victims. The interviews were individual and took place online via MS Teams and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

All participants received detailed information about the study and signed consent forms prior to participating. The expert interviews were audio-recorded (with participants' consent) and transcribed. Due to prison regulations and considerations of participants' comfort, the offender interviews were not recorded. With the interviewees' consent, handwritten notes were kept by the researcher(s).

3.4 Data analysis

Interview data were analysed through qualitative thematic categorisation. Since each type of interview served a different purpose, analysis of the data collected from both types of interviews followed two different paths. Data collected from the interviews with the experts were analysed collectively to identify the push-and-pull factors that allow THB to thrive, peculiarities of the phenomenon in the Greek context that stem from the country's geographical position, and trends in the *modus operandi* of criminals. Moreover, the analysis aimed to develop a list of indicators that might indicate a potential victim or perpetrator of THB, the challenges faced by the stakeholders along with the best practices to combat THB.

In contrast, data collected from the interviews with offenders were categorised in seven domains to highlight demographic information (gender, age, nationality, education level) as well as THB-related information (offence, sentence, role). The aim of this was to identify correlations between demographics, reveal behavioural patterns, and detect potential structures within criminal organisations.

4 RESULTS

In this section, results of the expert and offender interviews are reported. First, feedback received from experts involved in anti-trafficking efforts and victim

assistance in Greece is considered. The profile of offenders based on characteristics collected in the interviews is then presented.

4.1 Perspectives of Experts

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews with experts provided insights into the THB situation in Greece and their views on THB offenders. According to the experts, Greece's geographical location positions the country as both a transit and destination country within THB business models. Victims are typically migrants from other countries with a low education and poor working and living conditions. Notwithstanding insufficient data, it is clear that the most prevalent form of trafficking of adults is sexual exploitation, with victims mostly being women. This includes both prostitution and the creation and dissemination of online pornographic material. Labour exploitation also exists (both female and male victims), but to a lesser extent. Other forms of exploitation, like coerced surrogacy, have been identified, yet are atypical. As concerns the exploitation of children, it generally takes the form of begging, and less frequently child sexual exploitation.

As a major root cause of why THB exists, the experts named 'demand'. One interviewed expert (E2) stated: '*As long as there is demand, this crime will continue to exist. Victims will continue to exist*'. Experts stressed that 'demand' is a core driver of THB, while also identifying factors such as poverty, weak legal frameworks, and corruption as enabling conditions. A few experts suggested that demand had risen after the COVID-19 pandemic, linking this to social isolation and stronger demand for sexual services.

During the recruitment phase, experts referred to the growing use of social media to find and recruit potential victims. Despite traffickers widely using common social media, physical recruitment continues. In fact, it is quite frequent for the recruiter to be based in the victim's country of origin, and the exploiter to live in Greece.

Regarding patterns in traffickers' profiles, experts stated there is no single profile of a THB perpetrator. Notably, E3 mentioned as an example that one of earliest cases she handled was linked to labour exploitation of a victim by an elderly woman. E2 declared '*it is a myth that only men are involved in THB offences, and women exploit too'*. Even though traffickers are in most instances part of a network, it is also possible that some act alone. Irrespective of the lack of patterns, a few indicators are frequently shared by traffickers, such as the existence of a criminal record. Experts explained simply by noting that it is common for THB perpetrators to engage in other criminal activities as well. Further, in sexual exploitation cases male offenders commonly underestimate women and their roles. In cases of sexual exploitation where the offender is female, the offender is frequently of the same nationality as the victim, while some may themselves also have been a victim of sexual exploitation.

A common motivation for engaging in the described activities, according to the experts, was profit. Generally, THB perpetrators tend to regard their offences as not so serious, while often arguing that the victims agreed to become involved.

Some experts attribute this to the perpetrators' low education, which impedes them from understanding the ethical considerations of their criminal activities.

4.2 Profile of Offenders

The sample included both male and female offenders aged 29 to 70 years. The nationalities represented were five Greek offenders, two Albanian, two Colombian, one Romanian, two Bulgarian, one French, and one Georgian. Many offenders had only completed primary or lower secondary education, and some had no formal education. Socioeconomic backgrounds were characterised by having worked in low-wage sectors such as agriculture, or as the owner of a bar, with some reporting no occupation. All women but one reported being a mother, with two also indicating they had grandchildren, whereas male participants were single or divorced and made limited reference to family obligations. Table 1 presents the key characteristics of the offenders.

Table 1: Demographics

	Gender	Age	Nationality	Education	Offence	Sentence	Role
O1	Male	41	Greek	High School	Human trafficking, pimping, bribery	18 years (at first instance)	Business owner, reported recruitment, financial management and control of venues
O2	Male	38	Albanian	High School	Pimping of a minor (repeated offence)	5 years (reduced from 7)	Claims personal relationship, described involvement in arranging meetings
O3	Male	36	Colombian	Primary	Human trafficking	Awaiting trial	Described as a driver and providing logistical support. Recognised arranging arrivals for women.
O4	Male	50	Romanian	Primary	Repeated human trafficking, pimping	15 years (after appeal)	Reported facilitating the recruitment of and arranging appointments for women
O5	Male	48	Greek	Primary	Human trafficking, pimping, criminal organisation	Awaiting trial	Presented himself as a strip club owner
O6	Male	51	Bulgarian	Primary	Human trafficking committed repeatedly for the purpose of sexual exploitation, combined with unlawful confiscation of another person's passport	13 years (after appeal)	Described providing accommodation, financial management and the movement of victims
O7	Male	40	Bulgarian	Primary	Pimping, robbery and forgery	20 years (cumulative sentence)	Described as a drug addict
O8	Female	63	Greek	Higher education (professional qualification – Project Manager)	Repeated illegal transportation of foreigners, putting human lives in danger. Facilitation of the transport of people from abroad to Greece.	Sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment at first instance	Reported coercion in the transportation of migrants under pressure from her daughter's partner
O9	Female	46	Romanian (Roma)	None	Reception of third-country nationals without legal entry rights and facilitating their transport into the country from abroad	6 years and 4 months at first instance	Claimed being unaware of the full plan until arrived at the border

O10	Female	29	French	Higher education – Nursing degree	Reception of individuals without entry rights at the internal borders and facilitating their transport	6 years and 3 months at first instance	Romantic partners, denied there was planning
O11	Female	45	Greek (Roma)	None – left school aged 9 years	Complicity in facilitating the transport of individuals lacking legal entry rights	20 years at first instance	Described assisting a cousin in arranging and carrying out the transporting of migrants
O12	Female	49	Albanian	Secondary education	Breach of terms of a conditional release, falsification of travel documents, and the reception and transporting of individuals	22 years (cumulative)	Described assisting a cousin in arranging and carrying out the transporting of migrants
O13	Female	64	Greek	Higher education	Charged with human trafficking committed repeatedly and as a profession, illegal possession of a weapon, violation of Law 2734/1999, and violation of Article 323A of the Greek Penal Code on human trafficking	10 years	Bar owner
O14	Female	60	Georgia	Higher education	Charged with human trafficking committed on a continuous and professional basis, carried out individually, in violation of Article 323A of the Greek Penal Code	5 years	Caretaker

Note. Age refers to a participant's age at the time of the interview. Education level indicated the highest level of education completed prior to imprisonment. Legal charges are based on provisions of the Greek Penal Code, including Article 323A (human trafficking), Article 323 (transport of migrants) and, where applicable, Article 187 (criminal organisation). Sentence refers to a participant's self-reported judicial status at the time of the interview. Roles within criminal activities are reported as described by the offenders. No legal files were reviewed in this study.

4.2.1 Motivations, pathways, and self-perceptions among human traffickers: Gendered differences

In line with the research themes of this paper, here gendered differences in offenders' motivations, pathways to offending, and accounts of involvement in trafficking-related activities. The sub-sections below analyse offenders' accounts concerning what motivated them to join a criminal network, their views on the organisational structure, and the methods of coercion and control used against victims.

Motivations

Among the seven female offenders, only one referred to financial desperation as a primary motivation for becoming involved in the activities. She stressed the need to provide for her children, escape poverty, and cope with unemployment; she was in fact the sole female participant who openly acknowledged having received financial compensation to help transport migrants across Greek borders. Nevertheless, she referred to her involvement as only a single transportation, limited to driving assistance. In addition, four women described having been coerced or manipulated by intimate partners or family members, including threats of harm or emotional pressure or their own lack of awareness of the activity's illegal nature. In six of the seven cases, the women declared being innocent or that they had been unaware of the full scope of the offences, frequently presenting themselves as uninformed drivers, reluctant couriers, or emotionally compromised caregivers rather than active perpetrators. As O9 put it:

'I had no idea; he told me to go and find some friends of his.'

The male offenders displayed a similar pattern of denial and role minimisation, often blaming others for ending up in prison. In fact, all seven men either fully denied their involvement and/or downplayed the nature of their actions. Four attributed their prosecution to false accusations made by women with whom they had a romantic or personal relationship. As O6 explained:

'I took care of her as much as I could; she lacked nothing. She constantly asked me for clothes. After a while, my neighbours told me that while I was working, they saw her walking around the city with unknown men. I bought everything for her… Later, she met a new man and disappeared. I searched for her everywhere. I even called her mother, and she told me that she had gone to Germany with her boyfriend. Later, I found out that she had gone to the police and filed a complaint saying that I kept her imprisoned, beat her, and forced her to be with men. All lies.'

These offenders similarly presented themselves as having provided help and support to the victim, rather than as individuals engaged in illegal conduct. For example, O4 stated:

'She (her mother) begged me for a month to take the very poor girl, who was nineteen years old, from the village to the city to work. I asked her what she could do, and she said she could do anything... She came to the city and found me, and I asked her what she would do to make money. She replied: anything, I am not going back to the village. And then I started arranging appointments for her with men.'

A few entered the business primarily for financial gain; they saw the exploitation of women as a profitable opportunity. Five men admitted to working within the trafficking system – principally as drivers, facilitators, or club employees – but insisted the women involved acted voluntarily and were not subjected to force or coercion. Two offenders described managing or profiting from venues where sexual services were provided yet framed these activities as part of a legitimate business. In only one case, a man (O6) acknowledged having used physical violence; still, he did not interpret this violence as part of trafficking, instead viewing it as a personal conflict.

'We had a serious fight, and I hit her a little. Ungrateful…She didn't even have underwear on when she came from the village.'

Across all the cases, offenders expressed strong feelings of mistrust in the justice system, with none of the seven men accepting full legal or moral responsibility for their offences.

Recruitment strategies and control methods

Recruitment patterns among the 14 offenders interviewed reveal distinct gendered differences in both participation and self-perception. Among the seven female offenders, all denied any recruitment activity and instead framed themselves as a victim; either as individuals who had been coerced, manipulated, or misled into participating or, in the already mentioned case, as someone driven by financial need. For example, one reported having been threatened by her daughter's partner, while others cited promises of making an income or familial obligation as key influences. A participant (O8) who claimed she had been coerced by her daughter's partner maintained her innocence and morally distanced herself from the case, frequently claiming:

'I would never harm another human being; I am not a criminal.'

She expressed remorse for her actions along with frustration at being labelled a trafficker. All the women's accounts emphasised limited knowledge of the broader operations and a perceived lack of agency, presenting themselves as exploited, not exploiters.

In contrast, four of the seven male offenders provided clear signs that they had actively recruited or facilitated the recruitment of victims. Even though three of the seven acknowledged elements of control, such as withholding documents, imposing debts, or monitoring victims using cameras, these practices were framed as standard business practices rather than coercion. For example, O5 stated:

'They had to work until they repaid what I spent for them.'

Importantly, not one of the offenders – male or female – admitted to having used violence or making explicit threats. Recruitment strategies included leveraging personal or ethnic networks, using women already involved in sex work to bring in others, and taking advantage of the economic vulnerability of young women from their home countries. One participant described selecting women based on photographs before funding their travel, while another admitted to arranging clients for a woman brought from his village under false pretences.

A third had facilitated travel and local transport under instruction, and one spoke of supporting a young woman financially before asserting control over her movement. The remaining three men denied any involvement in recruitment, portraying themselves as minor actors, such as drivers or employees, unaware of the full extent of the trafficking networks. Like several female offenders, these men often shifted blame on to others and downplayed their actions, citing misunderstandings, romantic conflicts, or legal injustice.

These findings suggest that while some male offenders acknowledged recruitment activities, both men and women frequently relied on accounts marked by denial, minimisation or victimisation, complicating efforts to assess intent and responsibility within trafficking operations.

Criminal organisation structure

The offender interviews, particularly of the females, described the transporting of victims as disorganised, incidental or coerced. Five of the seven women had been accused of transporting individuals, and they portrayed their actions as isolated favours, often under emotional pressure or without being fully aware of the activity's criminality. O7 and O10 described their involvement as limited to assisting on a single occasion, often framing their actions as favours and not organised activities. Male offenders, on the other hand, offered accounts suggesting a more organised, albeit not explicitly structured, criminal network. Four of the seven men admitted to roles in transporting victims, including airport pickups and venue transfers, and two reported overseeing accommodation, yet frequently viewed this as part of day-to-day tasks rather than a strategic operation. Notably, offender accounts rarely acknowledged having escorted victims during cross-border travel or intentionally monitored them, and no interviewee detailed a systematised transport chain.

Offender interviews, especially those of the females, rarely reflected awareness of a broader organisational structure. Most women described their involvement as isolated, ad hoc, or reactive, denying knowledge of any hierarchy or coordination. Even when involved in transportation or recruitment, they often defined their actions as one-time favours or responses to family pressure, not as part of an organised system. Among the male offenders, several provided accounts that hint at structured roles, such as managing multiple venues, coordinating logistics, or receiving instructions from others. Three of the seven male offenders described having worked under or alongside others who gave them direction, suggesting at least partial integration into organised operations. For example, O3 mentioned:

'I just followed instructions'…'I didn't ask many questions'

However, even these men tended to downplay the existence of a formal hierarchy, emphasising personal relationships or informal agreements more than organised crime. Table 2 summarises the motivations and each participant's pathway to offending, together with the coercion they applied to the victims and the methods used.

Table 2: Pathways to offending, control practices, and post-release intentions

	Pathway to Offending	Coercion Used by the Offender	Violence (Admitted or Alleged)	Victim-Offender Relationship	Perceived Guilt/ Denial	Plans After Release
1	A business opportunity	Debt bondage, psychological	Psychological pressure	Employer	Denial	Continue to run the business legally
2	A romantic relationship	Denies coercion	Alleged rape/pimping of the victim	Romantic partner	Denial	Return to work in construction
3	Migration from Colombia to Greece, recruited by his wife	None claimed	None alleged	Acquaintances	Partial admission	Return to Colombia to open a restaurant
4	Family friend request	Debt bondage	Admitted to occasional violence	Family friend	Partial admission	Not specified
5	Economic crisis, to help a friend	Debt repayment	Alleged by a dismissed worker	Employer	Denial	Not specified
6	Helped girl	Financial control	Admitted physical violence	Family acquaintance	Partial admission	Resume work
7	Drug addiction, relationship	Dependency	Admitted physical violence	Romantic partner	Partial admission	Not specified
8	Family coercion (daughter's partner)	Denies coercion – coercion by others	None alleged	Daughter's partner	Denial	Moving abroad with her daughter
9	Family obligation	Denies coercion	None alleged	Cousin	Denial	Return to Romania with family
10	Romantic relationship	Denies coercion	None alleged	Boyfriend	Denial	Not specified
11	Financial difficulties	Denies coercion	None alleged	Cousin	Admission	Not specified
12	Family obligation (cousin)	Denies coercion	None alleged	Cousin	Partial admission	Anxious about reporting duties – spend time with family
13	Economic hardship	Denies coercion	None alleged	Employer	Denial	Fight the conviction
14	Economic necessity	Denies coercion	None alleged	Employer	Denial	Not specified

Note. The table reflects interviewees' self-reported accounts. Methods refer to forms of control or coercion reportedly used by the interviewees against victims. Victim–offender relationships are presented as described by the interviewees. All information is based on self-reported data; no legal or police files were reviewed in this study.

After-release aspirations

Most women offenders expressed a willingness to go back to their families and spend time with their children and grandchildren. Men, in comparison, were more likely to focus on business and employment after being released. Quite a few of them expressed being willing to return to their countries of origin, some opening their own business, while others expressed an intention to continue working in the sex industry after release. In fact, O1 stated: *'although fully legally this time'*. The men did not disclose any personal information concerning their wives, children etc. It seemed they were not prepared to communicate (or even acknowledge) their feelings. Overall, offenders' accounts were denoted by denial and the externalisation of blame; responsibility was seldom acknowledged, signs of remorse or regret were minimal. Most presented themselves as victims of circumstances or other individuals, describing their imprisonment as unjust or the outcome of false accusations, resulting in a blurring of victim–offender (e.g., *'I did nothing illegal'*; *'these accusations are lies'*; *'they set me up'*; *'I do not trust the legal system'*).

5 DISCUSSION

In this section, the study's research themes are considered by examining how people imprisoned for THB-connected offences in Greece narrate and justify their involvement in THB, how these self-reported accounts compare with the views of frontline practitioners and, finally, whether gendered differences emerge. The analysis showed that the experts' perspectives complemented the offenders' self-reported accounts.

A central finding with both female and male interviews was the widespread use of denial, minimisation, and blame shifting. In many cases, the blame game was observed, with women accusing their partners, cousins, or others of coercion and manipulation. On the other hand, men accused women of making false allegations or acting out of revenge. None of the offenders demonstrated full acceptance of their offence(s) or took complete responsibility for their roles. Such denials may reflect limited trust in the researcher or an effort to maintain narratives delivered in court, while simultaneously functioning as a deeper psychological coping mechanism to protect the self-concept from the sheer reality of their involvement. Experts in THB highlighted the tendency of offenders to underestimate the gravity of their actions and their impact on victims. In fact, one of the most consistent coping mechanisms seen in incarceration is the use of neutralisation techniques whereby offenders justify or minimise their actions (Sykes & Matza, 1957; Kaptein & van Helvoort, 2018). The offenders often used phrases such as *'I am innocent'*, *'I will only say what I know and nothing more'*. In the interviews, offenders frequently contradicted themselves, providing inconsistent accounts, with selective disclosure serving as a self-protective strategy to minimise their perceived involvement and mitigate psychological distress when discussing their offences and the likely associated stigma.

Gendered differences were particularly evident in how offenders framed their agency and positioned themselves on the victim–offender continuum. In several

cases, offenders blurred the distinction between offender and victim, referring to their own hardships, personal challenges, or other pressing factors, often claiming they would *'never hurt even a fly'*. A few women regarded their participation as the outcome of coercion by relatives, spouses, or intimate partners, framing their involvement as being imposed on them rather than a decision they actively made. Men, in contrast, were more likely to emphasise financial hardships and to insist that the women involved acted on their own free will. These self-reported accounts raise complex questions about degrees of agency and victim-offender overlap, which require careful attention in both research and policy discussions.

Another recurring theme concerned offenders' self-reported accounts of limited knowledge or denial of having been involved in organised trafficking networks. Offenders presented themselves as unaware of any organised or structured criminal network. Such denials or omissions may serve to minimise culpability, or it may reflect genuinely limited visibility of the overall structure of the organisational structure of trafficking operations. Previous research has shown that offenders often perceive only fragments of the network in which they operate (Aronowitz, 2001). These diverging self-reported accounts underscore the difficulty of reconstructing criminal structures based solely on self-reported accounts.

The views of practitioners contextualised the offenders' self-reported accounts within broader structural dynamics, including gender inequality, commodification, and the profitability of THB. Consistent with the literature (Kara, 2009; Bales, 2005), the findings reveal the commodification of women within a market-driven system designed to maximise financial gain. In patriarchal societies where men are socialised within a culture of the 'man as dominant' over the 'woman as subordinate', women might face greater risks of victimisation (Lilly et al., 1989: 219). This gender imbalance further sustains the profitability of the crime, which remains one of the most lucrative forms of organised crime because of its relatively low risk and operating costs (Agripress, 2018). Other factors, such as a lower risk of arrest, difficulties with gathering evidence, and reliance on victim complaints, add to its attractiveness to perpetrators (Sykiotou, 2008). Insights from expert interviews reinforced these findings, showing that the devaluation of women is not uncommon among male offenders, even outside the THB context. Experts also noted that women themselves may play active roles in recruiting other women, often of the same nationality, capitalising on shared language and cultural ties, and the misconceptions that female recruiters are often seen as being nurturing and non-violent (Wijkman & Kleemans, 2019).

Finally, offenders described various methods of victim control, including restricting their movement, confiscating travel documents, and imposing significant financial debts that had to be repaid through sex work. Physical violence appeared less prevalent in their self-reported accounts. Some female offenders reported experiences of domestic violence, which they indicated as being unrelated to the trafficking case. At the same time, male offenders insisted they never used physical force and that women were involved voluntarily in the sex industry. Even in the few instances where physical violence was acknowledged, it was framed as 'business as usual'. The absence of physical violence in their

descriptions might suggest either a selective omission or recognition that overt abuse risks deterring clients and drawing the attention of law enforcement. Instead, control was more commonly associated with psychological coercion, manipulation, deception, threats, and economic coercion. Existing research likewise points to the strong association between psychological coercion and survivors' mental health outcomes (Iglesias-Rios et al., 2018).

These findings should be interpreted in the light of several limitations. The offender and expert samples were relatively small, and certain aspects might not have been explored. Further, the recruitment process was conducted by prison staff, which may have introduced some selection bias. These factors may limit the generalisability of the findings. The mentioned recruitment approach was necessary as prison staff were the only individuals with direct contact with eligible offenders. Selection was based purely on predefined offence-related criteria. Moreover, the inclusion of offenders charged with related offences means that not all individuals in the sample may have been directly involved in trafficking activities, which could affect the interpretation of the findings. The offenders' self-reported accounts were not verified with police or legal reports and thus certain aspects of their offence might not have been adequately reported, and sensitive issues like traffickers' tactics may not have been fully disclosed. This is particularly relevant to the patterns of denial, minimisation, and blame-shifting, which could reflect court strategies more than personal recollections. Meanwhile, even though the study achieved gender balance, the nature of offences differed between the groups, which could limit direct gender comparisons. For the expert interviews, participants received the interview questions in advance to allow adequate preparation. While this may have facilitated more detailed and informed responses, it might also have limited spontaneity, with experts' self-reported accounts potentially reflecting more considered or professionally aligned perspectives, which may hold implications for the validity of the findings.

The findings underscore the importance of addressing denial, minimisation, and cognitive distortions in offender rehabilitation, as well as the need for gender-sensitive and trauma-informed interventions. Future research would benefit by combining interviews with offenders and the systematic study of complete police investigation files. Examining these two sources side by side would allow for cross-checking self-reported accounts, identifying gaps and inconsistencies, and improved understanding of trafficking networks. By bringing together human stories with structured, multi-source evidence, future research can help shape more effective policies, law enforcement strategies, and rehabilitation programmes.

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