



Huber, Edith et al. (2018):

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SIAK-Journal – Journal for Police Science and Practice (International Edition Vol. 8), 66-74.

doi: 10.7396/IE_2018_G

Please cite this article as follows:

Huber, Edith et al. (2018). The Way to a Better Life? Human trafficking in Austria – a bilateral research project, SIAK-Journal – Journal for Police Science and Practice (International Edition Vol. 8), 66-74, Online: http://dx.doi.org/10.7396/IE_2018_G.

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Note: A hard copy of the article is available through the printed version of the SIAK-Journal published by NWV (<http://nwv.at>).

published online: 9/2018

The Way to a Better Life?

Human trafficking in Austria – a bilateral research project



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Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a widespread problem globally. Many of those affected see few escape opportunities, despite national and international measures. The question then arises as to how support systems can better meet the needs of the women concerned. The German-Austrian research project “Prevention and intervention of sex trafficking” (“PRIMSA”) has made an up-to-date survey in order to develop a multidisciplinary prevention and intervention concept. The project is funded on the German side by the funding programme “Research for civil security II” of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and financed on the Austrian side within the security research funding programme KIRAS of the Federal Ministry for Transport, Innovation and Technology (BMVIT). This article gives an insight into the project’s two lines of research, a file analysis of the court records on the subject in Austria and the results of 30 interviews with affected women. Both substantive and research methodological conclusions can be drawn from the results. From a research methodological point of view, it becomes clear that different approaches enable very different results and that interdisciplinary and comprehensive projects are more suitable for researching this project. In terms of content, it becomes clear how much acute intervention in the field of trafficking in women depends on the appropriate trauma and relationship competence of the specialists employed. The two results are correlated with the current state of the literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking violates the human rights of victims and is usually associated with physical and psychological violence (UNODC 2014). It is estimated that its extent goes far beyond the dimensions presented in official police data (BKA 2014). The victims of human trafficking come almost exclusively from poorer countries and accept the change in the hope of a better life. The reality is sobering, as most of them end up in labour exploitation, begging and prostitution and are consequently exposed to great dangers. For example,

a recent article by Matthews (Matthews 2015), which focuses on the victimisation of prostitutes, shows that prostitutes are among the groups with the highest victimisation rates, moreover, their victim status is often denied. However, Europol achieved a great deal against human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in 2015 (Europol 2016). A ring of perpetrators was picked up in Bordeaux as part of a large-scale search in Romania and France. Europol estimates the total turnover of the network at around EUR 8 million (ibid 14).

But what is the situation in Austria like? For two years, a group of researchers dealt with the phenomenon of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Germany and Austria.¹ The bilateral and interdisciplinary project with 14 cooperation partners was dedicated to conducting a survey and developing comprehensive prevention and intervention concepts. The different disciplinary approaches shed more light on both the official data and the unreported areas. The following article gives an insight into some of the key results of the project: 66 court records relating to Section 104a of the Austrian Penal Code were evaluated in a file analysis. In parallel, 30 women affected by human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation were interviewed with biographically oriented, in-depth interviews. From these sources, the article presents results on the perpetrator profile, the modus operandi, the profile or situation of the victims and on an analysis of the legal framework in Austria.

2. THE PHENOMENON OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING FROM DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

2.1 Results from the analysis of court records

The aim of this part of the study was to obtain a picture of the crime progression, business models, motives, social background and the relationship between the perpetrators and victims. The method of file analysis was used to this end (Röhl 1987). Court records of the Vienna Provincial Criminal Court documenting convictions after human trafficking offences were analysed for the period 2009 to 2014. Only those proceedings (n=66) that were listed under Section 104a of the Austrian Penal Code and in which a main hearing took place were analysed. Records from the Public Prosecutor's Office were not analysed.

The case records were systematically analysed using file analysis. The advantage of this research method is that it can be used to evaluate both police and public prosecution protocols, expert opinions, indictments and judgements both qualitatively and quantitatively. Therefore, this gives an overview of the cases handled by the court. The following subchapter presents the key findings from the file analysis.

2.1.1 Legal basis of Section 104a of the Austrian Penal Code (StGB)

The provision of Section 104a of the Austrian Penal Code penalises the offence of human trafficking and defines this as the recruitment, harbouring or otherwise receiving, conveying, offering or passing on of a person with the intention of them being exploited (Section 104a (1) of the Austrian Penal Code). In the case of adult victims, the offence is only present if “unfair means” are employed, such as “the use of force or a dangerous threat, misrepresentation of facts, exploitation of a position of authority, of a predicament, of mental illness or a condition which renders the person defenceless, the intimidation and the granting or acceptance of an advantage for the transfer of control over the person” (Section 104a (3) of the Austrian Penal Code). In the case of underage victims, the offence is also present even if unfair means are not used (Section 104a (5) of the Austrian Penal Code).

Pursuant to Section 104a (3) of the Austrian Penal Code, exploitation includes “sexual exploitation, exploitation by organ removal, exploitation of labour, exploitation to beg and exploitation to commit punishable actions”. Thus, not only the human trafficking for sexual exploitation relevant to this article is punishable according to Section 104a of the Austrian Penal Code, but also human trafficking for the other purposes mentioned, such as begging



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and forced labour. These offences were expanded to align the legal situation with the requirements of Sections 2 and 3 of EU Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings as well as Sections 18 and 19 of the Council of Europe Convention on combating trafficking in human beings. The concept of human trafficking in Section 104a of the Austrian Penal Code thus complies with these international regulations.

2.1.2 Perpetrator and crime progression

During the period under investigation, perpetrators who were prosecuted for the crime of human trafficking related to prostitution primarily came from Bulgaria and African countries. Since the Viennese streetwalking scene was in Bulgarian hands during the period under investigation, fewer perpetrators from Romania and other eastern European countries were identified. The Bulgarian ring of perpetrators consists mainly of members of the Roma and Sinti minorities, who are generally related and know each other. Both women and men act as pimps or human traffickers. Women primarily act as guardians to the victims. Men, on the other hand, act as pimps or buy and sell victims. The progression begins within Bulgaria. The victims generally live in small rural villages. Members of the ring of perpetrators are active in these villages and acquire women. In the context of the file analysis carried out here, no men were collected. Also, the much-cited usage of the “lover boy” method for recruitment was not confirmed. The women who come to Austria are aware in most cases that they will also work in prostitution.

Both perpetrators and victims come from very poor backgrounds. This can be accepted as the primary motive for human trafficking. The reason for this is the poor economic situation in Bulgaria and the hopelessness of building a future in their

own country. The victims usually cross the border in cars or minibuses and very often live with the perpetrators in one household. The victims are forced into prostitution relatively soon. If the victim refuses, she is physically forced to comply. In most cases, the women’s travel documents and cash are also stolen. Around two-thirds of victims are able to retain part of the money they have earned. The perpetrators mostly pay for living and food costs. Looking more closely at the Bulgarian ring of perpetrators, it can be said that there is a very well-organised network of perpetrators who act both nationally and internationally. Women are bought and sold among the pimps like a commodity. The average price for a woman is between EUR 1,000 and 2,000.

The situation is a little different in the case of the perpetrators who come to Austria from Africa. In this case, there are two levels to the initiation. Most victims from Africa are smuggled into Europe. In contrast to the cases in Bulgaria, women are lured to Austria under false pretences. They are promised jobs as nannies or waitresses. On arrival in Austria, the women are usually registered as refugees in Traiskirchen. Locally in Vienna, a woman – mostly called “madam” – acts as a guardian and/or pimp. The victims are physically abused if they refuse to engage in prostitution. Furthermore, they are threatened with the use of voodoo – many of the women believe in and practice it. The perpetrators threaten women and their families in Africa, e.g. curse them with spells or illnesses, if they do not engage in prostitution. The routes of the victims to Austria are varied and obscure. However, it can be observed that there is a network in Italy that distributes women to other parts of Europe.

In summary, looking at the similarities between Bulgarian and African perpetrators, it can be said that most of them come

from the same country of origin as the victim and are very much at risk of poverty themselves. At times, a connection between prostitution and drug-related crimes can be established from the files. However, this situation is not always described accurately enough in the files.

2.1.3 The victims

According to the present files, the victims are mostly young women. First, however, it should be noted that prostitutes generally experience significantly more violence than other women. Not only do they suffer violence more frequently, but measured by the effects of the injuries, even more threatening forms of violence. The forms of victimisation experienced by prostitutes depend on different contextual factors and are manifold: violence, abuse, human trafficking and health problems. The perpetrators are pimps, clients or partners. The risk for prostitutes is 15 to 20 times higher than for non-prostituted women in the same age group (Treibl 2015).

No minors or male victims were found in the file analysis. For the most part, women from Bulgaria have a higher level of education than women from Africa. This plays a particularly important role in the context of contraception. African women often have sexual intercourse for the first time in prostitution and are unfamiliar with condoms. This is accompanied by an increase in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. According to Santos-Hövenner et al. (Santos-Hövenner et al. 2015), epidemiological studies from various Western European countries attribute a great impact to migration on the epidemiology of HIV, HBV and HCV. Immigration from sub-Saharan (SSA) countries is particularly impactful. This development can also apply to Austria (ibid). Further studies can be found in Coma (Coma et al. 2013).

Moreover, Africans are often unaware of the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Many perpetrators exploit this circumstance and force women to engage in unprotected intercourse. Many women have families in their home countries and see prostitution as their only chance to feed them. The prices that women offer their services for are arranged with the pimp. On average, clients pay EUR 15 for oral sex, EUR 30 for oral and sexual intercourse and EUR 50 for half an hour in the hotel. If women offer their services without a condom, the price increases by EUR 20. In general, it can be said that most of the prostitution in Vienna takes place around the Prater. Nevertheless, it should be noted at this point that most victims reside in the 15th district of Vienna. The consensus of all files analysed is the conclusion that prostitutes are rarely able to ward off violence committed by both pimps and clients through institutional aid and the police.

2.2 Results from interviews with affected women

An in-depth approach to the situation of those affected was followed in this project primarily through qualitative interviews with the women themselves. At the centre of this was the question of how professionals can constructively support those affected in escaping. The interviews were used to develop focal points for the training of professionals. The interviews focused in particular on the experience of the affected women so far with aid processes and sought suggestions for even more suitable support services. The approach can therefore be understood mainly from the addressee-oriented research perspective, in which the recipients of aid processes are specifically examined in order to obtain more detailed knowledge of their situation, as well as more appropriate prevention and intervention methods (for details on the

methodology, see Gahleitner et al. 2017).

The survey was carried out using problem-focused interviews (Witzel 1982; *ibid* 2000), which use an open initial question and an exploratory narrative to provide a large space for the subject concepts of the interviewees. At the same time, cultural and linguistic barriers to communications were lifted (currently see Enzenhofer/Resch 2011), always in close cooperation with consulting services. A content-analytic method that gives the inductive parts of text a special weight (Mayring/Gahleitner 2010) was deliberately chosen for the data preparation and evaluation. Risks of reactivating traumatic content were reduced in advance to a minimum for the women by means of previously obtained ethics approval as well as by the participating NGOs and a suitable interview technique (Bar-On 1996, 9–21).

An individual case example will be presented in the following in order to draw general conclusions from the entire data.

2.2.1 Beate Beron: “Helping you build a new life from your broken lives”

Beate Beron and her sister ended up in the violent environment as a result of deception. “We were at a wedding reception, (...) but suddenly we were driven a long way away to a town (...). And then the man said, we had already been sold (...), I didn’t understand (...), my sister and I got so scared (...). Then I cried because I had a small child.” Both sisters were intimidated with threats. They quickly realised that many women in that milieu share the same fate. At some point, Beate Beron saw no other way but to function: “I was always beaten (...), and then I got ill, very, very ill”. Despite her desperate situation, she repeatedly showed willpower: “Then the boss had also come to me, he wanted to sleep with me, do such things. I didn’t do it, and then told him: ‘I’ll tell

your wife about this.’” The pimps also tried to influence Beate Beron through her sister.

After a long time in the milieu, Beate Beron got an opportunity to visit her family. However, she had to conceal the truth about her predicament: “I (...) saw my son, (...) and I’m just sad, I think nobody noticed, we will really stay here for maybe 20 years without getting out.” As time went by, Beate developed a plan to flee: “But I saw myself that while it’s bad, I cannot get out of there (...). That’s when I came up with the idea that I’ll play along, which was the only way to run away.” However, an unexpected event thwarted her escape plans: “This woman said, I had to bring my son to this place (...), and then she (...) fetched my son.” Nevertheless, Beate Beron continued to plan a way to get out of the situation. Finally, the plan succeeded together with another affected person: “We only had our clothes, were on the street, no money, nothing at all (...), we went to my town to my mother.” However, Beate Beron was then under pressure to free her sister and son from the milieu.

In desperation, she decided to earn the necessary money by re-entering the scene. This decision involved many risks: “And then I went to this country, but where it was really dangerous. (...) They beat you. It is so bad. You don’t know, if you get into a car, whether you will survive or not.” After many wrong paths and numerous acts of violence, Beate Beron got a helpful connection: “I said to this man, can you give me three or four thousand euros? I have to get my son and my sister away from these people, I explained to him, so I’ll stay here and pay you the money back.” In fact, Beate Beron succeeded in freeing her sister and son like this. However, this positive event created new dependencies for her: “And then this man, (...) now wants to sleep with me, I think,

what should I do? Now I am indebted to this man, he has freed my family.” Once again, she went through many dangerous and violent situations. She only managed to return exhausted to her family after a long period of time.

The precarious financial situation of her family, however, drew her in again: “I went back to my country. But my mother was seriously ill.” Threats from former pimps and concern for her mother forced Beate Beron to agree to work in the milieu again. “Then the bus drove away, and I cried. And then this man says: ‘Stop crying, I’ll call the hospital now and say, don’t do anything, don’t operate on your mother’, and then began to pressure me.” Once again, the pimps resorted to isolation and intimidation tactics and the original cycle started again from the beginning. She did not dare to confide in the police about this situation. After an endless cycle of violence, a client helped her. He encouraged Beate Beron to contact the police: “He tells me, ‘Go to the police’. I say, ‘I’m not going to the police, the police don’t help. I called so many times. Police, police, police – no help.’ No, he told me, in this country, it’s different.” A new relationship could actually develop on the basis of new experiences: “I went to the criminal investigation department. Right. They are great. But the police officers are not. (...) They still abuse. Yes, they also abuse you, the normal ones. But the special ones, these CID police, they are, how do you say that, very good.”

Besides the criminal investigation department, the counselling centre represented an important support for Beate Beron: “They somehow help you with these mental and these weak points, everything you have been through, somehow (...), help you get back on your feet and build your life again from scratch. (...) If you need, you can always speak to the coun-

sellors (...). Simply, everything is better.” According to Beate Beron, police and relief organisations work together closely in this process. Investing trust into the specialists was worth it, Beate Beron is now experiencing new things and looks back on the past with these experiences. Today, she advises every woman to flee as quickly as possible: “This criminal investigation department. They behave well, not like in our country, you know. Nice, don’t treat you like filth or a dog, somehow completely with respect. (...) And I have done all this here, made a complaint (...), have already informed the police. Look after my family.” She is now passing on her knowledge about the milieu to the police: “Then we tried to help other women as well.” She describes very convincingly how important an empathetic understanding of the situation of those affected is in order to gain their trust.

On this basis, Beate Beron is trying with great strength and creativity to establish new structures in her life.

2.2.2 First conclusions from interviews with affected women

Beate Beron has succeeded in making her way out of the old milieu into an independent life, albeit after many setbacks. What makes her case so successful? What have the professionals succeeded in with her that was not successful for other women? Her successful escape – in contrast to several previous failed attempts – was initiated by sustainable relationships of trust with professionals and the social support of a committed client. This initiation of trust, according to the results of all 30 interviews with affected women, is anything but trivial. The path into human trafficking already represents a series of traumas and fractures for the affected women. As with Beate Beron, violence, deprivation and global disadvantage are the reasons why

women may find themselves involved in human trafficking or have difficulty in escaping from it.

In this system of violence, women are subjected to surveillance, threats against family members, physical abuse, loss of control over their own bodies and rape. A vicious circle emerges that cements the feeling of helplessness. Summit (Summit 1983) names this dynamic of sexual violence and the typical subsequent reactions of the victims “sexual abuse accommodation syndrome”. After many years of exposure to violence, many women demonstrate post-traumatic stress disorder to its full extent (Oram et al. 2012). All areas mentioned in the classification keys, e.g. disturbances to emotions, attention and consciousness, psychosomatic phenomena, changes to the value system, as well as chronic, long-term consequences and personality changes are highlighted by the women in the interviews (APA 2000).

This severe traumatic shock changes access to the support system and to the police. Trust entails danger to the victims, as trust has led to the abuse. Disappointments are often repeated when trying to enter into relationships, as it happened with Beate Beron, leading to renewed exploitation situations. Above all, according to the women’s descriptions, there is hardly any possibility in this state to reflect and consider getting help or finding a way out (Kolk et al. 1996). Because of this, access to the women can only be achieved by highly skilled professionals with knowledge and competences in the areas of trauma, attachment and trust (Herman 1993; Keilson 2005). This applies to all professionals involved in the process from counselling work, the police and the judicial system. Also, consideration of the emotionally distorted perception processes in the questioning practice (see Helfferich et al. 2010; Pfaffenlehner 2014) can open the way to significant key positions for ways out.

The fact that victims of forced prostitution usually have to deal with a complex post-traumatic stress disorder therefore requires special handling. Active trust-building by the professionals accounting for the trauma is necessary to break new ground (Müller 2016). The prerequisite for a successful initiation of trust is ultimately a precise diagnostic understanding of cases (Gahleitner/Pauls 2013), which in addition requires sound expertise in the crime of human trafficking in the form of forced prostitution and the potentially traumatic consequences involved, for all professionals concerned (see also Gahleitner/Miersch 2012). If this succeeds, the affected women will be offered a variety of opportunities for a new beginning. Supporting psychosocial experiences are therefore necessary as positive anti-horizons (Keupp 1997) in contrast to the years of humiliation and disappointment with regard to relationships – this should be right from the first moment and in an interdisciplinary context.

3. CONCLUSION

It is known from psychotherapy and counselling research and the research on social support that positive attachment constellations, so-called “corrective emotional experiences” (Cremerius 1979, 588–590; see Alexander/French 1946; see also Grawe 1998) significantly influence the success of professional support. This is especially true in the realm of traumatic experiences. Trust and relationship-building is therefore delegated to the psychotherapeutic setting. However, women who are affected by trafficking and are looking for escape opportunities are not usually reached by this high-level measure. The task here – in this “hard-to-reach” area (Labonte-Roset et al. 2010) – therefore falls to the more community-oriented counselling setting or acute intervention. Police officers play a significant role here. In the case of Beate

Beron, her encounter with the criminal investigation department played a key role in the decisive change to a new life.

In the area of human trafficking, the respective institutional representatives – counselling, police, court, etc. – which are firsts perceived are therefore of particular importance to the victims. As key persons, they have to prove their own trustworthiness in successful points of reference – effectively as a link between person and system that is visible in everyday life (see Giddens 1995, 116 ff). Accordingly, the project is setting its objectives on training courses for the professional groups involved in this process, primarily social workers, police officers and legal representatives. The stated goal of the project is to use the results for qualifying training, e.g. in professional and further education of specific professionals.

However, the result also draws attention to a research methodological aspect. The evaluation of the court records and the interviews with affected women give different results. These only lead to a comprehensive sense in the overview. The serious traumatic consequences and the

resulting changes in attachment and relationship structures are not clear anywhere in the court records. The consequences of violence against women require central changes in the approach of counselling, police and court professionals. The combination of different methodological approaches, today broadly formulated under the terms “method integration”, “mixed methods” or “triangulation”, therefore proves to be particularly suitable for dealing with this problem. This procedure was also chosen for this project. A broad research spectrum was realised in several work packages in order to do justice to the examination of various questions.

Knowledge of further studies on manifold levels could help further develop the opportunities and possibilities of different approaches, but even professional, further and continuing training programmes for the professional groups involved in the interdisciplinary practice context on the subject of human trafficking. We hope that this project has managed to provide a solid basis for this and can offer numerous points of reference.

¹ See www.primsa.eu.

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Further literature and links

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