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Identifying the Challenges in the Detection and Protection of Child Victims of Human Trafficking in Spain: A Case Study of the Southern European Border

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Abstract: Despite the improvements in enhanced child protection, there is an increasing concern about the vulnerability and cases of child trafficking in Spain, the southern gateway to Europe from the African continent. Analyzing 23 interviews with professionals in the field, this article identifies the factors that contribute to high levels of child trafficking in Spain. This study identifies three primary results: (1) The dangers of residential childcare as places of recruitment; (2) The southern European and Spanish border as a place of elevated risk for the recruitment of children; (3) The stereotypes regarding child trafficking make invisible male victims, other types of trafficking for non-sexual purposes, domestic trafficking, and individual trafficking. Therefore, it remains imperative to advance a set of policies that: (i) invest in specific residential childcare resources for child victims either alone or with family members; (ii) invest in smaller residential childcare to prevent abuse; (iii) invest in mentoring programs for children previously under state guardianship; (iv) improve the working conditions and the training of residential childcare staff; (v) increase the visibility and diversity of child trafficking while avoiding stereotypes; (vi) improve the regional coordination; (vii) invest in campaigns to inform children about the dangers involved in running away, exploitation and abuse.

Keywords: vulnerability; trafficking; stereotypes; Spain; residential childcare

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1. Introduction

Human trafficking has been defined internationally in the Palermo Protocol (2000) in three aspects: acts, means, and purposes. However, in the case of child victims, it is not necessary for these specific means to be present. It is enough to be given the capture, transport, transfer, host, or receive the person for exploitation purposes to be identified as a trafficking victim (López Peregrín 2023). The consent of individuals under the age of 18 to be exploited holds no relevance, as the element of consent is deemed void for children under that age within the realm of human trafficking (López Peregrín 2023). Recruitment involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or/and reception of persons both within national borders and across international borders. The purpose of exploitation includes sexual (forced prostitution, pornography, and sex tourism), forced labor (domestic service, begging, agriculture, etc.), forced marriage (minors forced to marry, often against their will), or criminal exploitation (drug dealing, robbery, and forced begging). Internationally, we know that trafficking directly affects girls (18%) and boys (17%), with an increase in the number of boys identified as victims of trafficking worldwide in the last decade (UNODC 2023). Regarding international instruments for child protection, the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols apply to this context.

At the European level, the most important treaties are the European Charter on the Rights of the Child, the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, or Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and child pornography. Directive 2011/36/EU is particularly relevant because it includes family reunification of child victims. The Council of Europe adopted the Warsaw Convention in 2005, one of the highlights being its emphasis on structural causes and the creation of the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), tasked with collecting and analyzing data on this crime. GRETA (2023) latest report, Spain indicates its concern regarding (1) the lack of identification at Spain's southern border of child trafficking when migrant minors or asylum seekers enter, (2) the lack of specific resources for identified child victims, especially boys; (3) the risks of recruitment of children under state guardianship.

In Spain, at the national level, changes to the child and adolescent protection system reflect the evolution of public policies in response to the emerging needs of minors at risk with the Law 26/2015 (BOE 2015). By incorporating specific measures for protection against trafficking and exploitation, this law represents a significant advance in safeguarding the rights of children and adolescents in Spain. The latest official data from Spain (CITCO 2023) indicates that 1466 victims of human trafficking and exploitation crimes have been formally identified during 2023, of which 18 of them were minors at the time of identification, mainly for sexual (12), labor (5), forced marriages (2) and begging (1) purposes. The report indicates that the most frequent nationalities of victims are Colombian, Moroccan, and Spanish.

Applying a gender perspective to this crime is fundamental to understanding and addressing child trafficking, given that victimization experiences can vary significantly between boys and girls. This perspective highlights how social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity influence vulnerability and child exploitation (Reid 2012). On the one hand, girls are more likely to be sexually exploited due to gender stereotypes that portray them as more vulnerable. On the other hand, boys face less visibility when they are victims of forced prostitution or child pornography because of stereotypes that minimize their vulnerability.

The literature on child trafficking focuses on the purpose of sexual exploitation (Franchino-Olsen 2021). It points out that the most relevant risks for the recruitment of minors include participation in juvenile services or centers, sexual victimization, material needs, peer influence, juvenile delinquency, and substance use. In the case of Spain, the latest GRETA (2023) report has drawn attention to the concern regarding residential childcare as a place of vulnerability and recruitment for child trafficking, although with significant regional differences. In Spain, there are 20,000 available spots for minors distributed among 1200 centers, most of them privately run. According to a study in Mallorca (Spain) involving children and adolescents in residential childcare, a third of the young people interviewed reported needing more information about commercial sexual exploitation and the risks of running away from residential childcare and highlighted the need for greater communication with center workers (Pereda et al. 2021). In the same study, they point out that some of the most frequent causes for falling into a situation of vulnerability that ends in exploitation include the fear of homelessness not having money to purchase goods, alcohol, and drug consumption.

Despite legislative and political advances at both the national and supranational levels, challenges persist in the effective implementation of protection measures in centers for minors, the identification of child victims at the border, the allocation of sufficient resources (GRETA 2023), and the visibility of certain groups or profiles of minors. Therefore, the objectives of this research are: (i) to identify the risks of exploitation and child trafficking in Spanish residential care; (ii) to understand the specific circumstances of Spain as a southern European border and its implications for fighting trafficking; (iii) to understand the stereotypes that exist regarding child trafficking in Spain.

2. Materials and Methods

This study applies a qualitative methodology through interviews and focus groups with key informants who work with people at risk of exploitation or trafficking, mainly in Spain. To this end, we conducted interviews with professionals from civil society organizations and government, such as social workers, nurses, lawyers, educators, doctors, and psychologists. There is an inherent limitation with respect to the sample that is important to point out. This article offers an approach through the lens of professionals working to combat trafficking but not through the lens of those directly affected: the children themselves. Future research should consider the perceptions of children at risk of being trafficked based on similar circumstances as those discussed in this article.

Regarding the length, the interviews lasted an average of approximately one hour. Some of the interviews were conducted on the Microsoft Teams platform, and the focus groups were carried out in person in different provinces of Spain. The provinces were selected because of the volume of victims in those regions and because these provinces are important entry points in the trafficking phenomenon in Spain. The focus groups were conducted face-to-face and audio recorded using Microsoft Teams (for transcription purposes). All interviews were conducted in Spanish, so all quotes presented in this chapter are translated into English. Data collection primarily took place throughout 2023. The project was broader in scope, and the topics covered in these interviews were extensive; however, only the information related to children will be used for this article.

Regarding the sample, 4 focus groups (FG) of 6 people, 2 dual interviews (with professionals of the same institution), and 8 personal interviews were conducted. In relation to the participants, some characteristics are described in the table below. All the participants were adults and living in Spain at the time of the interview. The sampling initially involved contacting organizations collaborating with the university, and then it expanded through a snowball effect. Once the first organizations were interviewed, they referred the researchers to other colleagues or entities. Invitations to participate in the research project were sent via email. The aim was to achieve diversity and heterogeneity among the interview subjects (Table 1), including interviewees from different Spanish regions, different levels of work (Regional, national, international), various professional occupations, and different target groups (immigrant groups, prostitution, and children) that worked with possible victims of trafficking underage.

Regarding the ethics considerations around the theme and methodology, the (University)'s Ethics Committee reviewed this broader research project. The study's purpose, the guarantee of anonymity, and data confidentiality were explained to the interviewees, who then voluntarily signed an informed consent form. All interview recordings were securely stored by the research team. Recordings and transcripts will be deleted upon completion of the project. To protect the interviewees' anonymity, only aggregated data is presented, including their gender, the region where they worked, and their occupation (Table 1).

Data analysis was conducted based on individual or group interviews using Nvivo software. Criteria for rigor and quality in qualitative research were followed. First, subject triangulation was used to identify different civil society organizations to interview. Second, reliability was ensured to maintain coherence between the objectives, research techniques, and questions by designing clear questions, training interviewers, and documenting the process in detail. Third, the research was triangulated, with interviews conducted, transcribed, and coded separately by at least two researchers. Our content analysis aimed to identify common experiences that reach data saturation and data quantification.

Table 1. Characteristics of the qualitative sample.

N.	Occupation	Population Served	Region	Gender	Interview Type
1	Law	Minors NGO	Spain	Woman	Interview
2	International Relations	Human trafficking NGO	Spain	Woman	Interview
3	Law	Human trafficking NGO	Spain	Woman	Interview
4	Nurse	Trafficking and prostitution NGO	Europa	Woman	Interview
5	Educator	Minors Centre	Madrid	Woman	Dual interview
6	Psychology	Minors Centre	Madrid	Woman	Dual interview
7	Law	General Government	Spain	Woman	Interview
8	Pedagogy	Prostitution NGO	Malaga	Woman	FG
9	Social Work	Minors NGO	Malaga	Woman	FG
10	Psychology	Minors NGO	Malaga	Woman	FG
11	Psychology	Labor and sexual exploitation, minors NGO	Malaga	Woman	FG
12	Social Work	Trafficking Government	Malaga	Woman	FG
13	Law	Migration and trafficking NGO	Malaga	Woman	FG
14	Volunteer	Trafficking and prostitution NGO	Malaga	Man	FG
15	Director	Trafficking and prostitution NGO	Malaga	Man	FG
16	Social Work	Human trafficking NGO	Galicia	Man	Interview
17	Law	General Government	Melilla	Woman	Interview
18	Educator	Minors NGO	Madrid, Ceuta	Man	FG
19	Social Work	Minors Centre specialized in trafficking NGO	Catalonia	Man	Dual interview
20	Migration	Health and trafficking NGO	Melilla	Woman	Dual interview
21	Psychology	Migration NGO	Canary Islands	Woman	FG
22	Social Work	Human trafficking NGO	Canary Islands	Woman	FG
23	Psychology	Minors NGO	Canary Islands	Woman	FG

3. Results

Based on the information obtained from the participants interviewed, and in line with the objectives of the research, the analysis identified three highly prevalent themes across Spain: (1) concerns about the centers for minors in Spain as places at risk of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking; (2) specific and concrete risks for child trafficking on the southern border of the European Union and Spain; (3) stereotypes about child trafficking victims.

3.1. Risks Encountered within the Residential Childcare in Spain

In Spain, the responsibility for the protection of minors (e.g., residential care) lies with the regional governments. Being regional competencies, several interviewees mentioned notable differences in management, availability of funding, and child protection protocols between the regions. There is a multitude of frameworks (open, semi-open, closed), different management responsible (state, NGOs, private entities), and different target populations (mixed, separated by gender, with criminal records, with health problems, by age, first reception centers for migrant minors, etc.).

Centers for the protection of minors serve as institutions that temporarily assume the care and education of children. However, concerns regarding centers for children have been widely reported by the professionals interviewed (N = 13 respondents). According to the interviewees, they pose a risk to the children themselves as they do not have effective systems of protection against exploitation and trafficking. In particular, the risks associated with open centers are explained by the possibility of minors or adolescents leaving the center to go to school or to enjoy leisure time. Sometimes "runaways" occur, where children disappear for a while from the center and return with money or goods (especially cell phones, shoes, clothes) or with sexual-reproductive health problems. Thus, when children leave the centers, they are especially vulnerable to recruitment or abuse by traffickers and adults. In the interviews, instances of both prostitution of minors and cases involving formally identified victims of trafficking have been reported. The following quote illustrates

recruitment through an emotional relationship with the minor. They act as if they have a relationship with the girls, and the girls introduce them as their boyfriends

> A lot of situations of people who approach them on the street, right at the doors of the residential center, who introduce themselves. Also, maybe young people who introduce themselves as, "I want to be your boyfriend".

Another situation detected within the centers for minors is, according to three of the interviewees, the lack of professionals with sufficient training to protect or detect possible victims of trafficking in minors. In a similar vein, the participants observed that various factors, such as a deficiency in vocational commitment, precarious employment circumstances, inadequate remuneration, elevated staff turnover rates, and the necessity to engage in multiple jobs, impede the formation of intimate and safeguarding relationships with minors. Furthermore, the ratios of staff to children within the facilities are markedly higher than optimal, which, in conjunction with unstable working environments and the multifaceted challenges presented by the youth—issues for which the personnel received insufficient training—intensifies the obstacles to effective professional intervention. According to some participants, the relationship of trust between minors and workers in the centers is fundamental for them to feel safe from possible risks or situations of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. However, the work in some centers for minors is often more focused on maintaining order among the children rather than identifying needs and vulnerabilities and trying to create a bond with them. Unfortunately, centers for minors under state guardianship are often no longer always safe spaces for protection against exploitation.

> "(. . .) I have zero training for detection, that is, anything other than the kid explicitly telling it, the team has no training."

> "There were Moroccan girls in a protection center in Hortaleza, who had to be taken out, because they were being sexually exploited. [. . .] So, the problem with children is that if they enter the protection system, we have no security, because we have no information of any kind, of what is happening, and if there are professionals who can detect"

Furthermore, some centers even become places where recruitment and exploitation occur. Two interviewees expressed concern about cases in which some of the professionals in the children's centers were complicit in the abuse. When these situations occur, transparent communication of the cases within the centers themselves, along with training and awareness for the rest of the staff, as measures to prevent future cases, becomes fundamental.

> "But the cases of trafficking or attempted. . . the beginnings, have been by educational personnel and by security personnel. And when cases have arisen, or at least as a worker, as we have experienced it, there has not even been communication. [. . .] the management has not formally explained it to us, nor have they worked to, well, systematize it a bit, to see if these cases would become more or to see how to prevent them from occurring in the future".

In addition, some interviewees explained their concern about the intersectionality between vulnerability, trafficking, and drugs. On the one hand, drug abuse or dependence can be a vulnerability factor for being recruited by sex or labor trafficking networks. On the other hand, traffickers retain and exploit children for the sale of drugs. Finally, one of the interviewees commented that in her center for minors, attention to drug use and dependency problems is inadequate, increasing the vulnerability of many of these children.

> "As they were minors sheltered in the centers for minors, they did enter into these networks. And what you always see is the most striking part. In many cases they also had to do with issues related to drug use, in minors."

> "We are finding minors who come with their father and mother, who ask for asylum, but they have been captured in their country of origin to exploit the mother, the father, who often finds himself packing marijuana or hashish in plantations in Spain"

> "They all come with substance abuse problems. It is true that for the first five weeks they do not leave the center to prevent them from consuming, but there is really no follow-up or treatment as there should be. In other centers, every time they leave, they are tested for toxics to see if they have consumed or not. And in my center at least there is a total abandonment, apart from the fact that they are not treated at a therapeutic level, but the easy way is to give them a pill to keep them calm"

The previous testimony highlights how a focus on managing behavior in the center prevails rather than professional intervention in response to the children's vulnerability. In addition, most of the centers for minors are large, with a high number of places, and in some of them, control of behavior prevails over other priorities, with more individualized attention lacking. For this reason, one of the interviewees advocates for small residential centers for minors where there can be a closer and more familiar relationship between children and workers. In addition, another interviewee also mentions that it would be important to change the view of order and control of the rebelliousness of minors for one that detects vulnerability and needs.

> "It is very difficult to see a rebellious girl, a rebellious teenager who has put on I don't know how many tattoos and defies you, and who runs away, how not to see her as a rebellious teenager who needs to be brought under control, right? And how to go beyond that and see that need for affection, that trauma she has, those nightmares she has at night" In relation to minors, considerable apprehension has been articulated regarding the inadequate safeguards encountered by individuals under guardianship upon reaching the age of majority. Upon attaining the age of 18, numerous individuals find themselves deprived of access to residential accommodations and childcare facilities, thereby heightening their susceptibility to recruitment by adults or trafficking organizations that aim to exploit their precarious circumstances. The deficiency of housing alternatives for former minors under state guardianship constrains their housing prospects, leading some to face homelessness. At least four interview participants expressed concern about the susceptibility of these minors as they near the age of majority, particularly in terms of the heightened risk of being targeted by trafficking networks. In this regard, one interviewee from Catalonia underscored the necessity for the establishment of mentoring initiatives to aid these individuals during both their childhood and the formative years of their youth, subsequent to their attainment of legal adulthood.

> "We were surprised by last year's data on Spanish women and the cause was girls who were institutionalized in residential childcare, who had already begun prostitution there, and once they left, that is, close to the age of 18, at 18 years of age, they were already out of the residential childcare, they were captured by a trafficking network. Last year there were two Spanish minors who were victims of trafficking"

3.2. Procedures and Vulnerability at the Southern Spanish Border: The Increased Risk Faced by Children at Europe's Entry Point

A great number of concerns have been detected in the south of Spain (including North Africa), where the autonomous Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla share the only European land border with the African continent. Other territories, such as the Canary Islands, Algeciras, and Almeria, are also crucial places in the transit of migrant minors. At least four interviewees mentioned that once they enter the European Union as a place of transit, it is very difficult for the practitioners to detect child trafficking victims who pass through southern Europe in Spanish territory. Children who arrive at the border entrance of the Canary Islands, Melilla, or Ceuta frequently want to continue their migratory journey to the peninsula and, therefore, do not seek protection in the cities of first entry, which complicates the detection by organizations and public bodies. This is also explained by

the limited resources available in these territories to cover the basic transit needs of the thousands of migrants who pass through:

> "You know that there are many cases, especially of labor trafficking in minors, almost all of whom come from Ceuta and Melilla. But it is not so easy to detect, because of the situation in which they are in transit."

> "only ridiculously obvious cases were identified (as trafficking). But it is true that neither the staff was informed, nor, above all, the point of view of what was a priority was there. In other words, the point of view of what was a priority was that people had clothes, food and that they were not hitting each other, because the situation was very tense."

In addition to the existing collapse at the southern border, at least three of the interviewees were concerned about migrant boys in street situations. Children and young migrant minors on the street are in extremely vulnerable situations, frequently without adult guardians to watch over their protection. The trafficking networks take advantage of the socio-economic vulnerabilities and lack of protection of these minors, including a lack of decent housing and substantive opportunities, to recruit and exploit them.

> "In Algeciras, for example, we have a very well identified trafficking network. It is a network that extorts children to commit petty theft, robbery and so on. Then they get them hooked on drugs so that they then commit these thefts, or even murders, we have even detected some of them. In other words, they have them quite extorted. And of course, they are children who arrive here as minors, who leave the protection system, because they already have a level of consumption that makes it very difficult for them to adhere to the rules of the protection systems."

> "But when you enter a street situation: because you leave the center because they treat you badly, because you are 14 years old. And the legal way or the ordinary way to leave Ceuta within the system of centers is to wait another 5 years."

According to one of the interviewees, the police at the border were, in many cases, more concerned with crime control than with identifying possible cases of trafficking for labor exploitation. This limited action to protect and detect trafficking situations for labor purposes does not occur as much when there is a risk of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

> "Trafficking for the purpose of illicit labor, mainly in retail, was not followed, it was known and all the, and many of those kids had police records because they had been caught, it was known that they consumed, it was known that they had economic resources that did not match their situation. But there, at least the exclusive treatment that I saw, both by the area of minors and by the police, was simply limited to their criminal role because of their retail work, but it did not go beyond that".

Another concern was raised by at least five of the interviewees, who observed that DNA tests performed on accompanied minors often involved very long wait times to receive the results. These tests help Spanish authorities determine whether there is a blood link between the minor and the adult with whom they are traveling. DNA tests might help decide whether the adult is lying about the relationship with the child. This process can help detect situations in which a person connected to the traffickers is traveling with the children to control them. The interviewees commented on cases of missing children, where DNA testing took a long time and where they were accompanied by an adult who was not a family member. On the contrary, there is a lack of regulation of situations where minors, despite not traveling with immediate family members, are being protected with consent by other adult friends or extended family ties. There are still some cases of separation between children and their reference adults who cannot prove that they are their parents during DNA testing.

> "With negative DNA and... Women who have come with a minor saying that their child. It comes out DNA negative, it's confirmed that it's not their child, and when the child has already been taken, it's already gone. The DNA thing is a drama."

> "children arriving with people who were not their relatives were separated because they could be victims of trafficking. But that they were realizing that, perhaps, of course, it was a joint migratory project accepted by the family of origin."

In addition to determining family ties, concerns have been raised about the actual age of the children. Tests are carried out to determine the age of migrants or refugees, and when they are detected as being children, special procedures are undertaken to protect them. However, at least six interviewees commented on the difficulty of determining the age of migrant and refugee minors, which has an impact on the detection of possible child trafficking victims. At entry points of minors into Spain, the interviewees commented that it is difficult to establish protection procedures such as age determination, where cases of failures, long waits, lack of documentation, testimonies of minors pretending to be adults, or children´s disappearance are reported. As an example of good practice, one participant from Catalonia highlighted that first, the minor is taken into guardianship, and then the age determination test is carried out instead of the other way around. The respondent pointed out that guardianship was extinguished if children were of age, which is a problem, as the veracity of age determination tests/evidence is questioned.

> "There were boys and girls who were in the system for 4 months, 5 months, well cared for, but without being able to determine whether they were adults or minors. Therefore, they were not under guardianship, they were in a somewhat strange situation. Now it is the other way around, now at the first moment they come into contact with the administration, they are under guardianship. And then the guardianship is not effective, if after knowing their age, they are of legal age".

3.3. Stereotyping or Lack of Visibility

During the interviews, biases, stereotypes, and an invisibility of certain realities related to child trafficking were detected. Applying a gender perspective to this crime is fundamental to understanding the specific needs of boys and girls. As mentioned above, three of the interviewees mentioned how vulnerability due to the street situation affects boys more and exposes them to being captured by trafficking networks for various purposes such as sexual, drug trafficking, or criminal activities. At least five interviewees mentioned how gender biases towards boys make them more vulnerable to not being identified, detected as victims, and, consequently, not protected as such. In addition, fewer protection and residential alternatives and resources are mentioned for boys than girl victims:

> "For example, in terms of funding for programs to care for victims of trafficking, there is enough money, which is never enough, but there is enough money for lines of action for women and girls who are victims of trafficking and there are no specific lines for men."

> "Girls are more protected, that is very evident. For boys there are no specialized resources for trafficking issues. That is, they are not seen as victims of exploitation, because also a little bit because of what I said, because maybe they are boys who are on the street, many times, who are understood as prostituting themselves because they want to, so there is not as much protective gaze as there is for girls."

In addition to the previous testimony, another bias that concerns the interviewees is that of foreign nationality. At least three interviewees commented that there is a nationality bias that makes it more difficult to identify Spanish victims of trafficking than foreign victims. The imagined victim is thought to be a foreign woman entering a country without documentation or residency rights. This image reinforces a stereotype that leads police and

organizations to profile potential victims while ignoring the reality that victims come in many forms. This makes internal trafficking, in some cases, more difficult to detect than trafficking that crosses international borders. Although they do not consider that there are many cases, it is relevant to be able to identify them.

> "But in trafficking there is a clear foreign bias. That is to say, people only identify trafficking when it is a person who has come from abroad. In other words, internal trafficking costs us a lot."

At least three interviewees commented on their concern about the lack of visibility of types of trafficking other than sexual. In particular, respondents noted limited training and lack of resources about trafficking for other purposes, as well as limited detection of cases of child trafficking for such objectives as labor, begging, forced marriages, or other criminal activities.

> "One of the cases we have now in the center, a 12-year-old girl who was already living as a schoolgirl, all day long, but when she arrived home, she was exposed to a 45-year-old man. Well, it exists, it has existed, and in the 3 years that we have had the center open, we have seen it".

> "...they end up being convicted, one after another, and what they are is that they are exploited for begging, and nobody has the trafficking glasses on."

At least two of the interviewees mentioned that trafficking is frequently believed to occur through large networks, ignoring the reality that it also occurs by individuals and small groups. The participants advocate for making visible other, more diverse conceptions of traffickers, not only criminal groups and organizations but also individual adults who take advantage of the children's vulnerability. Some trafficking cases are more related to opportunistic child exploitation than to a series of premeditated decisions to recruit from the countries of origin. For this reason, most of the participants, whether public or private, have tried to go deeper into the detection of vulnerabilities to improve child protection.

> "And this, for example, happens, at the network level, sure, but at a very individual level in Ceuta and Melilla."

> "They don't come as much as with the trafficking network from the country of origin, but the situation of extreme vulnerability in which they find themselves here is what leads them to get into trafficking networks."

Based on stereotypes and prejudices about trafficking victims, at least five interviewees reported concerns about the lack of resources for both accompanied and unaccompanied child victims. The first situation concerning the lack of resources involves minors who travel with their parents and who are victims of trafficking. There are not always entities with places for accompanied minors. The second situation involves child victims who are alone and who would automatically be transferred to the child protection service of the region in which they are located. In cases of child trafficking alone, it is more complicated to find specialized resources and centers.

> "Yes, as long as they are accompanied by their parents, or by a relative, who, if they cannot prove an affiliation, we initiate foster care. That is, what we don't foster, we can't, because we don't have room, is to foster minors who are alone. Then those minors go to child protection."

> "when a woman with children comes to us, we have a hard time finding a resource for her. Almost all the resources are for single women."

4. Discussion

Living in an environment free of violence is a right that all children have (UN 1989). However, data on the exploitation and trafficking of minors shows that it continues to impact millions of children (UNODC 2023). In Spain, a significant number of children

detected as possible trafficking victims for sexual exploitation are foreigners unaccompanied by their parents or legal guardians, and yet there is no real framework for action, nor are there people with specific training to detect child victims, nor sufficient specialized resources for victims in Spain, Italy, Portugal and Germany (Espuny Cugat and Villacampa Estiarte 2023).

Despite the advancements in enhancing the protection of minors and the low number of officially identified child victims in Spain (CITCO 2023), concerns are reported by professionals in our sample about the risks of child trafficking in Spain in three aspects: residential centers as recruitment sites for child trafficking victims; unique challenges as the southern gateway to Europe from the African continent; prevailing stereotypes about child trafficking that obscure the visibility of many children. This is extremely important as respondents criticized the lack of adequate guidance from governments to institutions offering support as a specific global action. In line with our results, GRETA's 2023 report to Spain highlights concerns about (1) recruitment risks for minors under state guardianship, (2) difficulties in the identification of child trafficking at the southern border, and (3) lack of resources for minor victims, especially boys.

4.1. Concerns of Child Trafficking in the Context of Residential Care

Residential care centers for minors have a fundamental role to play in preventing different forms of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking, especially when children exhibit behavior characterized by recurrent runaways or unauthorized departures. Despite protocols to prevent and combat these situations at the national level, some of the interviewees remain concerned about the lack of protection in the centers, the insufficient working conditions of the staff employed in residential childcare, the lack of training to detect trafficking and the lack of confidence between employees and children to report abuse. There are described cases where children have been recruited inside of children's centers in several European countries (Lumos 2020), a shocking revelation considering that these centers are meant to provide protection to these children, not harm them. To combat this phenomenon, Lumos recommends relying more on family care than residential care, recognizing "orphanage trafficking" as a wider form of exploitation of children in institutions, training on trafficking detection for staff working in these centers, and raising awareness of the risks of trafficking or exploitation amongst children in these centers.

Pereda et al. (2021) pointed out that a third of children in residential care need more information about commercial sexual exploitation, the risks of running away, and better communication with center workers, in line with our results. Frequent causes of vulnerability leading to exploitation include fear of homelessness, desire for money or goods, and substance use. Among some of the major concerns of our interviewees were the connections between vulnerability, drugs, and trafficking, with drugs being an element of vulnerability for recruitment or exploitation purposes. It is important to improve resources for minors with substance abuse and mental health care in residential childcare.

Furthermore, official records on official complaints in Spain confirm that every year, more than a hundred foreign children, 70% of whom are close to the age of adulthood, disappear from residential care (Ministry of the Interior 2023). GRETA (2023) also highlighted the specific vulnerability of migrant boys close to 18, in the same vein as some interviewees. The disappearance of children has been reported as well in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, where their protection and safety against abuse, exploitation, or trafficking is not known once they disappear from the centers (Sidebottom et al. 2019).

In response to similar vulnerabilities, Spain has implemented some changes to protect at-risk minors. One of the big changes in the last years in Spain was the integration of foreign minors close to the age of majority into the Spanish labor market with the reform of 2021 (BOE 2021). The purpose is to mitigate many of the risks discussed above by integrating them into the workforce and strengthening their livelihoods. Official data from Spain's Permanent Observatory of Migration (OPI: Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración) confirms that foreign minors under guardianship in Spain are increasingly accessing formal

employment, demonstrating this law's effectiveness in helping to strengthen economic possibilities and target some of the factors contributing to their vulnerability. It would be important to research the advantages -such as the reduction of economic need—as well as disadvantages—such as the risks of abuse and exploitation-generated by the reform of Royal Decree 903/2021 (BOE 2021) to facilitate the labor inclusion of foreign minors close to the age of majority.

In line with our results, GRETA (2023) also identified several other good practices in some Spanish regions that, if implemented more broadly, could help to remedy some of these difficulties in child protection. For example, there are instances involving the use of smaller centers with closer environments and more family-like situations, improving the working conditions of staff, improving intervention with minors who have mental health problems or with foreign unaccompanied children, avoiding large regional differences in the care of minors, improving detection and intervention with victims of trafficking within the minors' centers (UNICEF 2017). A more proactive governmental role, supported by adequate resources and policies, is essential for mitigating the risks of child trafficking and ensuring the protection of the most vulnerable populations.

4.2. Concerns of Child Trafficking in the Context of Southern Europe and Spain

One of the major concerns that has been reported is related to the transit and crossing point situation of the Spanish and European southern border. Spain is the only European country that has a land border with Africa, making it a key transit point for migration and trafficking. Participants were also worried that the police prioritize control and order over detecting trafficking among vulnerable migrant children, particularly in cases of homelessness and illicit economic activities. Furthermore, the emergency, lack of resources, and a large number of arrivals mean that there are many problems with the identification of trafficking victims, in line with previous publications (GRETA 2023). In this sense, international arrivals should have targeted protocols to identify potential trafficking situations and sexual violence (Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al. 2020), not only for undocumented female immigrants arriving in Spain by small boats but for many vulnerable people.

There are significant concerns about the identification of possible minor victims accessing European territory through Spain and accompanied by an adult claiming to be their family (González 2014). Therefore, DNA testing is a mechanism to detect situations of minors traveling with adults who claim to be family but who are actually traffickers or facilitators of trafficking. Amongst the most worrying results from the interviewees is evidence of the separation of minors after DNA testing identifying that they are not traveling with family. The authorities fail to consider that the adult may be a caregiver who has arranged with the children's families in the country of origin to escort them to Spain (UNICEF 2019).

Regarding the age assessment procedures, participants highlighted the difficulties in the identification of child victims at the Spanish border, including test failures, long waits, lack of documentation, children pretending to be adults and disappearances. These findings illustrate how the government's inadequate response to creating effective policy frameworks and ensuring their implementation has exacerbated the vulnerabilities of at-risk children. A good practice from Catalonia involves taking the minor into guardianship before conducting the age determination test. In addition, GRETA's (2023) concerns about age determination were related to the importance of prioritizing the child's best interests, as well as comprehensive assessment should not solely depend on medical examinations but consider the child's overall physical and psychological development.

4.3. Concerns of Bias and Stereotypes About Child Trafficking

Despite the difficulties of detecting child trafficking, this reality is even more invisible and hidden in the case of male minors, who are affected by masculinity stereotypes (UNICEF 2020). Understanding gender perspectives is essential to address the specific needs of these particularly hidden male child victims. *Gender biases* result in girls being more

frequently detected and protected as victims, while boys are often perceived as "rebels" who must be criminally punished (Cockbain and Brayley 2012; Breuil 2021). Studies from the USA highlight a focus on law and order, emphasizing punishment over protection for children trafficked involved in forced criminality (Soltis and Taylor Diaz 2021).

The *foreigner bias* has been another of the major findings of our sample, which may contribute to a lack of detection of Spanish trafficking victims by the police in charge of formally identifying the victims. In general, attention is more often paid to victims of trafficking involving border crossing because of the special vulnerability involved in documentation and administrative procedures, thereby ignoring victims of domestic trafficking (UNODC 2023). Some research in the United Kingdom points to the difficulty of detecting and conceptualizing human trafficking for domestic rather than foreign minors (Brayley and Cockbain 2014; Heys et al. 2022).

Additionally, participants expressed concerns about the *bias of trafficking networks*, which exist in some sectors of society. There are stereotypes of large criminal networks composed exclusively of men (Chacón 2010) who use physical force to recruit and control victims and that traffickers are always strangers to their victims. Similarly, a few interviewees highlighted the need to recognize the different types of traffickers, whether they are individual opportunists or part of large criminal organizations, in order to avoid prejudices that hinder the identification of trafficking situations.

The propagation of stereotypical and simplified images, such as the *bias of sex trafficking and prostitution* and what constitutes a trafficking victim, can impair the identification of other victims who do not fit that image, as has been documented in several studies in different European countries (Saiz-Echezarreta et al. 2018; Wilson and O'Brien 2016). Stereotypes about the image and characteristics of the imagined victim, together with the lack of visibility of trafficking for purposes other than exclusively sexual in the case of minors and adults, derive from the lack of real knowledge of the magnitude of the phenomenon. The efforts by Spain to combat trafficking illustrate this point. The Spanish government has been unable to prevent the perpetuation of stereotypes surrounding human trafficking, particularly due to its lack of economic and political initiatives to protect less visible minors who do not fit the conventional image of trafficking victims.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the evidence from the interviews conducted demonstrates a number of important policy changes that need to be implemented to better protect the best interests of children in Spain. The findings and evidence suggest that there is a lack of political initiatives and economic resources dedicated to protecting less visible victims; this involves children. Broadly speaking, it is necessary to invest in improving the detection and protection of vulnerable children, especially in centers for minors or in places of entry into European territory, as well as improve coordination amongst the different regions of Spain.

In doing so, it is important to: (i) allocate specialized residential resources for minors who are victims of trafficking, both when they are alone and when they have a parent in their care; (ii) invest in smaller and more familiar residential resources to improve the proximity and child protection; (iii) provide support for more permanent mentoring programs between workers and minors during the process both as minors and at the first moment of their majority or when they are no longer under the guardianship of the state; (iv) improve the working conditions and make compulsory specific training about trafficking and exploitation for professionals who will have contact with possible vulnerable children, especially in residential homes; (v) develop an awareness campaign and specific training amongst professionals to reduce the use of stereotypes and biases; (vi) create a committee amongst the autonomous communities that shares best practices and meeting annually to discuss innovations in fighting trafficking as well as challenges faced; (vii) use online platforms commonly used by children to develop campaigns aimed at informing them of the dangers of exploitation, trafficking, substance abuse and runaways.

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