



Editorial

International Counter-Trafficking: A Zero-Sum Game?—Introduction to the Special Issue

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“Human trafficking” is widely described as a matter of concern. An ever-present issue on national and international political and social agendas, its condemnation has nevertheless favoured the consolidation of counter-trafficking norms and initiatives in many countries, with a singular mobilization of human and financial resources (Dottridge 2014).

In the last twenty years, research on the topic has also suggested that human trafficking is a polysemic and fluid concept, whose mobilization often presents itself as inherently problematic (Clemente 2023; Piscitelli 2012). One of the reasons as to why this is the case relates to the objectives and priorities that have motivated the call-to-action and intervention of many counter-trafficking agencies, states, and non-governmental organizations. In particular, an ever-growing convergence of securitarian, moralistic, and neoliberal concerns have opened up and strengthened the power of business opportunities for these agents and their coalitions (Bernstein 2018; Musto 2010). However, the few benefits brought to trafficked persons and the violence they often face within counter-trafficking result in counter-trafficking efforts recurrently appearing to have become a zero-sum game, in which gains made by many of those who populate counter-trafficking apparatuses rarely trickle down to the “victims of (counter-)trafficking” (Clemente 2022).

This Special Issue presents the work of scholars and scholar-activists, with the aim of contributing towards a strengthening of the knowledge and informing debates about trafficking, helping to make counter-trafficking something more than a controversial zero-sum game. I begin here by first recalling the contribution of Irena Ferčíková of the European Sex Workers’ Rights Alliance (ESWA). In the article, “Excluded but Fighting: Where Are the Voices of Sex Workers and Their Allies in EU Anti-Trafficking Policymaking?”, combining an auto-ethnographic approach with the analysis of documents, Irena Ferčíková recounts the strategies mobilized by sex workers’ collectives and unions to counteract the harmful impacts of counter-trafficking on sex workers, including their criminalization, discrimination, violence, and exploitation. This is a particularly valuable contribution if we consider the historical exclusion of sex workers from counter-trafficking initiatives (see also Doezema 2010), i.e., the lack of recognition of their work, experience, and expertise, and the very limited resources with which they have to try and defend themselves from the damage caused by counter-trafficking.

All the remaining articles that make up this Special Issue are characterized by extensive empirical research experiences within counter-trafficking, involving the broad participation of people labelled as “victims of trafficking” and “traffickers”, as well as agents who, in different forms, intervene in counter-trafficking. This is the case of the work of Hamadou Boiro and Jónína Einarsdóttir, authors of an article discussing multi-year anthropological fieldwork in Guinea-Bissau and Senegal in relation to interviews with Quran teachers. In “Begging for Knowledge in Senegal: Conflicting Understandings and Interests of the Dominant Anti-Trafficking Approach and Quranic Education”, these authors discuss Quran teachers’ understanding of Bissau-Guinean Quran schoolboys’ begging in Senegal and their responses to accusations of child trafficking. This work renews the need to focus on



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potential neocolonial and neoliberal aspects of counter-trafficking that, according to the Quran teachers, are used by NGOs to profit from funding and to eliminate Islam.

The article entitled “Nigerian Migrant Women and Human Trafficking Narratives: Stereotypes, Stigma and Ethnographic Knowledge”, by Estefanía Acién González, allows us to move from Africa to Europe, following Nigerian migrant women in the sex market in southern Spain. Based on a decade of participant observation, informal conversations, and interviews, this work analyses the relationships that these women establish during their migration and work paths, contributing to challenging hegemonic narratives about trafficking, its victims, and trafficking networks.

With the article “Protecting Protection Programs or Engaging with People? Conditional Inclusion and Evolving Relational Dynamics in Anti-Trafficking Programmes” by Michela Semperbon, we follow women within counter-trafficking programmes in Italy. Based on dozens of interviews carried out between 2019 and 2021 with practitioners and beneficiaries of the N.A.Ve counter-trafficking programme, this article discusses the reproduction of structural violence on Nigerian women as victims of trafficking, while also emphasising the agency of these women in their relationships with the agents who populate the counter-trafficking.

The article “Anti-Trafficking Professionals and Institutionalized Violence in Spain: An Exploratory Study” by Mara Clemente, Alba Sierra-Rodríguez, and David Cairns aims to contribute to the critical scholarship on the link between trafficking, counter-trafficking, and violence, primarily focusing on the Spanish context. Drawing on interviews collected between 2018 and 2020 with professionals employed in protection programmes of counter-trafficking NGOs of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, the article shows that the neoliberal ethos that pervades counter-trafficking contributes to the institutionalization of violence within the counter-trafficking apparatuses involving not only the people who are being assisted as trafficking victims, but also some anti-trafficking professionals. In contrast to the calls from those who focus on allocating more financial resources to counter-trafficking, the article emphasises the importance of paying closer attention to labour conditions as the starting point of any counter-trafficking effort.

I would like to thank all the authors of the articles contained within this Special Issue for their contributions. In some cases, dialogue was made possible by the activities carried out within the Globalization, Illicit Trade, Sustainability and Security (GLITSS) COST Action, to which I extend my thanks and which I hope will contribute to more critical approaches to trafficking. Last but not least, my thanks goes to the *Social Sciences* journal for its interest.

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

List of Contributions:

1. Acién González, Estefanía. 2024. Nigerian Migrant Women and Human Trafficking Narratives: Stereotypes, Stigma and Ethnographic Knowledge. *Social Sciences* 13: 207.
2. Boiro Hamadou and Jónína Einarisdóttir. 2024. Begging for Knowledge in Senegal: Conflicting Understandings and Interests of the Dominant Anti-Trafficking Approach and Quranic Education. *Social Sciences* 13: 288.
3. Clemente Mara, Alba Sierra-Rodríguez, and David Cairns. 2024. Anti-Trafficking Professionals and Institutionalized Violence in Spain: An Exploratory Study. *Social Sciences* 13: 321.
4. Ferčíková Konečná, Irena. 2024. Excluded but Fighting: Where Are the Voices of Sex Workers and Their Allies in EU Anti-Trafficking Policymaking? *Social Sciences* 13: 148.
5. Semprebon, Michela. 2024. Protecting Protection Programmes or Engaging with People? Conditional Inclusion and Evolving Relational Dynamics in Anti-Trafficking Programmes. *Social Sciences* 13: 218.

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