Bachelor Thesis in Peace and Development Studies

The victim's road to freedom.
Unmasking the crucial role of social mechanisms in rescuing human trafficking victims.

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Abstract

Throughout the centuries, human trafficking has been a crime on a global scale, whether it involves labor or sex trafficking. The complex theme has proven to be a dangerous subject to discuss, leading much information to end up in the shadows. Therefore, the objective of this study is to delve deeper into the topic of human trafficking in Latin America, particularly focusing on the social mechanisms required to help these victims escape human trafficking. There are millions of victims of human trafficking worldwide, but this does not necessarily mean that traffickers always hide them. Sometimes, they remain hidden in plain sight for others in society to witness (United Nations, 2023).

Furthermore, sexual exploitation is the predominant form of human trafficking, accounting for 79% of the cases. Women and girls are the most common victims, in addition to that children make up almost 20% of trafficking victims globally (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019). Many of these victims end up in situations like human trafficking in the hope of a better life. Traffickers exploit the dire situations these victims are in, involving them in their illegal business. Regardless, there are still people who manage to break free, whether they have done so on their own or with the help of a third party. Therefore, we have chosen to analyze 13 cases of human trafficking where the victim has successfully broken free to identify the social mechanisms required.

To accomplish this, we will conduct a desk study, utilizing a series of interviews and stories found on news and organizations' websites. Within our material, we will attempt to identify a phenomenon or recurring theme, providing an opportunity to conduct a more in-depth examination and analysis. To better comprehend how society perceives human trafficking and how social mechanisms play a vital role in combating it, we will utilize three selected theories, social action, decolonial theory, and decolonial feminist theory.
Keywords

Human rights, Latin America, Human trafficking, Victims, Social mechanisms, Violence, Development, Women

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1. Introduction

This paper will lead you through the spider web that is human trafficking. To understand the complexity of human trafficking, an explanation of some concepts will follow. Human trafficking happens when a person is being used or exploited for others' profit. This can happen through fraud, force, or deception. Most people caught in human trafficking are forced to stay, and the tools other people use to ensure this are often any type of violence such as sexual, physical, and mental. People getting trafficked can be both men and women, however, 7 out of 10 victims are girls and women. Therefore, we find it important to study the perspective of women in human trafficking (Novotney, 2023).

There are different types of trafficking, however, forced labor, and sexual trafficking, are the biggest. While many of the victims can be trafficked in both categories at the same time, there is an increase among women to be solely trafficked for sexual purposes (United Nations, 2023). Our focus for this study is on women victims from Latin America, which is a region that consists of the whole of South America, Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. The countries this thesis will focus on are Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru. The people of this area today share the history of having been colonized, and they also speak a Romance-type language. The countries also share a huge gross public debt of 51.5% of their GDP (Gross Domestic Product), due to previous colonization and events such as the pandemic, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America (Álvarez, 2023). Latin America is today counted as a part of the world with one of the highest numbers of victims of human trafficking (Salomon, 2022).

1.2 Justification for Research

In an attempt to reduce human trafficking, more non-governmental organizations are being created for the work of helping and decreasing
human trafficking. But there is still very much in this area of study that has not been researched yet. Together with the United Nations (UN), several Latin American countries have “signed a declaration and guidelines of action, expressing their commitment to strengthening regional cooperation on the identification and prosecution” (United Nations, 2017), of human trafficking and smuggling of migrants. Despite the UN mandating for new laws, the reportings on anti-human trafficking, and their effort, minimal change has been made. As a consequence of this, a significant loss of information and crucial data is being overlooked. Furthermore, many victims of human trafficking remain silent due to fear and reluctance to share their stories.

Therefore, there is a pressing need to address the censorship, such as the interference with freedom within media and the editorial independence, that is imposed by the countries in Latin America. The censorship concerns the issue that thoroughly examines how human trafficking has impacted women (Open Society Justice Initiative, 2008). By actively collecting information on this subject, we aim to contribute to a growing body of knowledge that can support future research in this area. As this theme deals with human rights, we find it relevant for peace and development studies. We believe that more research regarding the topic of how to get out of human trafficking will help increase and spread awareness both about the traps to get into human trafficking and also about how to get out of human trafficking.

2. Background

In 2000 the UN conducted a protocol (United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime) an addition that established the first global definition of "trafficking in persons." The goal is to prevent and combat this crime while promoting international cooperation. The Protocol emphasizes the issues linked to trafficking, which often results in the degrading and

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1 Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Spain and Uruguay.
perilous exploitation of those trafficked. Similar to the main Convention, the Protocol is anticipated to bring uniformity to the language, laws, and practices of countries dealing with these types of crimes (United Nations, 2000).

Human trafficking victims are trafficked for mainly two purposes, either for labor or sexual exploitation, thus sometimes these two get combined. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report on human trafficking reveals that sexual exploitation constitutes the most prevalent form, accounting for 79% of all reported cases. Additionally, in the 30% of countries reporting on traffickers' gender, it is noted that most victims are women and girls. Trafficking of women by other women is also prevalent in certain regions. Furthermore, the second most common form of human trafficking is forced labor with 18%, but this may be misrepresented due to less frequent detection and reporting compared to sexual exploitation. Globally, almost 20% of trafficking victims are children (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2019).

Today, there are millions of people victims of human trafficking, all over the world. People who get human trafficked are not just being hidden in the shadows but also in plain sight (United Nations, 2023). According to a report from the UNODC, the Global Report on Human Trafficking in Persons 2022, writes that 50% of human trafficking cases are being brought forward by families of the victims (United Nations, 2023).

Human trafficking is a pervasive issue that transcends demographic boundaries, with certain communities facing a higher risk. In Latin American countries, a significant number of people seek to escape the prevalent gang-related violence and government corruption in their homelands, often finding themselves trapped in different forms of brutality. The profound impact of gang violence and corruption has led to the exploitation of vulnerable young women. Recruiters leverage promises of safety, security, and an improved quality of life to lure victims into trafficking. In this
context, a trend emerges, where individuals fleeing one form of violence inadvertently become victims of human trafficking. In Latin America, the recruitment methods vary, with 34% of victims being lured through smuggling operations. Additionally, 29% of victims report falling prey to fake job offers, discovering the true nature of their work only after it is too late (Dressember, 2021).

Establishments, like hostess bars\(^2\) and cantinas\(^3\) often serve as fronts for illicit activities. Both labor and sex trafficking thrive in these venues, with exploitation occurring when employers use force, fraud, or coercion to control workers, leaving them with a perceived lack of alternative options. Reports reveal a significant gender disparity among cantina-related trafficking victims, with an overwhelming 96% being female, predominantly from Mexico or Latin America. Around 63% of victims were minors, underscoring traffickers' preference for recruiting young girls. This highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the specific vulnerabilities and patterns associated with the trafficking of predominantly female and underage victims (Dressember, 2021).

The challenge lies in the lack of reliable data and the need for improved cooperation between investigators and prosecutors. For instance, the UNODC's 2022 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons revealed a concerning 27% drop in convictions for trafficking in persons (TIP) in 2020 compared to the previous year (reliefweb, 2023)

3. Research Objective

Our research aims to understand how women escape human trafficking in Latin America through social mechanisms. The analysis, will focus on

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\(^2\) A hostess bar is a place where customers pay to enjoy the company and conversation of a hostess employed by the establishment.

\(^3\) Cantina is a type of bar/pub that is most common in Latin America, mainly Mexico. Cantinas often offer a more relaxed atmosphere, serving a wide range of beverages and sometimes offering live music or entertainment.
common traits and patterns among the victims and seek insights into their experiences. Most of the research we have been able to find is how you get caught in human trafficking, what human trafficking is, and how it affects society. Hopefully, our research will lead to knowledge that can be spread, especially on how to raise awareness on what social mechanisms are needed to break loose from human trafficking. We believe this information and knowledge could help the peace and development field in the long run. Exploring human trafficking through research offers insight and could help to understand its frequency, underlying risks, appropriate actions, and detection methods. Since there is a language barrier from Spanish to English, being able to spread the information regarding the subject in English could help the field with its understanding and give the field more attention.

Human trafficking, as a peace and development topic, emphasizes the violation of human rights. People are being coerced and manipulated into sexual or labor work and then forced to stay. In some cases, people get out and are willing to share their stories. We believe that the more stories being shared, the more knowledge regarding the subject will appear (Mulinari & Sandell, 1999), and the more everyone can work together on a way to stop human trafficking in the long run.

### 3.1 Research Questions

- What kind of social mechanisms are needed for the victims to escape human trafficking?
- How do social mechanisms work with human trafficking in Latin America?
- In what way are the social mechanisms affected by the knowledge that exists or does not exist? Does it affect the potential development of the work?
3.2 Potential Research Gaps

When it comes to conducting research on human trafficking in Latin America, many research gaps appear. While there is information available on human trafficking in general, there is a notable lack of research and literature regarding how women escape human trafficking in Latin America. Current research on human trafficking often misses the detailed social factors that make people vulnerable to trafficking and sustain exploitative practices. While existing studies focus on laws and immediate actions (Murphy & Lazzarino 2002), there is a gap in understanding the complex social mechanisms. Exploring these social aspects is vital for creating effective prevention and intervention strategies that tackle the root causes. Closing this research gap will give a better understanding of the social complexities of human trafficking, helping to develop more successful policies and actions to fight against this widespread issue.

4. Literature Review

4.1 The complexity of human trafficking

Human trafficking is a criminal activity that primarily affects women, and it remains a neglected issue with limited information. In addition, human trafficking is the third most widespread crime globally. It is often overlooked and challenging to gather accurate data. Despite challenges, increased attention on the security agenda has shed light on this illegal market, where control over human beings is central, resulting in exploitation and human rights violations. Studies highlight the interconnectedness of human trafficking, irregular migration, and border areas. While trafficking involves exploitation, irregular migration contributes to vulnerability, creating conditions for trafficking situations. National borders play a crucial role, serving as spaces marked by social disadvantages and vulnerabilities,
influencing the dynamics of human trafficking, and modifying the characteristics of border areas (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p. 117-118).

Human trafficking results from the recruitment of individuals whose vulnerable conditions allow them to be involved in a process of exploitation, whether it be sexual, labor-related, in the form of begging, or servitude, among others. Subsequently, there is a displacement from the recruitment location, and conditions are ensured for the viability of the activity, such as the demand for goods and/or services, depending on the type of exploitation. Moreover, victims are often retained through the use of violence and coercion, among other factors (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.119).

To simplify the complexity of human trafficking, one can identify three main levels. In simpler terms, the first level involves not moving victims between recruitment and exploitation. Usually, minors are either convinced by their parents or kidnapped, then kept through threats against themselves or their close ones. The process doesn't require many people to be involved, making it less specialized. The second complexity level involves the displacement of victims, isolating them from their immediate support networks like family and friends. This can occur within the same region or between different regions. Certain activities, such as agriculture, commerce, or mining, attract labor more intensely in specific areas. Vulnerable individuals, due to socioeconomic status and employment situation, are most likely to become targets for traffickers. This level is more complex, involving a greater number of specialized actors that retain victims through threats, blackmail, or violence (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.121-122).

The third level of human trafficking involves victims being displaced across one or more international borders, heightening their vulnerability by suspending certain citizenship rights. This intersection with the illicit trafficking of migrants complicates matters further, targeting men and women in irregular migration. They are promised better-paying jobs in a
different country, prompting their relocation under cramped and insecure conditions. Victims, once engaged in trafficking dynamics, may be moved between different exploitation centers in diverse regions. This complexity leverages migration to intensify vulnerability, with retention mechanisms including document confiscation and threats of reporting and deportation (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.122).

As we reviewed the literature for our thesis and searched for a suitable theory, we encountered multiple theories. It has been established that there is a lack of theoretical frameworks that are specified and specifically developed for studying and most importantly understanding human trafficking (Murphy & Lazzarino 2002, Williamson 2022). Therefore, scholars and researchers use theories from all fields such as criminology, feminist studies, and migration studies. Most of the literature analyzed has used some kind of postcolonial or decolonial theory, such as postcolonial theory, postcolonial feminist theory, decolonization theory, and decolonial feminist theory (Murphy & Lazzarino 2002, Williamson 2022). The texts suggest a common conclusion regarding theoretical frameworks: there is a consensus that, in the context of broader societal issues concerning women and women's rights, some form of decolonization is necessary (Valdiva 2020, p. 113).

4.2 Humiliation and violence

Over the past 30 years, global politics scholars have extensively examined conflict-related sexual violence, acknowledging its importance in global security, media, non-governmental organizations, and national policies. Research has covered victim testimonies, mapped wartime rape instances, and explored violence patterns, perpetrator motives, and the impact on victims, societies, and peacebuilding (Gray 2019, p. 197-198).

A common recurring aspect in the literature between sexual violence victims and human trafficking victims is how women are perceived in their villages
and societies. Women who have decided that they need and want to get out of human trafficking sometimes face the stigma that comes with divorces, failed marriages, and women who become single mothers (Gray 2019, Murphy & Lazzarino 2022). In the same way female victims of sexual violence may experience a perceived loss of honor and challenges in remarriage, impacting their social status, especially with pregnancy resulting from the violence. Similarly, in heteropatriarchal societies, male survivors of rape may be temporarily stripped of manhood, subordinating them (Gray 2019, p. 202-203).

There is not only the stigma regarding remarriages and single motherhood, but also the feeling the victims have in themselves regarding always being called victims and survivors. Their identity will then revolve around this, the feeling of always being labeled, and never escaping the stigma. Female victims/survivors are often perceived as "disgraced," having lost respect and reduced in value. Rape is seen as violence that transforms the subject of a "good/proper woman" into that of a disgraced woman. In comparison to women, male victims have shared that their experience of rape made them feel like they were "used as a woman" and stated it "reduced" them to the status of women. This reflects the belief in patriarchal assumptions that men usually have a higher social status than women, which they fear losing due to sexual violence. For some victims/survivors, labeling their experiences as torture instead of sexual violence provided a way to reconstruct themselves without facing the stigma associated with sexual violence (Gray 2019, p. 209-210 & Murphy & Lazzarino 2022).

4.3 The legal definition of human trafficking

Another aspect of equal importance pertains to the legal definition of human trafficking. While the UN defines it as a violation of human rights, questions arise regarding the progress made and the accountability of those responsible. In 2000 the Palermo Protocol was conducted and furthermore,
the UN made a shift in its legislation stating that human trafficking is not only a human rights issue, now it is also considered a criminal problem. The shift was made when they created the Trafficking Protocol, which is a larger part of the Convention against Transnational Organization Crime (Murphy & Lazzarino 2002, p. 1-5). Furthermore, transitional justice mechanisms are often adopted by national authorities and operate globally under International Human Rights Law (IHRL). IHRL has historically shown epistemological blindness to gender, reflecting androcentric perspectives. According to Gómez Correal, law developed without accounting for differences, and tends to favor masculine values, disadvantaging women (Gómez Correal 2023, p. 486-487). The transnational processes are also favored when it comes to the Indigenous groups since the transnational justice processes have increased their awareness of the Indigenous people (Valdivia 2020, p. 113).

During colonial times, Indigenous and enslaved women were dehumanized, and forced to allow their bodies to be exploited for labor and pleasure. Gender-based violence also affected women involved in leftist movements and armed groups. The Peruvian Truth Commission (CVR) overlooked the colonial legacy's influence on this violence. Female militants in Latin American countries face violence, including sexual violence, due to stereotypes linked to their rejection of traditional roles. Decolonial feminists differ on the origins of patriarchy, while communitarian feminists suggest patriarchy as a millennial system oppressing Indigenous women (Gómez Correal 2023, p. 497).

Human trafficking is often hard to define correctly, a theoretical framework is not yet developed, and it is often overlooked and challenging to gather accurate data. What multiple scholars have agreed upon, is the gap in the research gathering. The gap concerns women's tales of human trafficking and how they got out, and also the multiple gaps in how human trafficking should be handled.
5. Theoretical Framework

As our theoretical framework, we have chosen three theories to work with. As this type of research focuses on human trafficking is quite new, a theory solely regarding human trafficking has not yet been developed. We will, therefore, be using decolonial theory by Aníbal Quijano, decolonial feminist theory by Maria Lugones, and social action theory by Max Weber.

5.1 Decolonial Feminist Theory & Decolonial Theory

Decolonial feminist theory is a theory created by Maria Lugones, and it has its foundation in decolonial theory, which will be more thoroughly explained in the following text. Decolonial feminist theory has its primary focus on gender, especially on the Global South Indigenous women (Lugones, 2007, p.186–190). Lugones pushes on the importance of all knowledge and lived experiences being valued as equal, which creates a whole new framework within geopolitics and knowledge production. The focus on identity and gender during colonial times, can today also be applied in modern society in different ways. Such as the hierarchy between men and women, for example not being valued as equal, which was something that arose from colonization (Lugones, 2007, p.186–190).

Lugones also claims there is an indifference shown in everyday life, often by men (Lugones, 2007, p. 186). She means that the indifference being practiced is done through men who before were inferior to systemic violence are now the practitioners instead (Lugones, 2007, p. 187-189). This is something Lugones argues she has a hard time understanding, how someone who once was the oppressed now becomes the oppressor instead.

Both decolonial feminist theory and decolonial theory share a common goal, they want to break free from the Western concepts and the Western superiority, but decolonial feminist theory wants to put gender concepts as the primary focus. This is because colonization created a whole new gender
system, which did not previously exist in the colonized countries. The previous societies in many colonized countries did not have any gender systems, in the way they are functioning now (Lugones, 2007, p. 186). This was instead a process that took a long time and depreciated the colonized women (Lugones, 2007, p. 201).

Furthermore, the theory aims to create a new point of view on gender and women that is not normalized and standardized from a Western woman's point of view, which is also called white feminism. The general idea of feminism can not be applied to all women, even though the basis of feminism is the same. Therefore, the generalization can not be from just one type or group of women (Lugones, 2007, p. 187).

As mentioned previously, decolonial feminist theory emerges from decolonial theory, which arose during a movement from South America, and it has its origins in the dependency theory, with some roots in Marxism as well. Decolonial theory is an anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-colonial theory, created by Aníbal Quijano who produced the famous expression “The coloniality of power” (Lugones, 2007, p. 186). This means that coloniality is an encompassing phenomenon of all power, such as sexual, labor, and collective authority (Lugones, 2007, p. 189-191). These are the elements that create Eurocentric capitalist method of power (Lugones, 2007, p.189-190). Meaning that problems the global world is facing today, such as economic, political, or cultural, emerge from colonial times. These problems can be defined as economic instability due to debts, human rights violations, and ethical rivalries (Quijano, 2000, p. 215-232).

Decolonial theory also claims that all the issues and problems that emerge from these topics have a foundation in the epistemic violence that was done to the colonized countries (Quijano, 2000, 541). The systems of the world today are created to benefit the West and not the countries that once were colonized. The theory claims that the Western world has developed into the
great power it is today from colonialism, by using domination, discrimination, and exclusion (Quijano, 2000, 541-542).

The theory strongly criticizes the successes of Western societies and wants the colonial countries to break free from the Eurocentric hierarchies, to make the West less superior in both their societies and also in their cultural aspects (Quijano, 2000, p. 542-545). Furthermore, the theory claims that the systems of racism, patriarchy, and economic extraction are founded due to colonization and that it is crucial to remember that to truly understand the coloniality of power. It is necessary to remember that almost all paid work previously was reserved for white Europeans (Lugones, 2007, p. 191).

If we now compare the theories, it is noticeable that decolonial and decolonial feminist theory, share the same foundation as mentioned before. However, as for the women, there is an extra layer of difficulty explained, it is not only the social and economic problems they are coping with, they are also dealing with the problems of gender and hierarchy, and the women were already from the beginning seen as less worthy. Decolonial feminist theory, therefore, creates a space where lived experiences and voices can be raised and where women are not marginalized by Western women and the theory challenges the structures of societies where the male/masculine, and the white/Western are dominating (Manning, 2021).

5.2 Social Action Theory

Weber's method for explaining social actions centers on rational interpretation. This involves reconstructing a meaningful context to understand why individuals act as they do. Actions are explained by considering the goals and methods involved, along with the significance these actions hold for the person. These meanings are shaped by socially and culturally determined motives for action (Ekström 1992, p. 112).
Weber's ideas on action and social action are intriguing not just for general theory but also for cultural sociology, an area that has overlooked the theoretical insights provided (Malczewski 2014, p. 524). He emphasizes the study of social action's interpretive understanding, aiming for a causal explanation of its course and outcomes. According to Weber, social action involves an individual giving subjective meaning to their behavior, considering others' actions, and making it 'social' in orientation. Social action involves behavior with subject meaning, influenced by or connected to other's actions, guiding its direction (Malczewski 2014, p. 529).

In social action, what matters is that an actor's meaningful behavior is linked to the behavior of others. This means that in social action, people use symbols to create realities and relationships. The person's actions show the conditions and reasons behind their behavior. For social sciences, it is important to grasp how symbols represent consciousness, including our basic understanding of reality and rules of behavior. The concept of social action involves theoretical ideas or analytical units based on fundamental instances of action. Weber's idealism is mainly about recognizing behaviors with symbolic meaning (Malczewski 2014, p. 530).

The concept of “will” relates to how much thought and emotional commitment a person shows to their meaningful social actions. Meaningful social actions depend on individuals realizing that their deeds should go beyond their own existence, making them responsible for the well-being of future generations. Weber believed that individuals cultivate a will to act, valuing responsible social action as the highest expression of personal ethics and self-development (Sahni 2001, p. 422-424). Weber suggests that self-awareness does not come from observation but from action. To know oneself, one must fulfill their duties. By doing your daily tasks, you discover what you are capable of, revealing your true self (Sahni 2001, p. 431).
5.3 Operationalization of theories

Since this study focuses on women victims of human trafficking in Latin America, it aims to explore commonalities among these women, such as their demographic profiles and shared experiences. What type of social mechanisms are needed in order to escape human trafficking? To have the best possibility of answering these questions, decolonial theory, decolonial feminist theory, and social action theory will be the theoretical framework in the analysis. Decolonial and social action theory will help guide the reader to understand how society is looking at human trafficking and the victims of it. How the social mechanisms can to some extent be explained and how they are used in this study. Decolonial feminist theory gives a somewhat better understanding of the women in this study, and how affected and vulnerable gender is in human trafficking cases.

6. Methodological Framework

This section of the thesis will outline the research structure, going in-depth and describing the chosen method, a qualitative desk study with a thematic analysis. Furthermore, it describes how the thesis is going to conduct our analysis and make use of the analytical method, describe the data collection process, highlight limitations, and implement a reflection of ethics.

6.1 Qualitative Desk Study

Since this study aims to analyze multiple human trafficking survivor stories, the method of this thesis will make use of a qualitative desk study. The methodology aims to gain a thorough understanding of specific topics. Qualitative research is interpretive and aims to understand the social world by examining how participants perceive it. It takes a constructionist view, seeing social properties as outcomes of interactions among individuals (Bryman 2021, p.350).
By looking at social life as a process, exploring how events and patterns unfold over time, it allows us to observe the development of events and the interconnection of elements within a social system, such as values, beliefs, behaviors, or group connections. These findings help us understand social life as a series of interconnected events and elements (Bryman 2021, p.355). In order to study the social mechanism needed to escape human trafficking, this methodology will further be used through a desk study, since we are not going to go out on the field and examine a specific case nor conduct the interviews ourselves.

### 6.2 Thematic analysis

When it comes to thematic analysis, there are numerous approaches available, which in turn can make it difficult to recognize what actually forms a theme. However, one can describe a theme as an analyst-identified category of interest that most likely is related to the research focus and questions. This in turn leads to codes found in field notes or transcripts, and in certain cases, researchers may even use both transcripts and field notes (Bryman 2021, p. 537). Braun and Clarke's method has recently grown in popularity, this is because of its clear theoretical and methodological transparency. Additionally, this method works well for this form of research because it is flexible with data changes and what the researcher chooses to focus on. This particular method follows a six-stage process which consists of familiarization, initial coding, identifying themes, rewiring themes, defining themes, and evidencing themes. This means that one must primarily collect material from interviews, and examine documents or other forms of material (Bryman 2021, p. 538).

After gathering materials, the next step is coding. In this phase, you seek patterns or common themes among the collected materials. Once identified, you can then remove excess codes (Bryman 2021, p. 537-538). “The analyst further develops themes by combining them into high-order constructs…” (Bryman 2021, p. 538). Also, identifying and searching sub-themes to add
depth to their analysis. From these established themes, it is now possible to create a narrative that describes their properties and how they might be related, finishing off the method by linking the theme to literature (Bryman 2021, p. 538). While other approaches to thematic analysis exist, we believe that Braun and Clarke's method will be the most beneficial and produce the optimal results for our study.

The six-stage process has been done accordingly. To familiarize us with the data, by going through the videos and documents multiple times, making light remarks and comments. Continuing with the coding, we started to look over the notes more thoroughly, to make sure there was the same information from all the material, such as country, age, what type of trafficking, and how they got out. While in this process, we started to identify some similar themes and could, therefore, start with the process of rewiring the themes. This led to the stage of defining the themes, such as police enforcement, social mechanisms, labor and sexual trafficking, etc. And finally, the stage of proving the evidence could be done. It can now be seen what type of theories are needed and what literature to use in order to make a thorough analysis.

6.3 Coding

As mentioned earlier in the section on thematic analysis, coding is a crucial part of analyzing qualitative data. It serves as the starting point for most forms of qualitative analysis. The coding process involves making notes alongside the data and refining these into codes. It is best to start coding while collecting data to gain a detailed understanding and assist with theoretical sampling. The main steps in coding qualitative data include familiarizing yourself with the collected data. Begin by reading through your initial data without taking notes, then write down general notes.

As a second step, re-read the data, write memos about significant remarks, and make as many as possible to create themes. Step three involves reviewing codes, and if you are using multiple words to describe the same
thing, try to limit the amount. Moreover, do codes relate to existing literature, and reflect over the relevance of these relations. Lastly, reflect if there are connections between codes. The fourth step allows you to consider more general theoretical ideas in relation to codes and data, outlining connections, and developing hypotheses. Go back to the data to confirm these linkages. Coding helps make sense of data and reduce its volume, but interpretation of findings is crucial once coding is complete (Bryman 2021, p. 533-535).

In order to proceed with the coding process, we started by watching and identifying our data, which we did without taking any notes of any kind. Furthermore, we watched and read our data again and simultaneously took notes about the individual cases, but once more nothing specific was written down. This process was repeated with one change every time, which was that we started to write memos about significant remarks relating to human trafficking. We finalized the coding process by outlining connections between the codes that showed a clear theme of country, age, what type of trafficking, and the escape process.

6.4 Collection of data

The aim of this study is to explore and identify the social mechanisms crucial for individuals to escape human trafficking. To conduct this research, we collected videos and one document of survivor narratives. Obtained from various sources, including official organizations like the UN, news outlets, and other relevant documents. These materials will provide insights into survivors' experiences and shed light on the factors that enabled them to break free from human trafficking.

Utilizing the gathered data, our objective is to pinpoint a theme for in-depth analysis. The process of acquiring this data necessitates adaptability in exploring various sources. Using keywords such as "human trafficking" and "survivors" enabled us to discover the most pertinent information, and remain discerning about the sources to ensure the reliability of the obtained
data. The gathered testimonies videos are mainly in Spanish, and the documents and other relevant text data are mainly in English. The Spanish data has been translated by the authors of this thesis.

A table of collected data

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6.5 Limitations

One of the limitations encountered is that the little information found is not written in English, it is written mainly in Spanish, and this creates a language barrier. While this is not a limitation for the authors of this thesis, it could potentially increase the chances of misunderstanding. Furthermore, when examining human trafficking in Latin America, significant challenges are not just the limitations revolving around language and literature. The issue also extends to the difficulty in accessing accurate reporting. Neither governments nor past or current victims of human trafficking openly disclose all the information. Unfortunately, the precise number of victims remains uncertain, potentially due to fear or corruption. This lack of transparency hinders our ability to obtain accurate research data (National Institute of Justice, 2020).

6.6 Ethical reflection

When writing about human trafficking, it is crucial to approach the subject with careful attention to ethical considerations. Especially since we will be using real stories of human trafficking victims, it is crucial to be ethical. By further protecting the privacy of the survivors and anonymity to prevent potential harm to the victims. This will be done by changing the names of all the victims to maintain their anonymity. Furthermore, it is crucial to avoid sensationalism and prioritize facts over emotional exploitation. Since we are going to collect our material from different online forums, we have to be careful with the legitimacy of these stories. Ultimately, to raise awareness, contributing to positive change while respecting the dignity and well-being of survivors.

7. Presentation of Findings and Analysis

In order to make the presentation of the findings easier, the data have been divided into subcategories, wherein in each subcategory it is explained what the data is about.
7.1 The victim and trafficker

In the following text, there will be a presentation of common traits of whom the victims are and who the traffickers are. We will follow the cases of Fiona, Elsa, Any, Bella, Carolina, Daniella, Kiara, Gina, and Ida who all have shared their human trafficking stories.

7.1.1 Who is the victim?

In this study, the focus is on women and to make it easier to understand who the women are, common traits and patterns that have been found will be discussed and analyzed. Since the study has its focus on Latin America, all the women are from different countries from Latin America such as Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Honduras, Mexico, and Peru.

From the data collected, the women who are sharing their stories are now between the ages of 16 up to their 30ies. Nevertheless, the women were much younger once they first got dragged into human trafficking. An example of this is a woman named Fiona, who was 12 when she was forced into human trafficking (CNN, 2020). Furthermore, Elsa was 13 when she was forced into human trafficking, and a woman named Amy was 14 when she was forced into human trafficking (RTVC Noticias, 2021, Al Jazeera English, 2013). However, it is not just when you are underage that you are a possible victim, this can also happen when you get older, as it did for a woman named Gina, who was forced into human trafficking at the age of 21 (CNN en Español, 2023).

There is a noticeable pattern regarding the age, that it is mostly young girls/women who get targeted. From most of the collected data, the pattern that emerges is that the girls/women are around 12 to 15 years old. In an interview performed by Tim Ballard, a previous homeland security agent who specifically now works with human trafficking. Claims that there are a large number of organized groups that target young kids in Colombia, 9 to 10 years old, which the traffickers mean are ready to have sex when they
become 11 years old. One method the traffickers use to lure young kids is by saying that they are a modeling agency (CBS Evening News, 2014).

Another pattern or a common trait found among these young girls as to why they end up in human trafficking, and why they become trafficked, is often the longing for a new, better life. They get promised numerous things. A lot of these girls/women come from a rough background. One woman who specifically spoke up about her past before she became a victim of human trafficking, is Fiona, who at the age of 5 was sexually abused for the first time (CNN, 2020). She comes from a family with lots of abuse, where they used to beat her and use her for sexual purposes. This was not a safe and loving environment and when the opportunity emerged to get another, better life she took it. She later met a boy on the street who became her friend and promised her a life far away from the abuse and violence, and she became very happy. In the first months, nothing bad happened, but after a while, they told her she needed to start paying for the expenses and her nightmare of human trafficking started (CNN, 2020).

A girl named Amy, who was 15 years old, became friends with an older woman named Sofía who was 35 years old. Amy was making a living by selling fruit on the side of the road, and after a while Sofía told her she could give her a much better job and Amy could get a much better life. On the first day, she got drugged and raped and after that, she was forced to work in different restaurants and strip clubs without ever receiving her payment, it was always Sofía who came and collected the payment (UNODC, 2009).

The promise of a better life did not only happen to Amy and Fiona, this is also why Daniella, Kiara, and Ida got trafficked (RTVC Noticias, 2021, CHS Alternativo, 2012, Ministerio de Justicia y DDHH, 2015). These three women were promised by their “friends” that they would receive a better job which would give them a better life.
Although, as mentioned previously, there are also older women who get caught in human trafficking, one example is Gina, who was 21 years old. Her trafficker threatened to kill and hurt her family if she did not start to work as a prostitute for her traffickers (CNN en Español, 2023). Since she was too scared to do anything else, she started working for them, and they moved her and a few other women around all the time to make sure they could not get out.

Carolina is another woman who was sexually human trafficked, and before she got trafficked she had a husband who used to beat her and treat her badly (Foundation, T.R, 2020). She divorced him and after that found a nice man who changed her world, Diego. It was beautiful for the first months until he dropped her off at a brothel and told her to work, she was too scared to lose his love so she was too blind to understand what he truly was, her pimp.

Out of these women, there are common patterns. All of them wanted a change for a better life. Which made some of them trust the wrong persons and all of them got betrayed. A common trait is that most of the women had a poor living situation, both in the family aspect and also in the financial aspect, which made them easy targets for the traffickers.

7.1.1.1 Analysis: Who is the victim?

In the pursuit of a better life, people sometimes face difficult choices, which can lead them to become involved or trapped in human trafficking. Social action theory explains these decisions, not as random, instead they stem from the complex interplay between personal goals and external pressures. Young children and women caught in human trafficking share one thing in common: the pursuit of a better future, whether it is to secure income for themselves or their families. The hope to achieve a better life makes it easier for the trafficker to build a closer relationship (Ekström 1992, p. 112).
This trust, built by the trafficker, leads the victim to make a seemingly simple conscious act rooted in how normal it is in society to rely on one's "friends" instead of being skeptical and saying no to an "opportunity" presented. Seeing traffickers as friends and consciously saying yes whilst also unknowingly accepting the reality that will eventually surface when it is too late. Understanding these actions requires examining the motives behind them. People act based on culturally and socially shaped meanings. To understand why someone chooses a certain path, we must consider their goals and the significance these actions have for them. Essentially, the journey towards a better life involves navigating the complexity of personal aspirations within the broader context of societal influences (Ekström 1992, p. 112).

This does not imply that the victims are to blame for finding themselves in these situations. Rather, traffickers tend to target individuals facing vulnerability, as echoed in the accounts of countless women and children above. Many of these victims come from challenging circumstances marked by financial struggles, making it difficult for them to overcome their hardships. Driven by the hope for a better life, these individuals, vulnerable due to their circumstances, unwittingly become ensnared in various forms of exploitation (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.119).

Moreover, this dynamic may clarify why these victims remain trapped for extended periods. The use of violence or coercion, alongside other factors, plays a role in the retention of victims. The fear instilled by traffickers makes it increasingly harder for victims to break free, as they are apprehensive that the repercussions might surpass the struggles they currently endure. It's essential to recognize that the root of this issue lies in the exploitation of the vulnerability, emphasizing the need for comprehensive efforts to address the socio-economic conditions that contribute to the susceptibility of individuals to trafficking (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.119).
As mentioned in the findings, the women often have common traits or share similar life stories, such as a bad economic situation and a bad social situation, such as having no family, a violent family, or a family who does not care. According to the theories of decolonial and decolonial feminist theory by Quijano and Lugones, these reasons have their foundation in colonization. The Eurocentric capitalist method of power is having the authority and the power over sexual and labor phenomena (Lugones, 2007, p. 189-191). Since the women did not have a good economic living situation they easily fell victim to human trafficking, as mentioned above they searched for something more. This phenomenon, as Quijano and Lugones argue, is rooted in colonization and manifests in the unequal treatment of women.

Some of the reasons for imbalances in a society can be explained by patriarchal structures, economic inequalities, and less awareness of a person's rights. Since many societies in countries that have high economic inequality, do not have the best welfare system, it becomes a task for the women to save themselves economically. This is also shown in the fact that so many women are being missed by society or looked upon with disgust by other citizens. The vulnerable position the women end up in as a consequence of not having any money is something Dammer-Guardia mentions is what makes them a potential target for human trafficking (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.119).

Furthermore, during colonization, enslaved and Indigenous women were dehumanized in ways such as they were forced to exploit their bodies for both sexual and labor purposes (Gómez Correal 2023, p. 497). This shows how gender is not treated equally. Lugones mentions in decolonization feminist theory, that the gender system was not something that existed in the countries before colonization (Lugones, 2007, p. 186). The gender system that came during the colonization time is, however, something that still exists today, and it is not doing women any good. They are looked less upon and
exposed to more dangers, such as human trafficking. Hence, we can see from the research findings.

7.1.2 Who is the trafficker?

As mentioned in 7.1.1, we see that many of the women are desperate for change and opportunities. This is something that does not go unnoticed by the people on the lookout for new victims, the traffickers. Our collected data shows a few common traits and patterns that we will be going through below.

A common pattern that appears in many of the survivors' stories, for example, Carolina, and Fiona, is that they thought they were taken care of (Foundation, T.R, 2020, CNN, 2020). As for Carolina, she fell in love with a charming and wonderful man, who was the best to her and changed her world for the better, until the day that he did not anymore. As for Fiona, she trusted the boy she had befriended on the street who would give her a safe place from her abusive family, and for the first months it was good, she was treated well until the day came when she needed to pay for her expenses. In the case of these two women, they were blinded by what was to come, and it took time before they realized it. Thus, this shows us one kind of trafficker, the sweet boyfriend and the sweet friend.

As for the cases of Bella, Ida, and Daniella who trusted a “friend” who would give them a better job (Al Jazeera English, 2013, Ministerio de Justicia y DDHH, 2015, RTVC Noticias, 2021). However, they did not know this job would be that they would be human trafficked, sold for sex, and working for money that other people would collect. The friend that they trusted lured them. In these cases, the traffickers are individuals who are regarded as acquaintances, perhaps not their closest friends, but still people known well enough for the victims to believe they harbor no ill intentions.

Furthermore, there is the case of Gina, who was forced by violence into trafficking (CNN en Español, 2023). She was not tricked by a friend or
promised something better. She was targeted and forced by violence by the traffickers, they threatened her that they would hurt her and her family if she did not work for them. Overall, there is a distinct pattern that shows that most of the traffickers are boyfriends/partners/friends, and there is also a common pattern that shows most of the traffickers want to get to know the victims and make sure that they trust them enough to come “willingly”.

7.1.2.2 Analysis: Who is the trafficker?

As previously mentioned, the complexity of human trafficking can be classified into three main levels. However, in the available data, one can only pinpoint two types, specifically corresponding to level one and level two. It is worth noting that level three predominantly revolves around the intersection of human trafficking and migration. While the data may not encompass the full spectrum, understanding the nuances of these identified levels provides valuable insights into the complex nature of human trafficking. Despite the limitations in the available information, this categorization contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the various dimensions within human trafficking. A key theme is the deception of victims, where traffickers exploit their trust, whether by posing as friends or taking advantage of socioeconomic vulnerabilities (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.121-122).

As the example of Carolina and Fiona, trusting individuals who initially seemed caring, experienced deception by traffickers. Carolina's charming partner turned harmful, and Fiona's street friend changed when she could not pay for her expenses. Both were initially unaware, highlighting a pattern of traffickers posing as sweet boyfriends or friends, exploiting trust for nefarious purposes (Foundation, T.R, 2020, CNN, 2020).

Victims, seeking support or better opportunities, unknowingly fall into the traps set by traffickers. In the same way, Bella, Ida, and Daniella trusted a
"friend" for a promised job but were unaware that it involved human trafficking, sex exploitation, and earning money for others, the trusted friend deceived them (Al Jazeera English, 2013, Ministerio de Justicia y DDHH, 2015, RTVC Noticias, 2021). The common thread is the manipulation of trust, whether through the guise of a caring partner or a promised job improvement. Traffickers use a range of tactics, including deceit, threats, and violence, to achieve their harmful goals. Recognizing these shared elements is crucial in understanding the widespread nature of trafficking and advocating for measures to combat this harmful crime (Dammert-Guardia 2020, p.121-122).

Analyzing these cases through Weber's method of explaining social actions, the focus is on rational interpretation. It is crucial to reconstruct the context to grasp why traffickers behave as they do. When evaluating their actions' goals, methods, and significance, it is important to recognize that meanings are shaped by socially and culturally influenced motives. As mentioned earlier, a clear pattern emerges: traffickers frequently pose as boyfriends, partners, or friends (Ekström 1992, p. 112).

By building a friendship and establishing trust with the victim allows the traffickers to exploit the social actions performed by the victim by mimicking them. Adopting a persona that aligns with all social norms and actions expected by society, the traffickers appear normal and trustworthy to those around them. These traffickers work hard to create a strong foundation to operate from, whether it be by being the best boyfriend ever, creating an emotional bond with the victim, or being an understanding friend who listens and offers assistance to the victim. They strategically strive to gain the trust of the victims to exploit them willingly (Ekström 1992, p. 112).

Looking at this text from the perspective of traffickers who misuse social actions for their harmful intentions, Weber's idea of deep thinking and emotional commitment takes a different turn. While Weber encourages
qualities for positive contributions to society, traffickers use similar tactics deceitfully. These traffickers exploit social actions by faking emotional connections and creating a false sense of responsibility to gain victims' trust. This goes against Weber's belief in ethical behavior and intentional efforts for the betterment of society. The values lie in personal ethics and self-development in social actions, but traffickers twist these principles for harmful purposes. Instead of contributing positively, they use trust and emotions to cause harm. This shows how individuals can misuse responsible social actions for their own negative goals. While Weber encourages positive contributions, traffickers reveal the dark side of manipulating social interactions for personal gain, harming others in the process (Sahni 2001, p. 422-424).

7.1.3 Labor and Sexual Trafficking

While going through these survivor's cases, we find a pattern that most of the victims are exploited for sexual services. Some, however, might be exploited for solely labor purposes and some for both labor and sexual purposes. From the collected data, the pattern shows, that there are a lot of the victims who sought help, and they receive it from both the police, law enforcement, or human rights organizations (UNODC, 2009, Ministerio de Justicia y DDHH, 2015). It also shows that the victims are both labor and sexual trafficked.

Nevertheless, another pattern emerged, it is hidden but noticeable. It showed that women who had sought help from the police and law enforcement and got turned down were women who had been solely sex trafficked. It can be that the data collection is not wide enough, but this is still something that showed. There is also, in the case of Bella, an interview with Rosi Orozco, who is the president of United Against Trafficking, where she claims that policemen are often buyers of the girls being trafficked (Al Jazeera English,
Perhaps the findings are a bit small, but it does show that there are different types of trafficking and that it gets treated differently by societies.

7.1.3.3 Analysis: Labor and Sexual Trafficking

This type of indifference towards the victims is something that we can relate Lugones decolonial feminist theory to. She mentions there is a noticeable indifference shown by mostly men, who previously have been inferior to systemic violence and when women in an extremely vulnerable situation seek help and get refused the indifference is highly noticeable. This is also a statement made of epistemological blindness to gender, and this just proves Lugone's indifference point even more (Gómez Correal 2023, p. 486-487).

Furthermore, another issue mentioned previously in the study is the stigma and the fear of what the victims might lose when they decide to try and escape human trafficking (Gray 2019, Murphy & Lazzarino 2022). If they succeed, they are often enough looked upon as just the “rape” victim, or they are not as accepted in society if they for example are single mothers and so forth. When the women then decide to seek help and get refused this spurs the indifference and the imbalances even more and the women get marginalized even further (Gray 2019, Lugones, 2007, p. 187-189, Murphy & Lazzarino 2022).

The pattern found in the findings is small, and the collection of data is not wide enough. But it has been shown that new laws that are being developed tend to favor the masculine and this automatically becomes a disadvantage to women in these types of cases (Gómez Correal 2023, p. 486-487). This is not the type of forward development that will benefit the victims of human trafficking.
7.2 Who Saves the Victim

The gathered data revealed a distinct pattern among the victims, highlighting a notable division. Although each narrative preserves its uniqueness, two relevant themes emerged. Some recounted stories of being rescued by someone else, while others shared accounts of their own resilience in breaking free from the clutches of human trafficking.

7.2.1 Who are the heroes?

In the context of aiding victims in escaping human trafficking, various individuals play roles in assisting them, irrespective of whether the trafficking is related to sex or labor. Support can be sought from third parties, indicating a diversity of saviors in these situations, as evidenced by the data we have collected. In this part, five unique stories will be presented detailing the various forms of help each individual received. Following we delve into the experiences of Amy, Gina, Ida, and Bella, gaining insight into the social mechanisms at play. Additionally, follow Special Agent Tim Ballard, who dedicates his efforts to rescuing children from trafficking, providing a broader perspective on the societal dynamics involved.

As mentioned earlier, there are different people who can get involved and rescue these victims, but in Ida and her husband's case, it was their neighbor who took the first step to help them. After months of labor exploitation, they spoke to the neighbor who recommended contacting 145, a number that provides detection and complaint services in Argentina. This service further assisted them in breaking free from their traffickers. However, even when they were about to get help, Ida recounts how scared she was to seek assistance because they did not know their rights. Therefore, they believed that during the raid, instead of helping them, the authorities would arrest them (Ministerio de Justicia y DDHH, 2015).
Sometimes it is a matter of chance or just pure luck, as in the case of 15-year-old Amy. Her “… salvation finally came when, one night, her uncle happened to visit the dancing parlor.” (UNODC, 2009). It was a coincidence that saved her when she was recognized in the restaurant where she was being labored and sex trafficked. By recognizing her, the uncle was able to alert her parents, who subsequently contacted a human rights association that helped Amy break free from her trafficker (UNODC, 2009).

In the same way that being saved by someone close is possible, strangers in one's community can also be rescuers. This occurred to Bella from Mexico, who was saved from a prostitution ring by a community leader (Al Jazeera English, 2013). In some cases, heavier forces are required to rescue victims, and this may involve police strength in various forms. When it comes to the case of Gina from Honduras, we can observe this type of social mechanism. After 11 years of being trapped in sex trafficking, an opportunity arose for her to break free. “In a police operation in the downtown area where the woman, who is now 33 years old, was located, she managed to escape from those who had her detained.” (CNN en Español, 2023).

The difference between a civilian rescuing trafficked individuals and a police operation lies in complexity and scale. In undercover agent Tim Ballard's case, he collaborated with Colombian authorities based on an anonymous tip. Through a lengthy operation involving multiple people, a plan was executed to save a group of trafficked children. They spent months planning, rented a house rigged with cameras, coordinated with Colombian authorities, and negotiated with traffickers. When 54 kids arrived at what was called a sex party, 25 Colombian special operatives intervened, arresting 5 suspects, all charged with child trafficking (CBS Evening News, 2014).

7.2.1.1 Analysis: Who are the heroes?

As mentioned in previous literature, transitional justice mechanisms, globally adopted and often overseen by national authorities, face a notable challenge
rooted in historical blind spots, particularly regarding gender. International human rights law (IHRL) has, unfortunately, exhibited an epistemological blindness to gender differences, reflecting a bias that tends to favor masculine values. This inherent gender bias proves to be a significant obstacle in the pursuit of justice (Gómez Correal 2023, p. 486-487).

Ida, facing months of labor exploitation, sought help by contacting 145, a service for detection and complaints, based on a neighbor's advice. Despite seeking assistance, they felt scared due to not knowing their rights, fearing authorities might arrest them instead of helping during a possible intervention. Ida's fear, stemming from her lack of awareness about her rights, may also be influenced by her gender (Lugones, 2007, p.186–190). She is employed by a man who exploits her for labor, and the likelihood that he, being a man, may escape justice mechanisms adds to her apprehension.

In this scenario, it is probable that the trafficker will evade consequences, leaving the woman, in this case, to face potential outcomes, possibly including imprisonment (Ministerio de Justicia y DDHH, 2015). The fear and uncertainty highlight the need to fill the knowledge gap. This ensures that justice systems not only deal with exploitation and trafficking cases but also help and support victims in seeking justice (Gómez Correal 2023, p. 486-487).

Hence, having transparent social mechanisms is crucial for making information of this nature available to everyone. However, the role of social mechanisms extends beyond this. The survivors of human trafficking Ida, Amy, Bella, and Gina highlight diverse rescue scenarios. These rescues involve a supportive neighbor (Ida), a chance encounter with an uncle (Amy), the intervention of a community leader (Bella), and liberation through a police operation (Gina). This text underscores the multifaceted nature of rescue efforts, involving compassion, coincidence, community support, and law enforcement.
The connection between these stories and Weber's idea of "will" is about acknowledging responsible actions for the well-being of everyone. This reflects a broader sense of responsibility within society. To act in a certain way to help people caught in these circumstances. The survivors' stories show people that in this case become social mechanisms taking deliberate and caring actions to address human trafficking, aligning with the idea that our actions should go beyond self-interest and consider the future well-being of others. In simple terms, it's about individuals actively helping each other and contributing to a better society (Sahni 2001, p. 422-424).

Furthermore, the difference between civilian and police rescues lies in complexity. Undercover agent Tim Ballard's collaboration with Colombian authorities demonstrates extensive planning for large-scale operations. Initially, an anonymous person took significant social action by sharing crucial information with Colombian authorities, a choice that could save lives but also posed a personal risk. This conscious decision demonstrates the individual's commitment to making a positive impact despite potential dangers. In acting towards the common goal of saving these children, all of the actors are unanimously acting on social action. In their social actions, attribute subjective meanings to their behavior. These meanings are shaped by considering others' actions, which in this case could be the organizations or other actors around influencing all taking action in this case. Their interrelationship guides the direction of their actions based on a shared social context and understanding (Malczewski 2014, p. 529).

7.2.2 The Escape

Not everyone is fortunate enough to be rescued, and some have to take matters into their own hands. Moving forward, we will follow some women who saw an opportunity and managed to break free entirely on their own. This does not mean that these women did not attempt to seek help from others, but this will be described further in the upcoming text where we will
follow the cases of six different women: Helena, Fiona, Julie, Carolina, Kiara, and Daniella. To begin, let us take a closer look at Helena's case from Argentina where, after a long period, she successfully liberated herself from her traffickers. One day, when her traffickers were sleeping, she seized the opportunity to steal a couple of pills they usually used to sedate her. As she was the one who typically prepared their meals, she took these tablets and placed them in the food. She waited for several hours, pretending to be asleep until they were all sound asleep, and then she took the opportunity to escape. It was four in the morning when Helena managed to sneak away by jumping out of the house window and landing on an anthill (La Gaceta, 2012). She recounts that evening:

"I started to run, tried to run as far as I could, and well, I spent that night on the street. Later, I went to see some friends, and they gave me a place to stay." (La Gaceta, 2012).

She also recounts how throughout the entire night, she was filled with fear, a fear that her traffickers would find her (La Gaceta, 2012). Similar to Helena, Julie from Colombia managed to escape from her traffickers. After enduring difficult days, she succeeded in escaping one day. One night, along with some other victims, she made the decision to break free by jumping out of a window and running away (Noticias RCN, 2021). Sometimes, extra strength is needed to muster the courage to take the first step towards freedom. This can involve a third party providing inner strength. This can be observed in the case of Fiona from Mexico, who has now been free for twelve years. She recounts how she was sold on the streets, and no one approached to help (CNN, 2020).

"Why are people so cold? And why do we normalize this issue? I say this because many people saw me in a street area, many covered their eyes, many judged me, threw water at me." (CNN, 2020).
Consequently, she decided to take matters into her own hands, finding strength within herself for her daughter. Together with three other individuals, she managed to escape from her trafficker (CNN, 2020). Furthermore, in the case of Carolina from Mexico, she explains her blindness to her own situation. She understood that her trafficker was in the wrong, but she was in love. One day, “Somehow, my survival instinct kicked in”. She managed to walk out of the door and started running, she ran to the streets and screamed for help. And in this way, she finally managed to break free and open her eyes to her reality (Foundation, T.R, 2020). While Carolina managed to get help after her escape, not everyone is as lucky.

Daniella from Colombia has a slightly different story, as she did manage to break free in the end, but not without some failures before. When she was 15 years old and labored trafficked, a security man tried to rescue her, but it backfired, and she got trapped by sex traffickers where she remained for 15 years until she finally found the strength to break free. During this period, she had a child who, just like her, fell victim to violence. This was the last straw for her and gave her the strength and courage she needed to break free. Just like Julie, she tried to seek further help after her escape, by reporting the incident. Unfortunately, it led nowhere as the police did not take this case seriously (RTVC Noticias, 2021).

This is a recurring problem, where the police themselves choose to look the other way instead of helping these victims. In a case from Peru, Kiara recounts experiencing something similar. When she managed to break free after two years, she did so without assistance from the police or those around her. This is not to say that she did not search for help. She shared her situation and the experience of being sex trafficked by people in the bar, yet no one came to her aid (CHS Alternativo, 2012).

7.2.2.2 Analysis: The escape
As mentioned previously in challenging situations, not all victims of human trafficking are fortunate enough to be rescued, leading some, like Helena, Fiona, Julie, Carolina, Kiara, and Daniella, to take matters into their own hands. Their stories highlight diverse paths to liberation—Helena and Julie seizing opportunities, Fiona finding inner strength, and Carolina relying on her survival instinct. These narratives intersect with the concept of "will," emphasizing personal responsibility and self-development through meaningful social actions. The idea of self-awareness emerging from fulfilling duties aligns with survivors' journeys, as they discover their capabilities and true selves through the courageous act of liberating themselves (Sahni 2001, p. 422-424).

The connection highlights the profound impact of individual agency and responsible action in challenging situations such as human trafficking. In the face of adversity, the narratives of human trafficking survivors illustrate how their conscious decisions and determined efforts to break free not only led to their liberation but also transformed their lives. The transformative power lies in their ability to take control, make intentional choices, and demonstrate resilience, showcasing the potential for positive change through personal agency and responsible decision-making despite difficult circumstances (Sahni 2001, p. 431). In parallel, the social actions undertaken by these survivors will play a role in shaping societal norms. If more people break free, speak out, and reveal their realities, it holds the potential to impact the perceptions of others and impact how they may respond when confronted with situations similar to those faced by these women (Malczewski 2014, p. 529).

As mentioned above, the women share the concept of “will” and they all succeed in their escape, even though they all have different ways of achieving it. What all these women will face once they have broken free from human trafficking, is mentioned previously, the stigma of being a victim of human trafficking. Now the victims need to create a new role for themselves in society (Gray 2019, Murphy & Lazzarino 2022). Most of the
victims did not have the best life, economically, or socially before they were forced into human trafficking. After escaping, it may become even worse. In previous literature, it is mentioned not only the stigma the victims may face but also their own feelings handling that they are victims (Gray 2019, p. 209-210 & Murphy & Lazzarino 2022).

Hence, the victims are free now, they will have to learn how to live as single mothers, as survivors of human trafficking, and learn how to create a new identity for themselves. In societies where there exists close-mindedness and strong cultural beliefs, this can be an extremely rough task, especially since there is a big indifference to how people get treated (Gray 2019, Murphy & Lazzarino 2022).

While the stories of the analyzed women do not mention the “after” escaping human trafficking in much detail, it cannot be said for sure how their lives were. However, from previous literature, it is known how it was for some women who managed to escape and this is what we based the analysis on.

### 7.2.3 Social Mechanisms

In the context of aiding victims trapped in various forms of trafficking, there are diverse mechanisms, as mentioned earlier. These mechanisms encompass both social support during the process of breaking free and ongoing measures to preserve that freedom. They involve assistance from individuals, legal channels, organizations, or other forms of support, which will be further explored. There is a clear distinction between those who have managed to break free from trafficking, either on their own or with some form of assistance. This can involve individuals in one's surroundings, both strangers and familiar faces, various organizations dedicated to locating and rescuing these victims, laws, and the police. But what are these specific social mechanisms?
List of some identified social mechanisms within the data:

1. Helens escape:
   Ran away and found shelter with friends to break free (La Gaceta, 2012). In this case, her friend plays the role of social mechanisms.

2. Idas liberation:
   Sought help from neighbors and contacted service number 145 in Argentina, leading to assistance in escaping trafficking (Ministerio de Justicia y DDHH, 2015). Both the neighbors and the service can be identified as social mechanisms.

3. Amy's rescue:
   Found salvation when her uncle visited a dancing parlor, providing an opportunity for escape (UNODC, 2009). The main social mechanism in the case of Amy is her uncle, who took the first step in saving her.

4. Bellas salvation:
   Rescued from a prostitution ring with the help of a community leader (Al Jazeera English, 2013) which in this case becomes the social mechanism.

5. Tim Ballards Operation:
   Tim Ballard orchestrated a mission with Colombian authorities, thanks to an anonymous tip. This in turn led to the arrest of the traffickers (CBS Evening News, 2014) and establishing their different roles as social mechanisms.

However, even though these social mechanisms exist, one can also observe gaps in their functionality. For instance, the cases below highlight the lack of intervention:

1. Fiona's testimony:
Fiona now free for twelve years, reveals how she was sold on the streets and instead of people in her surroundings helping her and acting as a social mechanism, they chose to turn the other way (CNN, 2020).

2. Daniella's ordeal:
After a failed rescue attempt from a security man backfired, she managed to individually escape her traffickers. In this case, police neglected her case when she tried to report her traffickers failing their role as social mechanisms (RTVC Noticias, 2021).

3. Kiara's experience:
When sharing her situation of being sex trafficked in a bar, she expresses the unfortunate reality of people ignoring her pleas for help, and looking the other way (CHS Alternativo, 2012). Ignoring the situation, individuals at this bar neglect their responsibilities as social mechanisms.

By following the stories of these victims, social mechanisms have been identified. Many of these victims end up in rehabilitation centers, where they receive assistance to undo the harm done. This can involve medical, psychological, or even legal help. Legal assistance may include reporting, prosecuting, and imprisoning traffickers, as well as providing personal protection for the victims (FiscaliaCDMX, 2022).

However, complexity arises when examining the social mechanisms required to escape. Anyone involved in the "rescue" of the victim can be identified as a social mechanism. Therefore, an issue arises when the social mechanisms fail to work. When something like human trafficking becomes normalized, it is easier for people who could take the initiative to act as social mechanisms to instead ignore the situation, or even judge those who are trapped in this situation (CHS Alternativo, 2012 & CNN, 2020). A further persisting issue lies in the fact that many reports to the police do not progress. This is often
due to insufficient evidence or the reports being deemed illegitimate. Consequently, many girls find themselves breaking free from trafficking independently or with the assistance of a third party, bypassing police involvement (CHS Alternativo, 2012).

7.2.3.3 Analysis: Social Mechanisms

The social mechanism can be explained as almost everything, strangers, friends, family, law, police, human rights organizations, medical assistance, and so forth. While seeing all these social mechanisms we see that all parts of society are included, economically, socially, politically, and culturally. There is not one thing that could not be included in these social mechanisms, so why is it that it can be looked upon as insufficient when it comes to human trafficking, how can it not be enough?

If we go back in time and to the theories of Lugones and Quijano's, decolonial feminist theory, and decolonial theory, they will say the blame is colonization. All types of issues and problems are according to Quijano emerging from the epistemic violence that happened to colonialized countries (Quijano, 2000, 541). That all types of systems in a society today are created to benefit the Western countries. Quijano also claims that patriarchy, racism, and economic extraction are founded on colonization (Lugones, 2007, p. 191). This is the foundation Lugones uses when she adds the values and importance of gender and the inequalities they suffer along with hierarchy issues.

While examining the research findings of the social mechanism we see that they exist, some of the victims receive a lot of support and help through social mechanisms while others are not so lucky in the beginning but receive it eventually. For the less fortunate, is it failing due to human trafficking
becoming normalized, or is it a fear living in societies of not bothering other people or minding their own business?

One potential reason for the breakdown of social mechanisms is likely to be insufficient funding. Without adequate financial resources, there may be fewer personnel in law enforcement agencies, resulting in trafficking cases receiving lower priority. Are economic failure in a country also to blame on the colonization times, perhaps there could be a pattern as to why the welfare system is not as good as it could have been. A reason for this is the high economic gross debt that Latin American countries are facing. The money a country needs and wants to spend on its population in order for things to change is not always a possibility. This economic debt has a starting point in colonization, but it has also increased due to events such as the pandemic and other disasters (Álvarez, 2023).

The fact that anyone can be the social mechanism a victim needs makes it hard to say what is missing or not. There should be nothing missing since anyone can help but instead, some people look the other way and even exploit that some people are victims and no one seems to care. It is the societal system that is not working, and we do not know if it is because of the non-existent gender equality or because of people's lack of interest and fear, but something is missing.

When human trafficking becomes normalized, individuals may fail to realize the deeper meaning and ethical responsibility embedded in meaningful social actions. Since self-awareness stems from action, from fulfilling one's duties. In the context of trafficking normalization, people might overlook their duty to act as social mechanisms, either out of ignorance or a failure to recognize the profound impact of their actions. The lack of intervention maintains the normalization of human trafficking, creating a harmful cycle. This highlights the importance of cultivating a will to act and understanding that responsible social action is crucial for the well-being of future generations. The dangers
lie in the nonchalance or judgment that arises when individuals fail to recognize their role in combating normalized social issues. This underscores the urgent need for awareness and a collective sense of responsibility to break the cycle of normalization and encourage proactive social mechanisms (Sahni 2001, p. 422-424, 431).

Social action, mixed with subjective meaning and shaped by connections to others, guides behavior. In the context of combating human trafficking, victims often rely on social mechanisms for support. Rehabilitation centers offer medical, psychological, and legal help. However, complexities arise when these mechanisms, including police involvement, fail to address normalized trafficking (Malczewski 2014, p. 529).

The importance lies in ordinary individuals, not holding prominent roles such as the police or healthcare professionals, taking proactive steps to address these societal issues. Putting an end to the normalization of these crimes can pave the way for a new norm, by significantly impacting the fight against human trafficking at an individual level. Everyday actions, such as reporting incidents or showing empathy by listening to and asking about victims' situations, have the potential to bring about significant positive changes in society and for those trapped in these unfortunate circumstances (Malczewski 2014, p. 529).

8. Conclusions

The purpose of this thesis, “The Victim's Road to Freedom” is, “unmasking the crucial role of social mechanisms in rescuing human trafficking victims”. To find this out, the testimonies of 13 women have been studied, they are all survivors of human trafficking. All the women have their own unique story and by doing a thematic desk study we have been able to analyze each testimony with the help of a few helping questions, such as Who is the victim? Who is the trafficker? Difference between labor and sexual
trafficking? Who are the saviors? What is needed in order to be able to escape, and what type of social mechanism is there? Through these questions, different themes emerged that could later be analyzed more thoroughly.

While working through the study, a common pattern that emerged is the fact that the women often share the same story of being lured or forced into trafficking. The reason is often money-related, the women have a poor economic situation, and then they meet someone who promises them something else and better. The women trust the person and learn quickly that they have been deceived. People who trick these women are more often than not, someone the women know and trust. It can be the old lady you have known for years, it can be the new passionate boyfriend, or it can also be the friend you have had your entire life, who betrays you. As seen in the cases of Ida and Helena throughout the study.

While continuing through the thesis, the difference between labor and sexual trafficking is explored, and the conclusion of that is that there are distinctions, small but yet visible. Why that is, the collected data gathered for this study is too small to say. This is something future research could dive into and explore further.

One of the main pillars for this study is the social mechanisms and while going through the part of the thesis the authors named “The Escape”, it is clear to see that social mechanisms play a crucial role in order to escape human trafficking. In the explanation of what and who social mechanisms are, it stands clear, that each and everyone can be a part of the social mechanism and also, therefore, help and take action towards human trafficking. This is again shown clearly as an example in the case of Ida, where it is the neighbor who recommends she call a number and seek help. In this case, the neighbor becomes the social mechanism needed.
Throughout the study, the results from the themes are less and more shocking, and that human trafficking is as put in the shadows as it is, has many reasons. Many of them have to do with the stigma regarding being a human trafficking victim, but there is also the fact that no woman can escape until the person herself wants to. This theme is something that emerged along the way, many of the victims talk about their own “will”, and “survival strength” and that before this kicked in, the women were stuck in limbo, hating the situation but not too scared to try and get out.

As a final remark, there is a lot within this field of study that has not yet been researched, or any data gathered, which is reasonable since this is a highly delicate and sensitive topic. For future research, however, there are multiple options, such as the reason why some of the women get refused by the police when they seek help, and also why so many of the people who see women getting sold on the street turn such a blind eye to the situation, looking upon these women with disgust instead of concern.

9. Concluding remark/discussion

When writing this study, a lot of questions and thoughts have come up, things that cannot be proven because it has not been done enough research around the subject. There were especially questions that came up to the small pattern we found regarding the difference between labor and sexual victims. We cannot answer them or analyze them, but they did cross our minds. Is it simply circumstances and luck, to whom you make the report? Whether the police or law department will believe you and focus on the case? Do the people who turn away a report think the women are lying, and if that is the case, why would they think that? Or could it be because the case could be about sexual trafficking and that is not something anyone wants to work with? Will it be words against words, and could it be that there is corruption going on?
Could it therefore be easier to turn a blind eye to someone being human trafficked? Or could it be that more often than we think it is the policemen and law enforcement that are the buyers? This question is not just taken out of nowhere, since in the testimony of Bella, there is a short interview with the president of *United Against Trafficking*, and she claims the victims often share stories where it is the ones who are supposed to protect them that buy them. However, since this is not something proven, it is not something the authors of this study claim is true.
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