

The Importance of the Family Environment of Trafficking Victims in Peru, Before and After Exploitation

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Abstract

This article analyses the importance of the family environment of victims of human trafficking in Peru, before and after exploitation. Based on interviews with 30 victims and 10 family members, it demonstrates that families, primarily mothers, can play a powerful role in both preventing victimisation and assisting victims to recover from human trafficking experiences. Family structure and background can increase victims' vulnerability, yet the families are also the ones that protect and take care of victims. However, government officials often blame parents and family members for victims' exploitation, leading to revictimisation of both victims and their families. Understanding families' role in victim reintegration is crucial for improving the quality of social inclusion. Protection and care services workers must involve victims' families as part of their recovery process and receive further training to safeguard survivors' physical and mental integrity.

Keywords: human trafficking, family, Peru, access to justice, protection, vulnerability, revictimisation, reintegration.

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Introduction

Families play a crucial, complex, and, at times, contradictory role in each stage of the trafficking process. Family background characteristics, such as a history of violence or abuse, financial needs, unhealthy family dynamics, migration background, and discrimination,¹ can create vulnerability to exploitation. Traffickers may take advantage of these vulnerabilities,² and in some cases, family members may directly participate in the trafficking process.³ Conversely, families can also assist victims: for example, they can report exploitation to the authorities and aid the search process to locate trafficked family members.⁴ Family members can also be crucial in offering safety and facilitating victims' healing and reintegration into the community,⁵ and they can play a key role in helping victims to access justice.⁶ For example, they can significantly influence victims' decisions and may also be a part of the justice process themselves. Research by anti-trafficking non-government organisation CHS Alternativo has identified that during the justice process, family members can be stigmatised and victimised as they attempt to render assistance to victims. For example, parents are often

¹ J Greenbaum, 'Introduction to Human Trafficking: Who Is Affected?', in M Chisolm-Straker and H Stoklosa (eds.), *Human Trafficking is a Public Health Issue*, Springer, Cham, 2017, pp. 1–14; J Greenbaum *et al.*, 'Multi-level prevention of human trafficking: The role of health care professionals', *Preventive Medicine*, issue 114, 2018, pp. 164–167, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.07.006>; K Marburger and S Pickover, 'A Comprehensive Perspective on Treating Victims of Human Trafficking', *The Professional Counselor*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2020, pp. 13–24, <https://doi.org/10.15241/km.10.1.13>; R Surtees, *After Trafficking: Experiences and Challenges in the (Re)integration of Trafficked Persons in the Greater Mekong Sub-region*, UNIAP/NEXUS Institute, Bangkok, 2013.

² A Querol, *El intento de las víctimas y sus familias por acceder a la justicia. Trata de personas, violencia y explotación: 40 testimonios*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2020.

³ Greenbaum; Marburger and Pickover.

⁴ *Ibid.*; A Pascual-Leone, J Kim, and O-P Morrison, 'Working with Victims of Human Trafficking', *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, issue 47, 2017, pp. 51–59, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10879-016-9338-3>.

⁵ Marburger and Pickover; L A McCarthy, 'Life after Trafficking in Azerbaijan: Reintegration Experiences of Survivors', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 105–122, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218107>; N M Twigg, 'Comprehensive Care Model for Sex Trafficking Survivors', *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, vol. 49, issue 3, 2017, pp. 259–266, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jnu.12285>.

⁶ UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), *Brasilia Rules about Access to Justice for Persons in a Condition of Vulnerability*, 2008. We refer to 'access to justice' as a fundamental right beyond legal procedures, as has been recognised and developed by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights jurisprudence. See: H Ahrens, F Rojas Aravena, and J C Sainz Borgo (eds.), *El acceso a la justicia en América Latina: Retos y desafíos*, Universidad para la Paz, San José de Costa Rica, 2015; A Cañado Trindade, *El derecho de acceso a la justicia en su amplia dimensión*, Librotecnia, Santiago de Chile, 2012.

not kept informed of authorities' decisions concerning their children.⁷ Despite legislative efforts, victims and their families still face challenges in receiving assistance due to a lack of specialised and adequate services. Additionally, there is limited research on families' experiences and perspectives of assisting victims in the trafficking process.

This article addresses this gap by highlighting families' significant role in victims' recovery, access to justice, and reintegration. It demonstrates that for family members, the human trafficking situation begins when they confirm the victim is missing, become aware of the risks, and seek help from the authorities. It details the revictimisation and trauma experienced by family members through interacting with authorities and the need for a different approach and support model for families, tailored to victims' specific needs. It concludes that the families of victims may contribute significantly to these processes, if service providers set aside certain prejudices and include family members in the journey to access justice.

Context: The role of family and human trafficking in Peru

In Peru, nuclear households are the most common, followed by extended and single-parent households.⁸ Family composition has recently changed, with more women as heads of households and an increase in single-parent households.⁹ Family structure is highly dependent on income level, and poorer families are more likely to be extended and composite.¹⁰ Factors such as the number of family members, the level of education of the head of the family, and the area of residence play a role in families' poverty level.¹¹ Inequality is also negatively related

⁷ A Querol, *Testimonios de las sobrevivientes de trata de personas. Brecha entre las necesidades de atención y los servicios recibidos después del rescate*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2015; A Querol, *Más allá del rescate de las víctimas. Trata de personas: buenas y malas prácticas en la protección de sus derechos*, 1st Edition, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2013; A Querol, *Rescate, Atención y reintegración. Buenas y malas prácticas en la atención a víctimas de trata de personas 2013–2017*, 2nd Edition, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2019.

⁸ Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI), *Perú. Tipos y ciclos de vida de los hogares, 2007*, INEI, Lima, 2010; IPSOS, *El hogar peruano 2021*, 10 December 2021.

⁹ U Torrado, 'Nueva dinámica en las familias peruanas', *Datum Internacional*, Lima, n.d.; U Torrado and C Pennano, *Familias Peruanas. Más familias de las que imaginas*, Fondo Editorial Universidad del Pacífico, Lima, 2020; C Ramos, 'La idea de familia en el código civil peruano', *Themis*, issue 30, 1994, pp. 97–107.

¹⁰ I Arriagada, *Familias latinoamericanas. Diagnóstico y políticas públicas en los inicios del nuevo siglo*, CEPAL, Chile, 2001.

¹¹ R Castro, R Rivera, and R Seperak, 'Impacto de composición familiar en los niveles de pobreza de Perú', *Cultura-Hombre-Sociedad*, vol. 27, issue 2, 2017, pp. 69–88, <https://doi.org/10.7770/cuhso-v27n2-art1229>.

to intergenerational mobility.¹² Leaving poverty is strongly impacted by parental level of education, family income, and families' demographic composition.¹³

The Family: Vulnerability and protection

Families of victims of trafficking may play different roles at various stages of the trafficking process. Several family-based risk factors contribute to the vulnerability to human trafficking, including a history of violence or abuse, dysfunctional family dynamics, discrimination, poverty, migrant status, and homelessness, among others. Families' lack of awareness of human trafficking is another important factor as traffickers may encourage families to place victims into exploitative situations to ease extreme poverty. Individuals may be manipulated into entering sex work to support their families, but consequently be subjected to exploitative situations. Caretakers, parents, close acquaintances, or other relatives can also be traffickers or part of the trafficking network.¹⁴ Traffickers can also coerce victims by threatening the safety of family members.¹⁵

While family dynamics and involvement can increase vulnerability, families can also play a protective and supportive role throughout the trafficking process, including at the prevention stage. For example, families can actively look for their missing family member or report the situation to the police. After the trafficking situation, the family is also fundamental to victims' recovery and reintegration.

For victims of trafficking, reconciliation with a supportive family may offer substantial protection against re-trafficking throughout their recovery.¹⁶ However, reconciliation may necessitate special support measures due to, for example, shame, problematic family dynamics, the complexity of trauma, and families' direct involvement in victims' trafficking.¹⁷ Reintegration demands a thorough

¹² F Torche, 'Intergenerational Mobility and Inequality: The Latin American Case', *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 40, 2014, pp. 619–642, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071811-145521>.

¹³ R Morán, T Castañeda, and E Aldaz-Carroll, 'Family Background and Intergenerational Poverty', in R Morán (ed.), *Escaping the Poverty Trap: Investing in children in Latin America*, Inter-American Development Bank, 2003, pp. 15–58.

¹⁴ J Greenbaum *et al.*, 'Global Human Trafficking and Child Victimization', *Pediatrics*, vol. 140, issue 6, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-3138>; Greenbaum; Marburger and Pickover.

¹⁵ Greenbaum; Pascual-Leone, Kim and Morrison.

¹⁶ Marburger and Pickover; McCarthy; Twigg.

¹⁷ P T D Le, "Reconstructing a Sense of Self": Trauma and Coping among Returned Women Survivors of Human Trafficking in Vietnam', *Qualitative Health Research*, issue 27, 2017, pp. 509–519, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732316646157>; K Juabsamai and I Taylor, 'Family Separation, Reunification, and Intergenerational Trauma in the Aftermath of Human Trafficking in the United States', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue

comprehension of the environment and contextual factors to which the individual returns, the complexities of family relations, and the consequences of the trafficking situation on the individual.

Support from families for the reintegration process might vary, making it a complex dynamic.¹⁸ Each family member may participate differently, and their emotions and responses toward the victim are varied and frequently contradictory.¹⁹ During reintegration, victims are also vulnerable due to the return to a scenario similar to the one that gave rise to the trafficking process. This is aggravated if victims are stigmatised by their family and community, compromising returnees' support networks,²⁰ which is particularly common when they are female and victims of sexual exploitation.²¹

For several years now, survivors of trafficking in Peru have reported how essential their families' support has been, from their rescue to their reintegration.²² In 2018, the Regulation of Legislative Decree 1297 was approved to prevent separation from victims' families or provide the necessary protection to achieve family reintegration.²³ However, victims' families are often seen as responsible for what happened, and authorities do not consider their needs.²⁴ This can lead to secondary victimisation and trauma for family members caused by their interactions with authorities during the justice process. This situation can subsequently contribute to the difficulties and stigma experienced by victims.²⁵

10, 2018, pp. 123–138, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218108>.

¹⁸ R Surtees, *Moving On. Family and Community Reintegration Among Indonesian Trafficking Victims*, NEXUS Institute, Washington D.C., 2017.

¹⁹ R Surtees, *Stages of Recovery and Reintegration of Trafficking Victims. A Reintegration Guide for Practitioners*, Different and Equal (D&E) and NEXUS Institute, Washington D.C., 2022.

²⁰ E Paasche, M-L Skillbrei, and S Plambech, 'Vulnerable Here or There? Examining the vulnerability of victims of human trafficking before and after return', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 34–51, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218103>.

²¹ C Blanco and C Marinelli, 'Víctimas de trata de personas versus migrantes en situación irregular. Retos y lineamientos para la atención y protección de las víctimas de trata de personas extranjeras en el Perú', *Revista de La Facultad de Derecho PUCP*, issue 78, 2017, pp. 173–198, <https://doi.org/10.18800/derechopucp.201701.007>.

²² Querol, *Testimonios*.

²³ Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP), *Reglamento del Decreto Legislativo N.º 1297 'Decreto Legislativo para la Protección de las niñas, niños y adolescentes sin cuidados parentales o en riesgo de perderlos'*, 2019.

²⁴ Querol, *El intento*.

²⁵ Ministry of Women and Vulnerable Populations (MIMP), *Problemática de la explotación sexual contra niñas, niños y adolescentes. En las cuencas de los ríos Napo, Morona y Putumayo en las regiones de Loreto y Puno, en el período (2014–2015)*, MIMP, Lima, 2017.

Human Trafficking in Peru: Structural elements of vulnerability

Victims of trafficking in Peru are usually young women, 16 to 25 years old, and most commonly trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation.²⁶ In 2023, the Public Ministry recorded 3,179 victims of trafficking, of which 72% were women and 27.4% were children.²⁷ Until 2018, almost all victims were Peruvian, but with increasing Venezuelan migration and the arrival of criminal organisations from other Latin American countries, foreign victims have increased by 500% since 2014.²⁸

In 2007, Peru adopted its anti-trafficking legislation, National Law 28950 (aligned with the Palermo Protocol), and began reporting cases and taking steps to prevent and prosecute the crime and protect victims. Since then, a multisectoral task force against trafficking has been created, along with specialised police units and prosecutors' offices, though there are only 14 prosecutors' offices in the country's 27 regions. A limited budget has been allocated, covering just 11 of the 42 services that, according to the National Policy, should be operational to combat human trafficking and support victims.²⁹ The National Policy of Action against Trafficking in Persons, in effect until 2030, establishes prevention, protection, prosecution, and reintegration actions. However, it does not include families or communities in its objectives.³⁰

There are several structural elements that contribute to people's vulnerability to trafficking before recruitment or exploitation. Educational inequalities, for example, are particularly pronounced, and many factors, such as rural living, poverty, and gender, reduce opportunities to access primary education.³¹ Gender inequity, gender roles, forced unions, and forced pregnancy limit women's access to education.³² Lastly, illiteracy remains disproportionately higher among women

²⁶ Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI), *Estadísticas de Seguridad Ciudadana No. 2*, 2020.

²⁷ Public Prosecutor's Office, Information collected from the 14 prosecutors' offices specialising in human trafficking, requested June 2024.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ CHS Alternativo, *IX Informe Alternativo*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2024.

³⁰ Ministry of Interior (MININTER), *Política Nacional frente a la Trata de Personas y sus formas de explotación – Versión Amigable*, 1st Edition, MININTER, Lima, 2021.

³¹ A Sánchez, 'Trayectorias educativas a lo largo del ciclo de vida: El rol de la pobreza, el área de residencia y las brechas de género', in M Balarin, S Cueto, and R Fort (eds.), *El Perú pendiente: ensayos para un desarrollo con bienestar*, GRADE, Lima, 2022, pp. 179–202.

³² Plan Internacional, 'Brecha de educación en el Perú: Esta es la población más afectada', 22 June 2022.

and lower socioeconomic groups.³³ Moreover, women are made disproportionately responsible for care and household tasks.³⁴

Other risk factors are domestic violence, emotional deprivation, and family crises. According to studies, 63.2% of women have been victims of domestic violence.³⁵ Six out of ten children and teenagers have been beaten in their homes, 70% have suffered psychological violence, and 35% have suffered one or more forms of sexual violence in their homes or at the hands of close relatives.³⁶ Most victims of trafficking and other types of exploitation were also victims of gender-based violence (GBV) in the past, and these crimes occur within a broader social context of tolerance for GBV.³⁷

Method

This article is based on research conducted in 2019 and 2020 with 30 victims assisted by CHS Alternativo,³⁸ who are survivors of domestic trafficking for sexual exploitation (24) and labour exploitation (6). Of the 30 survivors, 21 were adult women, 2 were adult men, and 7 were underage women. This composition reflects the gendered nature of trafficking in Peru. In addition to survivors, the researchers interviewed 10 family members of survivors. This included 8 mothers of victims participants in the study, 1 grandmother of a victim of child sexual abuse material, and one father of a victim killed in captivity. Most relatives (7) had incomplete primary or secondary education, and only three had completed secondary education.

³³ Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI), *Perú: Indicadores de Educación, según departamento, 2012-2022*, INEI, Lima, 2023.

³⁴ Pulso PUCP, 'Familia y roles de género en el Perú', *Pulso PUCP*, 3 August 2023, <https://pulso.pucp.edu.pe/reportes-estadisticos/familia-y-roles-de-genero-en-el-peru>.

³⁵ Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru (INEI), '63 de cada 100 mujeres de 15 a 49 años de edad fue víctima de violencia familiar alguna vez en su vida por parte del esposo o compañero', INEI, 25 November 2019.

³⁶ UNICEF, 'Cifras de la violencia hacia los niños, niñas y adolescentes en el Perú', UNICEF, 2019.

³⁷ A Querol, *Buscando justicia. Trata de personas, violencia y explotación: 40 testimonios*, CHS Alternativo, Lima, 2020; Defensoría del Pueblo, *Balance sobre la política pública contra la violencia hacia las mujeres en el Perú (2015–2020)*, *Serie de Informes Defensoriales – Informe no. 186*, Defensoría del Pueblo, Lima, 2021.

³⁸ Since 2005, CHS Alternativo has had a support centre for victims of trafficking and their families, offering legal and psychological guidance and assistance in the processes of reporting, searching, accessing justice, and reintegration.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted in five regions: Loreto, Puno, Tacna, Lima, and Callao. They were conducted by female psychologists who have experience dealing with trauma clients and providing care for victims of trafficking. They were familiar with data collection tools and the research ethics principles, which were approved by Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú. The interview questions revolved around survivors' and their relatives' experiences with the legal system, from the moment they were rescued or escaped until their reintegration, and the role their families played during these processes.

In this article, we analyse the experiences of survivors in relation to the role of families in their trafficking experience and analyse how it may prevent or contribute to victims' vulnerability. We also analyse the perspectives of families, essentially mothers, who were spokespersons for their families' experiences.

The goal of the study was to understand the needs and experiences of victims and their relatives as they navigated the legal system, from the moment of rescue until reintegration. The qualitative approach allowed us to delve into their perspectives and understand the meanings they gave to their experiences.³⁹ Once the interviews had been transcribed, a matrix was drawn up to analyse the information, organising it into thematic areas.⁴⁰

Findings

The findings demonstrate that families play an important role in processes related to prevention and victim recovery. Socioeconomic conditions, family functioning, and existing bonds within the family environment can contribute to rescue and recovery following a trafficking situation. Despite this, the system often blames parents and family members for victims' experiences, disregards their concerns, and in some cases, prevents family reunification, leading to revictimisation of the victims and secondary victimisation of their families.

The following section examines how family situations can contribute to victims' vulnerability to trafficking, the role family members play in the search and reporting process during the trafficking situation, and families' interactions with the State in the process of accessing justice.

³⁹ J W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, SAGE Publications, London, 2013.

⁴⁰ V Braun and V Clark, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, vol. 3, issue 1, 2006, pp. 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

Family Factors Contributing to Vulnerability

Research in Peru has found that domestic violence and extreme poverty, often linked to a lack of education, can increase vulnerability to trafficking.⁴¹ This study confirms these findings.

Violence

Eight of the thirty victims (approx. 27%) had suffered an episode of violence within the family or inflicted by third parties. The father, uncle, or brother of five female victims used physical violence in the household, and three of these women were also victims of sexual violence before they were recruited: in one case, it was the father who raped her; in another, it was the neighbour; and in the third, it was the parents who sexually exploited the child, with the aunt being the one who reported the situation and protected her. Additionally, three of the minors interviewed were raped (and then extorted) by their traffickers, which marked the beginning of their exploitation.

These experiences were diverse and had differing impacts on the victims and their families. It is important to differentiate between violence perpetrated by immediate and extended family members, as one family member's actions do not render the entire family dysfunctional.

This is reflected by the case of a 14-year-old research participant. She was happy with her family, but a cousin who had recently moved into their house abused her, threatened to do the same to her younger sister if she told anyone, and finally, when he suspected he had been discovered, kidnapped her and held her for months against her will, repeatedly raping her and forcing her to serve him.

The testimonies show that in some cases, it was violence that prompted the victims to leave their homes, thus increasing their vulnerability to being trafficked or manipulated. For example, one participant, a 12-year-old girl who lived with her siblings and cousins at her uncle's house while her mother worked as a live-in domestic worker, was psychologically and psychically abused by her uncle, until she ran away. She explains:

One day when my uncle got upset, he grabbed me by force and cut my hair with his scissors. I screamed... That's when I decided to run away.

⁴¹ A Querol, *Buscando Justicia*; J Jabiles, *'Víctimas ideales' y discursos victimológicos en la persecución del delito de trata de personas en la ciudad de Lima*, PUCP, Lima, 2017; P Astete and R Guerrero, *Informe sobre la situación y contexto del delito de trata de personas y la explotación sexual en las regiones de Madre de Dios y Piura en el marco del proyecto 'No más mujeres invisibles: contra la trata, explotación sexual y violencia sexual en zonas de minería informal de Madre de Dios y Piura'*, PROMSEX, Lima, 2021.

She was subsequently captured by traffickers while she was travelling on a bus.

Some of the victims that suffered violence before the trafficking situation returned to their families, but in most cases, the family cut ties with the aggressors, and in a few cases, the victims were able to protect themselves and change the dynamics. Four participants who suffered violence by a close family member did not return to their homes.

Economic Disadvantages and Needs

Traffickers often take advantage of people's economic needs and exploit their desire to financially support their families.⁴² The low educational level of most participants (21 of 30 with incomplete schooling at the time they were trafficked) puts them at a higher risk due to a lack of information and the financial need for continuing their studies. Nine participants (30%) were deceived by traffickers because they wanted to generate income to support their families. Three of the six victims who were trafficked for labour exploitation also expressed their desire to help their families and were recruited by a member of the extended family. In another case, a young woman intending to financially support her parents accepted a job offered by an aunt and travelled to a mining area, where she was exploited by traffickers. Weeks later, she was murdered by the traffickers, and although the investigation is ongoing,⁴³ it appears that the in-laws were involved with the traffickers.

The intersection of domestic violence and economic hardship significantly heightens the vulnerability to trafficking, as evidenced by victims' testimonies and the manipulative tactics employed by traffickers who prey on these factors.

Family Members Reporting Trafficking Cases and Participating in the Search Process

Out of thirty victims, twenty-three (excluding seven who were directly exploited by or suffered violence at the hands of their parents) mention their families as vital in their escape or return processes. For families, the process of accessing justice usually starts when they report a family member's disappearance, a time during which they expect to receive immediate help from the authorities.

Nine of the ten family members interviewed shared that they started reporting, searching, or asking for help as soon as they became aware that their family members were being exploited. Cases in which victims were exploited while still living in their homes were harder to detect. Some victims said that their relatives

⁴² Greenbaum.

⁴³ As of November 2024.

were unaware of their situation and often only learnt about the exploitation once they escaped or were rescued, which could lead to delays in reporting.

One parent mentioned that they only became aware that something had happened to their daughter when her aunt told them that she had disappeared. The family immediately went looking for her, but the daughter was eventually found dead. It was later revealed that the aunt was the trafficker.

Another victim, a minor from a remote jungle community, was deceived by a man who made her a false job offer and took her and her son to another city, where he sexually exploited her. Her father began to search for her through the radio where he worked and reported her disappearance. When she managed to escape, she called him to ask for help:

I go to a public phone and dial my dad's number [...] and I tell him that it was a big lie that I'm fine and everything, right? And I started to tell him everything that I was going through, that they were taking me, that they were using me for this, and that when I wanted to leave, they wanted to beat me... [...] when my family found out what I was going through, they contacted the police...

Family members often persist in their search, interacting with authorities and becoming key actors in rescue efforts. This cycle of anguish and pain is exacerbated by uncertainty, as families feel powerless due to a lack of trauma-informed responses and authorities' passivity. For example, the father of a survivor went immediately to the police to file a report, but the police held him and his wife responsible for letting their daughter leave and warned them that in that place, there were no work opportunities but only human trafficking.

Five family members felt they were not helped by the police, one mother expressed ambivalence, and only three felt supported. Six felt mistreated and reported that the police questioned their daughters' disappearances and implied that they intentionally left their homes, probably with their partners. Participants reported experiencing recrimination and victimisation by the authorities, as these placed the blame on them or their families, such as assuming an existing close relationship between the victims and their traffickers. The following testimonies from mothers reflect this:

It's not easy when you go and file a complaint. No, no, they don't treat you well, there's a lack of attention from their side, you know? 'No, your daughter is... young, people are like that, ma'am, they go to bad things now'. [...] The policeman who leaves you sitting for two or three hours doesn't treat you well.

'...but what do we do, madam, maybe she has gone with her partner, with her lover and you are thinking badly' [...] Of course, because they are not their children, right? [...] I started to look for my daughter, I didn't have police help [...] and I did the work myself because I was the one who started to investigate [...] until I found my daughter.

One 14-year-old girl was rescued thanks to the intervention of her parents. Her mother was repeatedly mistreated and disbelieved by authorities. The family filed multiple reports of her disappearance and sought help for months, but they were ignored, although the daughter was being extorted and sexually exploited. Finally, the police held the family responsible and prosecuted them for neglecting their daughter. In addition, the accused, responsible for kidnapping, holding, rape, and sexual exploitation, blamed the family for mistreating their daughter and claimed to have been fostering her in his home. The family's attempt to find their daughter ended up criminalising them:

Well, it didn't help when the police reported me to the district attorney's office for abandoning my daughter, that I was a bad mother, and also my husband. They [social workers] told [my daughter] that if she... that we were supposedly not fit to be her parents, she was going to a shelter...

Families' efforts to start the search for their relatives are frequently met with victim-blaming and indifference from authorities. Besides feeling mistreated, they are accused of negligence and do not feel they receive the expected support.

New Forms of Recruitment

The growing use of social media and new information and communication technologies pose challenges for families, as children may be sexually exploited while at home. Four victims in this study were extorted and forced to have sex under threat while still living at home. Although such victims are not displaced, they are coerced and subdued by their exploiters, fearing that their loved ones may suffer retaliation if they do not comply.

Despite the difficulty in identifying this type of exploitation, families remain key in detecting behavioural changes in their children who are experiencing exploitation while at home. Four mothers reported that their daughters were exhibiting signs of isolation, emotional lability, or anxiety, or were unexpectedly absent. They sought dialogue and asked professionals for help (state or school psychologists) but were told that these were typical adolescent behaviours. These minors were being extorted, and two of them were later abducted. In several cases, these were concerned, seemingly well-constituted families who feared for their children and suffered with them.

She had a drastic, noticeable change. Psychologically I saw her in a bad way: she cried; she didn't sleep. I have a daughter who sleeps with her, she also told me that her sister cried all night [...] The day the events happened, my daughter disappeared for many hours and that's when it all started.

A mother always has a hunch, right? So, I [...] started to ask her what was going on. I would go straight to school, follow her, or drop her off at school. I would ask her 'What's wrong with you, what's wrong with you, what's wrong with you?'

The moment after victims escape or are rescued, or the family realises that their family members are being exploited, should mark the beginning of the restitution of rights (including reparation).

Families' Experiences with Access to Justice and Reintegration

Once the victim is identified, a new stage begins in which families' presence and participation varies. Like Surtees,⁴⁴ we found that the involvement, emotional experience, and understanding of the circumstances are particular to each family member and depend on the context. Apart from families involved with traffickers, the families in the survivors' immediate environment often feel relieved by their return, but this does not exclude other conflicting emotions. These feelings include guilt for not having protected the victims; anger and a desire for the perpetrators to pay for what they did; fear of the suffering and emotional impact of the trafficking experience that affect both the victims and themselves; and fear that the situation may be repeated, or that the traffickers may carry out their threats.

Experiences of Separation and Reunification

During the post-trafficking situation, victims are expected to make decisions about their immediate future, such as whether to participate in the judicial process and whether to return to their families. After a trafficking situation, victims, especially minors, are temporarily housed in shelters during preliminary proceedings. In our study, only twelve victims (40%) felt that they were able to participate in the decision to return to their families. Similarly, only four mothers were consulted about whether their daughters should be sheltered (in four cases, they were involved in the abuse, so they could not participate in the decision). Fifteen were sheltered in a specialised residential care facility (in the case of minors) or a temporary shelter home (for adults). Some did not know they would have to remain there for years:

⁴⁴ Surtees, *Stages of Recovery*.

I felt alone, I had no one to help me, no one to come and see me [...] I saw that they were visiting other girls and I thought 'I'm never going to have a visitor, I don't know when I'll get out of here.' I said I'll stay until when?... I didn't know that at 18 you get out of there, I didn't know anything...

I wanted to talk to my mother because I was worried [...] I wanted to see her as soon as I got there and they wouldn't let me. They sent me straight there and they didn't tell me I was going to go to a shelter [...] they didn't tell me I was going to go to a home where it is permanent [...] you can stay for months, years.

Peruvian trafficking policy prioritises children's best interests and the relationship with their families. Following Legislative Decree 1297, the Special Protection Units for Children and Adolescents (UPEs), under the Ministry of Women, are responsible for determining whether victims' families are involved in the exploitation or can care for them. However, there is a tendency to criminalise parents. If a child's disappearance is not immediately reported, this may be interpreted as a lack of interest or, worse, as an indication that the parents are part of the exploitation structure.⁴⁵ Government officials tend to presume that families are involved in the trafficking situation and may or may not receive economic benefits. However, family members may fail to report their children's disappearance for various reasons, including lack of information, financial resources, or lack of awareness of the trafficking situation.

The UPEs carry out a risk assessment where trafficking is usually understood as part of families' incapacity to protect their family members. They can impose a protection measure involving victims' temporary separation from their families, complemented by specialised support for the families. Even though Legislative Decree 1297 aims to prevent the separation of children from their families, it does not seem to fulfil this goal.

As a result, the sense of mistreatment and powerlessness often persists when parents find their children, only to feel like they lose them again because authorities shelter the children to 'protect' them from their parents. Five out of eight mothers said they were separated from their daughters for extended periods. A clear example of this was a 13-year-old girl, who was sheltered because the State concluded that by not reporting her disappearance, her mother was demonstrating disinterest and lack of capacity. Her mother was a domestic worker, had not finished primary school, had no money to respond to the State's requests, and was unaware of her rights. She did not report her daughter missing as she did not know how and was afraid of losing her job, as her boss denied her permission to leave to file a report. After quitting her job and scraping together the money

⁴⁵ Querol, *El intento*.

needed to travel and pick up her daughter, she was informed that she must return to her hometown for more documents, and that she was not allowed to see her daughter. Not only was she misinformed, but her daughter was placed in four different shelters, and the mother did not know her whereabouts for over a year. They saw each other for the first time a year and a half later, and despite the mother's efforts, it took her three years to bring her daughter home. In the process, she was mistreated by various officials.

I did want to see her, but they [staff at the shelter] wouldn't let me, they shouted at me, they told me, 'You don't have to come in here to see her', 'Why are you only now getting worried', they told me. I didn't say anything, I had to look down.

Another girl's mother agreed to her daughter's placement in a shelter because she required special care, but despite her involvement and concern, maintaining contact was difficult:

I had no contact. From there she was taken to another shelter. I demanded to see her. [...] After many requests, they allowed me to see her.

When evaluating protection measures for victims, consideration should be given to the respective family settings, the family members' degree of knowledge and information, the psychological consequences for victims of prolonged periods of separation, or victims' decision-making capacity. It appears that these factors are not included when assessing families' ability to care for their children.

Accessing Justice

Family members' low socio-economic status and lack of education can influence state officials' decisions concerning their capacity to protect their relatives. One of the greatest difficulties for victims' relatives is the extensive paperwork necessary to move forward with the judicial processes. Often, these are families with limited resources that make great sacrifices and even go into debt to comply with the required legal procedures.

I alone have bought my ticket, I alone have searched, I have come all the way here, [...] to look for someone to lend me [money] to take her to the forensic doctor. [...] And the doctor never came.

One family spent more than four years seeking justice for their daughter who was murdered during her trafficking situation. The parents had not finished primary school, but their son supported them to continue with the proceedings. They lost their house to pay for the legal process and were constantly threatened by the alleged traffickers.

We ask for justice, but as we are poor, there is no justice. [...] They kill and insult us! That man is free... his daughter studies in a public school... and they have killed my daughter. They should punish him forever!

Parents' lack of awareness regarding their children's situation may raise concerns, but this does not justify authorities mistreating or undervaluing them. Instead, it highlights the need to improve their skills in handling complex situations and develop preventive competencies. A support model for families in the reintegration process is necessary.⁴⁶

Families of trafficking victims frequently feel judged and like passive recipients of authorities' decisions due to prejudices and stigma involving the respective victims' environments.⁴⁷ Authorities frequently attribute responsibility for victims' circumstances to their families, associating them with environments that make victims vulnerable, unprotected, or subject to violence. This influences officials' attitudes and can affect victims' reunification with their families. Officials seem to have an 'ideal family' in mind, consisting of a nuclear family which can shield children from violent circumstances. It is essential to understand that victims' families are diverse, with different structures, and different feelings and needs.

Trauma and the Cycle of Revictimisation

A process of victimisation and revictimisation of both the victims and their families is created and begins by blaming the parents and the other family members. Recrimination and discrimination negatively impact victims' rights and recovery. In our research, several families had experienced public officials behaving inappropriately and making disparaging comments or accusations. For example, one victim stated:

[the policeman] said [to her and her parents], that we [the victims] are already used to that [being forced to have sex with men]. [...] Another time he told my dad that there are girls who are to blame [because they know] what they are getting into...

This blaming and revictimisation can worsen post-traumatic stress disorder for victims.

⁴⁶ Blanco and Marinelli.

⁴⁷ N Roca *et al.*, 'Rompiendo cadenas entre estigma y enfermedad mental. La deconstrucción del estigma desde la acción comunitaria', *Investigación Cualitativa En Ciencias Sociales*, issue 3, 2016, pp. 86–96.

One participant described how, when she managed to escape with help from her parents and they all went together to file a report, the police questioned the kidnapping and exploitation:

'But how do you know it's the man's fault? Surely that girl has provoked him'. I mean, how [can] they say that to my mum? [...] And they were all in the back, listening to what I said [in the Gesell Chamber].⁴⁸

As these quotes demonstrate, families may face disbelief because the victims are young women. There is a recurring assumption among some justice officials that women leave voluntarily with their partners. This speaks of a gender bias, as there is a tendency to blame mothers (fathers too, but less often) for not taking adequate care of their daughters and to hold them responsible for their children's disappearance and exploitation.

Survivors perceive that they are mistreated and have little credibility, feeling revictimised.

It was like an insult and a mockery of me because I kept telling him that he was not my partner and that he had kidnapped me. Even on paper, they recorded it as if he was my partner. It was very painful...

Participants expect the justice system to respond to their demands and treat them with respect, and question the lack of empathy and the little help they receive. This is aggravated by bad practices and revictimising interventions not only towards victims but also towards their mothers.

I didn't like the way he [police officer] treated me... he asked me if I had anal sex, oral sex... and for me, it hurt me... the tone he used, I didn't like it. I felt it as a mockery.

Revictimisation is exacerbated when the parents' level of education is low, or when they are unaware of the laws and protection mechanisms to which they are entitled. They experience frustration when authorities do not provide the expected help, leading to passivity, inaction, and indifference, and generating mistrust and unease due to long waits, delays, and labyrinthine processes.

I don't believe in justice because justice is now based more on believing the aggressors than the victims. And there is no justice, they are not interested in people's pain.

⁴⁸ The use of the Gesell Chamber is part of the protocol, ensuring a single interview with underaged victims of any kind of violence to avoid revictimisation.

All the families interviewed (as well as the victims) hope that justice will be served. Their motivation to continue collaborating with the authorities is the fear that the traffickers/exploiters remain free and could harm them, and the conviction that they must pay for their crimes:

For me, justice is that he pays for all the damage he has done, not only to my daughter, he hurt my whole family, because by messing with my daughter he did it to all of us.

Many family members experience a lack of listening, collaboration, and support throughout the process of obtaining justice, and felt victimised by its length and bureaucracy. Many female victims and their mothers feel mistreated by male justice officials. However, while they often feel more comfortable with female officials, they report instances of mistreatment and a lack of empathy from women, too.

It is clear that family members are also affected by the traumatic experiences of their trafficked relatives. There are family members who have lost their jobs because they spent long periods of time tracing their missing children or relatives, even moving to other cities with destabilising consequences. The impact on family members could be classified as secondary or vicarious trauma, as they are indirectly impacted by experiences of violence both during and after the situation of exploitation.

Ten of the survivors interviewed received threats from traffickers to drop their complaints. The victims were the main target of these threats, but they also involved the possibility of harming family members. This shows the importance of families receiving support from the State. Only one participant reported that the State provided psychological support. Most did not receive it, or it was very limited. One mother put it bluntly:

The State didn't even give me a psychiatrist, the State didn't give my daughter any remedy, nothing...

Importance of the Family upon Return

Several victims said that their mothers and families played a key role after their return and stressed the importance of the accompaniment and affection received.

I thought that they were not going to welcome me at home, that they were going to leave me aside [...] when in fact [...] everyone supported me, they gave me the support that [I] needed at that time and [...] I felt more confident that I could talk, I could move forward with the case.

The support of my mum. And my dad, which is the most important thing, he was always there.

Families' support and involvement in reintegration are crucial for victims' well-being.⁴⁹ Reuniting with family also means readjusting and mending their bonds and finding solace from the trauma experienced.⁵⁰ Without romanticising families or ignoring their possible involvement or complicity in exploitative situations, we must recognise that they can serve as a refuge for survivors.

It was a sad reunion, but a happy one for me because I saw them again. [...] It wasn't easy [...] but I was always dependent on my mom because I was very scared.

Reintegration with their families or substitute families requires a process of adaptation, as observed by this 14-year-old girl:

At first weird [...] because I missed home. I missed the noise of the girls, the jokes, the pranks, and everything. [...] I'd say I'm finally home, calm, but I'd start crying [...] then it was normal, I was adapting.

Some victims return to environments similar to the ones that gave rise to the trafficking situation. In short, to the same social, economic, or personal vulnerabilities. For example, one girl shared how she felt upon returning home, where her abusive uncle—who had prompted her to escape years earlier—still lived. She spent three years in a shelter, during which time her mother could not find the financial resources to move elsewhere, and the State offered no alternative.

I came here, I felt happy, I hugged my little brothers, I started to cry, it was a lot of mixed feelings, really, [...] I'm fine with my mum, I'm fine with my little brothers, I don't need anything else. I don't care if he [the uncle] looks at me badly or tells me why have I reported him.

The situation is more complex when the victim is stigmatised by the extended family or community.

...before I felt bad because my mum felt bad because of the comments that others made [...] from my uncles, from my aunts, they would say: 'oh, your daughter is like that' and my mum, sometimes she didn't talk to me and that made me feel bad.

⁴⁹ A Querol and A Lerner, 'The Vulnerability of Minors after a Child Trafficking Situation', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 10, issue 1, 2024, pp. 103-120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2021.1996126>.

⁵⁰ Greenbaum; Juabsamai and Taylor; R Surtees, 'At Home: Family Reintegration of Trafficked Indonesian Men', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 10, 2018, pp. 70–87, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201218105>.

Thus, family members often provide protective environments for survivors. They may support the recovery and facilitate reintegration into the family and wider community. However, they may also contribute to revictimisation, which highlights the critical need for families to receive counselling.

Conclusions

This article explored how the family environment can contribute to vulnerability to human trafficking and the needs and experiences of family members during and after the trafficking situation. It demonstrated the challenges that families face, first in their desperation to find their missing children, and then while coping with the legal and emotional aftermath of their surviving children.

It also revealed that victims and their families mistrust the criminal justice system and, by extension, the State, due to mistreatment and lack of guidance from the moment the complaint is received to the conclusion of the criminal justice process.

Without idealising families, or denying that there are families who are exploitative or complicit in abuse, the state must take a different approach and recognise the importance of victims' families in victims' recovery and restoration of rights. Understanding the complex role of the family in victim reintegration is critical for improving the quality of social inclusion.

Including the perspective of victims' families in research is necessary as their experiences are often ignored. Survivors and their families face daily challenges and difficulties when trying to access medical and psychological services, which should be provided by the State. A family-centred approach should be part of the principles to be considered in the National Anti-Trafficking Policy.

Research on the profile of the families of victims of trafficking is crucial to gain a better understanding of their difficulties. For example, it is important to acknowledge that an absent father does not necessarily mean that a family is dysfunctional, or that a violent relative does not render an entire family an unsuitable environment for children. The concept of an ideal family is a fictional representation, and each approach to family must be grounded in reality to prevent biases and prejudices. Approaching families' needs must be based on the real-life circumstances of each victim.

The family members interviewed for this article recommend, among other things, improved quality of care from professionals in shelters, greater efficiency in identifying high-risk areas and activities for better prevention, increased proactivity from the police in investigating cases, and stronger collaboration between NGOs and state institutions.

Contexts of violence, low educational levels, lack of awareness of their rights, and limited financial resources are factors that exacerbate families' vulnerabilities. These issues also hinder their ability to act or demand appropriate responses from authorities, being often revictimised through either mistreatment or exclusion from decision-making. A paradigm shift is needed regarding the care of at-risk populations with limited resources to protect themselves. It is essential for the design of public policies to incorporate education and violence-related initiatives.

The State must go beyond setting norms and protocols and also allocate adequate human and financial resources to prevent trafficking and provide comprehensive care for victims and their families. This should include investing in education (including university-level education) and the specialisation and training of justice and service officials, ensuring that gender perspectives and their relationship with violence prevention are actively incorporated into training curricula. In addition, further research into these factors is essential to tailor effective prevention strategies.

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