

Human trafficking policies are to a large extent internationally driven and were introduced in most countries after the turn of the millennium as part of international obligations through the signing of conventions and adoption of directives. This study examines what happens when the human trafficking policy framework is introduced into the everyday lives of ‘victims of trafficking’ and ‘anti-trafficking practitioners’, based on an analysis of qualitative data from Norway and Moldova.

The overarching research question is: **How does the human trafficking policy framework influence practice in institutional responses to women who have been exploited in prostitution?** The analysis and data collection are based on an institutional ethnographic approach in which the goal is to investigate power empirically, and link relations and institutions through exploring how people’s actions are coordinated.

This thesis consists of four articles. Article I examines the practice of ‘identification of human trafficking’ by social workers in Norway. Through this process boundaries are drawn between different groups of people and the definition of human trafficking is given its real-world content. Article II discusses how barriers and access to assistance are institutionally organised and take, as a starting point, social workers and their daily work and practice. This article particularly explores how the human trafficking assistance response is intertwined with pre-existing institutional structures especially in welfare and migration legislation. In article III the perspective shifts to include the different (and sometimes conflicting) vantage points of victims, social workers and police/prosecutors, in a discussion of the implications and dilemmas that result from making victim assistance partially conditional on cooperation with the criminal justice sector. Article IV presents an analysis of the process of reuniting victims with their families and communities in Moldova, and investigates challenges in this process, and whether and to what extent experiences are reflected in the understandings that underpin assistance at this stage.

I find that human trafficking policies affect anti-trafficking practice in ways that, in the title of this thesis, I have likened to the effect of a searchlight – a very powerful source of light that can serve both to illuminate and blind, with the ability to help us locate what we look for but also to cast what falls within its range in very stark contrasts of light and shadow, black and white, and where ambiguities and shades of grey are washed out. And that which does *not* enter into its beam is left in relative darkness.

The human trafficking framework has been illuminating for practice in the sense that it has made visible and drawn into focus types of exploitation that were previously sometimes ignored in spite of the at times devastating effects on individuals. However, the blindness and discounting of nuances that also ensue from human trafficking policies are highly problematic and promote practices that can be unhelpful and even harmful. I find that rights to assistance for trafficked persons in Norway are presented in official documents as a cohesive set of special rights for one particular group, but actual access in fact rests on other statuses, most notably migration status and the ability to document identity. The “trafficking victim” category thus blinds to the greater importance, in practice, of general legislation in the fields of migration, welfare and health services. Special rights for trafficked persons were introduced into a comprehensive universal welfare state, ill-equipped to handle special cases and exceptions that apply to a very small number of people. One very serious consequence is that certain forms of assistance can be systematically more difficult to access for some of those who are in the most precarious situations. I also show how ‘blindness’ to the broader context and non-trafficking related challenges for trafficked women can

be an obstacle to their recovery and “reintegration” after return to their home country. What made them vulnerable to exploitation in the first place was often a marginalised social position, inequality and poverty, features that frequently marked the situation of their families as a whole. While individual assistance (such as e.g. trauma treatment) might in some cases be warranted, in other cases it would be just as effective to assist the family as a whole, or even *other* individuals in the family, when this would improve the social and/or economic situation of the family.

There is a gap between the complexities of women’s experiences in prostitution and the more clear-cut categorisations that are required to receive (helpful and long-term) assistance within the anti-trafficking system in Norway. This manifests in ethical dilemmas described by social workers in the process of the ‘identification’ of trafficking victims. As ultimately the requirements of, and outcomes in, police investigations and trials will be extremely influential in terms of what long-term assistance victims can expect to receive, social workers have become more reluctant to actively recommend trafficking specific assistance. This reticence stems from experiences with cases resulting in what they described as “harmful” outcomes, not least when investigations were dropped or did not lead to a trial. The social workers’ actual practice in identifying victims does not correspond to what might be seen as their ideological understanding of human trafficking, but from the wider institutional context that their work enters into. The requirements of a more binary thinking in criminal justice replace their initially more complex considerations of ambiguities in people’s lives. This supports the criticism of the human trafficking policy framework being dominated by a criminal justice approach. However, in Norway, the partial conditionality of assistance on cooperation with the police creates unfortunate outcomes both for victims *and* for criminal justice. On the one hand, the possibility of being granted a permanent residence permit heaps substantial pressure on victims to cooperate. On the other, the strong incentive for victims to testify undermines their credibility as witnesses in court, thus weakening the chances of a conviction.

Human trafficking policy is a framework that is controversial and marked by deep lines of division both in policy discussions and in academic scholarship. In a landscape of considerable contention and sometimes even animosity in debates, the actual practice of human trafficking policies in the victim assistance field, and the ways in which it varies both across and within countries, sometimes get lost. In recent years, it has been pointed out that there is a lack of knowledge of what influences institutional practices more broadly, a sparsity of empirical studies of assistance frameworks and a gap between reliable empirical evidence and policies on human trafficking. In this thesis I contribute to an identified need for empirical knowledge about how the policy term “human trafficking” is translated into practice and seek to understand the broader context of so-called anti-trafficking institutions. I particularly highlight the importance of examining practice with a starting point in the everyday activities and ‘doings’ of people. This brings into view how human trafficking policies enter into specific local contexts and throws light on the institutional frameworks with which they interact and meld, and the results that are specific to that context. While there are sometimes striking similarities in organisation of responses and ‘anti-trafficking language’ across vastly different countries, the differences in understandings, approaches, resources and broader institutional frameworks can be substantial. Anchoring analyses in specific contexts and a wider institutional landscape informs a more realistic discussion about how human trafficking policies actually translate into practice.