Echoes of Exploitation: Gender Dynamics and Unravelling the Complex Re-integration Landscape of Sex-trafficking Among Women from The Permeable Borders of Central and Eastern Europe

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Maynooth University Department of Law Declaration on Plagiarism

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ABBREVIATIONS AND FIGURES:

1. Central and East Europe: CEE
2. Criminal Justice System: CJS
3. Domestic Violence: DV
4. European Union: EU
5. Gender-Based Violence: GBV
6. Intimate Partner Violence: IPV
7. Non-Governmental Organisation: NGO
8. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: PTSD
9. Traditional Gender Roles: TGR
10. Trauma-Bonding: T-B
11. Victims of Sex-Trafficking: VOST
12. Violence Against Women: VAW

1. Table 1.1 – The Push and Pull Factors are on the Literature Review Chapter: Page 16.

ABSTRACT:

This thesis explores the gender dynamics influencing the re-integration of female victims of sex-trafficking (VOST) in Central and East European (CEE) states. It examines how these dynamics hinder the return of VOST to their communities and shape their post-trafficking experiences and recovery. Through a qualitative analysis of case studies across CEE, the research identifies mental health, stigma, victim-blaming, patriarchy and gender-based violence (GBV), family structures and community values, and gendered labour markets as key barriers to re-integration. These findings provide insight into how deeply entrenched gender norms and cultural expectations exacerbate recovery challenges. The thesis argues that interpersonal, familial, societal, and socio-economic struggles further marginalise women, sometimes leading to re-trafficking. It concludes that these complex, gender-specific dynamics necessitate a nuanced, gender-sensitive approach to re-integration, calling for the establishment of tailored support networks and systems.

Key Words: Sex-trafficking, Stigma, Patriarchy, Re-integration, VOST, and CEE.

OPENING CHAPTER:

Sex-trafficking remains a pervasive issue in CEE, with victims often facing complex challenges upon their return to society. Existing literature extensively explores how gender dynamics contribute to sex-trafficking, yet there is a noticeable gap in applying these gender perspectives specifically to the re-integration process. While much of the research has examined re-integration broadly or through the lens of push and pull factors, it has often overlooked the nuanced impact of gender on this phase. This thesis addresses this gap by exploring re-integration through a gendered lens, highlighting how gender dynamics create barriers that prevent VOST from re-integrating effectively. Through case studies of CEE states, this thesis aims to shed light on the individual pre- and post-trafficking experiences that VOST endure. By examining re-integration specifically within CEE, it seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how gender shapes the recovery journey for VOST.

Background

Sex-trafficking is a critical issue in CEE, where economic vulnerabilities (Andrijasevic, 2010), gender inequalities (Vanwesenbeeck, 2018), and socio-political instability (Williamson, 2019) contribute to the prevalence of this crime. Re-integration, a crucial phase in the recovery of VOST, involves returning to a sense of normalcy and rebuilding one's life (Cody, 2017). However, this process is fraught with challenges, especially when considering the gendered expectations and societal stigma that victims face. Although the literature has explored re-integration broadly, it often lacks a focus on how gender-specific factors, such as societal expectations of women and internalised stigma, affect victims' experiences. CEE states refer to the countries of Central and East Europe, many of which were formerly part of the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War (Vintrová, 2004). Central Europe consists of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Slovenia, while East Europe includes Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Russia. The Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—and the Balkan states—Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Albania—are also part of this region (OECD, 2024; Okey, 1992; Rupnik, 2000; Petsinis, 2022). Compared to West Europe, these states are considered less developed (Simionescu, 2018), with delays in economic (Tiits et al., 2008), cultural (Cerwonka, 2008), and political domains (Greskovits, 2007; Gros and Suhrcke, 2000). These

factors underscore why this thesis focuses on CEE states rather than Europe overall, as the unique socio-economic and historical contexts of these regions significantly impact the re-integration process.

Importance of Research and Aims

This thesis is significant for several reasons. Theoretically, it fills a notable gap in the literature by applying a gendered lens to the study of re-integration, an area predominantly discussed without a nuanced consideration of gender dynamics. Understanding how these dynamics operate can inform more gender-sensitive re-integration programs and policies. Practically, the findings can guide Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO)'s, social workers, and policymakers in developing interventions that address the specific needs of VOST in CEE, helping to improve the support structures available to them. By highlighting the often-overlooked role of gender in re-integration, this research aims to contribute to more effective and inclusive re-integration strategies in CEE.

The aim is to explore how gender dynamics influence the re-integration experiences of VOST in CEE. It seeks to uncover the ways in which these dynamics create barriers to successful re-integration, including the impact of Stigma, Mental Health, Victim-Blaming and Victimhood, Patriarchy and GBV, Family Structures and Community Values, and Gendered Labour Markets. This thesis is guided by the question; How Do Gender Dynamics in CEE Influence Re-integration Experiences of Female VOST, and the two sub-questions; In What Way Does Stigma Contribute to The Marginalisation of VOST During Their Re-integration Process and, How Do Intersects of Tradition, Culture and a Male Dominated Society in CEE Affect the Recovery for VOST. By integrating case studies of CEE states, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the individual sex-trafficking experiences of victims, highlighting the critical role gender plays in shaping these journeys. By focusing on this niche, it provides a deeper understanding of the internal and external barriers that victims face, thereby filling a critical gap in the field. The next chapter will provide a comprehensive review of the literature, further situating this research within the broader academic discourse and setting the stage for the subsequent empirical analysis.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

INTRODUCTION

Sex-trafficking remains a pervasive and insidious issue within CEE, where porous borders and complex socio-political landscapes facilitate the exploitation of women. This thesis delves into the multifaceted nature of sex-trafficking. By examining states of origin, we uncover the significance of entrenched gender dynamics characterised by inequality, economic marginalisation, traditional gender roles (TGR), and patriarchal norms. Historical influences such as communism and systemic corruption further complicate the plight of women, contributing to patterns of violence and inadequate legal protection. Migration patterns, driven by push and pull factors and gendered recruitment, exacerbate vulnerabilities. While existing literature extensively explores these areas, a critical gap remains in understanding re-integration and the stigma VOST face.

PART I: SEX-TRAFFICKING

Defining The Problem

There is ongoing debate among policy officials and organisations on the true definition of sex-trafficking. In Article 3, paragraph (a) of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children (also known as the Palmero Protocol), the United Nations (2000) defines it broadly as:

> *"The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons utilizing threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power, or a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation,"*

As noted above, this thesis is concerned specifically with sex-trafficking. The U.S. enacted the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000, which defines sex-trafficking as *"... a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age"*. This act also defines coercion as any scheme, plan, or pattern meant to create the impression that failing to carry out an act would result in serious harm to or physical restraint against any individual; abuse of the legal system, or the threat of

abuse; and threats of serious harm to or physical restraint against any person (Raphael et al., 2010).

The U.S. Department of State (2023) defines sex-trafficking as

> *'… a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age' and 'the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery'*

The International Labour Organization (2024b) perceives trafficking from a forced labour viewpoint and defines it as *'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily'* The Polaris (2015) Project's definition is *'sex-trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery in which individuals perform commercial sex through the use of force, fraud, or coercion. Any situation in which a person under the age of 18 is involved in commercial sex is automatically considered sex trafficking under U.S. law, even if force, fraud, or coercion is not involved'.* The European Commission (2011) uses the same definition as the Palmero Protocol.

Generally speaking, the term "trafficking" usually refers to the unauthorised movement of individuals over international (or even domestic) borders. People are regarded as commodities in this phenomenon, which succeeds in and perfects the vicious cycle of exploitation via labour or sex (Vidaicu and Doldea, 2009). Since the wording of the Palermo Protocol and others 'connotes only the movement portion of the trafficking chain', many laws and programmes against trafficking focus more on movement than exploitation. One widespread misconception about trafficking is that it only involves moving victims across national and international borders in exchange for money. Trafficking is dependent on the recruitment, harbouring, provision, or acquisition of an individual for the purposes mentioned in the definition above; it does not always require crossing an international border or any form of transportation (Bakirci, 2009)**.** Other scholars in the field of sex-trafficking have also contested this definition, arguing that servitude, not mobility, is the essence of trafficking (Kara, 2010; Caramello, 2013). The concept of sex-trafficking has been an ongoing subject of discussion in recent years. Reputable scholars such as Kara (2010) and Raymond (2013), advocate for victim-centred approaches to be addressed in the definitions of sex-trafficking and contend that the emphasis placed on

mobility in many legal frameworks these days takes attention away from the primary problem of exploitation.

In line with these criticisms, this thesis offers a thorough definition of sex-trafficking that puts the victims' exploitation first, over their movement, in order to prioritise the lived experiences and traumas that women have faced from sex-trafficking. The focus should be on their loss of autonomy and their human dignity instead of just the trafficking mechanisms. The alternative definition that is to be used is from UN Women (2020) *'Sex trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of women and girls for the purpose of sexual exploitation, often through force, fraud, or coercion. The trafficking of women and girls is rooted in systemic and structural gender inequality and discrimination'.* UN Women (2020) state that this is reflected in the high levels of poverty, lack of education, gender inequality, GBV, and women's focus in precarious and informal work. This definition of sex-trafficking emphasises the victim's and their experiences rather than the logistics of transportation or movement. UN Women defines it as a 'violation of basic human rights' and being 'robbed of their dignity', highlighting the exploitation and suffering of the victims rather than the mechanics of the crime. It recognises that systematic discrimination and gender inequality disproportionately affect women and girls, making them more vulnerable to sex-trafficking. This approach shifts the focus from recruitment methods to the underlying reasons why women and girls are targeted. While the definition mentions recruitment and transportation, the primary concern is the goal—sexual exploitation—rather than the method. This ensures that the abuse and coercion endured by the victims remain central. UN Women further emphasises that gender inequality is a key driver of sex-trafficking, as economic, social, and cultural oppression make women and girls especially susceptible. By acknowledging that sex-trafficking 'disproportionately affects women and girls', the definition underscores the gendered nature of the crime and the specific forms of abuse they experience. Such a definition is crucial for addressing the true nature of sex-trafficking and provides VOSTs with appropriate support.

The Phenomena of Sex-Trafficking

Sex-trafficking frequently serves as an example of the relationship between migration from areas of extreme poverty and gender inequality (Brooks and Heaslip, 2019). VOST are typically transported to wealthier, more secure, mostly Western destinations from poor or unstable regions, where the feminisation of poverty is apparent (Philipp, 2019). The flow of VOST varies depending on availability and demand, but generally speaking, trends tend to follow east to west and south to north (due to the need for fresh and 'exotic' women) (UNODC, 2020). This phenomenon is profitable and widespread, as show in the UN report 'Profits and Poverty', the yearly worldwide profit from trafficking was approximately $32 billion in 2005, $150 billion in both 2014 and 2017, and has now increased at a terrifying rate, to around $236 billion in 2024 (International Labour Organization, 2024a).

Whilst it is important to mention that sex-trafficking is not the only form of trafficking in these statistics, it is the most profitable form of trafficking in comparison (Richmond, 2024). The number of VOST varied and varies greatly still. UN data demonstrates that, between 2010 and 2012, 53% of victims worldwide were trafficked for sexual exploitation, with 97% of those victims being female (UNODC, 2014). Over the same period, the European Union (EU) recorded rates of 69% of victims being women and girls (EUROSTAT, 2015). Moreover, this phenomenon appears to have grown considerably. In 2001, the European Commission, Justice and Home Affairs (2001) estimated that between 700,000 to several million people are trafficked globally each year (taking into account various types of abuse). More recent estimates from the International Labour Organization (2017) indicate that approximately 4.8 million women and children were forced into sexual exploitation in 2017. Given the persistent and ever-evolving nature of clandestine trafficking networks, it is likely that the number of VOST has increased further since that date.

PART II: STATES OF ORIGIN: CEE

EUROSTAT (2023) reports that, in 2022, there were 23 documented cases of trafficking in the EU for every million people, up from 16 cases in 2021. This equates to thousands of victims across the EU, with Luxembourg, Estonia, and Austria reporting the largest numbers. Women and girls who have been trafficked are transported from Southern (Romania, Bulgaria, Albania) to Northern (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, Lithuania) states (Surtees, 2008). The path to Western Europe passes via large cities (i.e., Budapest, Prague, Belgrade, and Tirana), as well as communities near borders (Smartt, 2003).

Significance of CEE Origin states

The unique socio-economic environment of CEE has had a substantial impact on the frequency of sex-trafficking there. CEE states have acted as both the source and transit area for VOST (IOM, 2022; Council of Europe, 2021), such as Romania (Buzatu, 2018), Bulgaria (Vujin, 2009), Serbia (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2017), Moldova (Lee, 2007) and Ukraine (Wylie and McRedmond, 2010). Although we may think of sex-trafficking as a phenomenon that happens everywhere in the globe, the majority of trafficking from East and Central Europe to West Europe are made possible by the lack of border restrictions inside the Schengen region (Voronova and Radjenovic, 2016). The UNODC (2022) report finds that women account for over 3/4 of all trafficked victims in 2020 in the Central and South-East regions, and within these numbers, sex-trafficking is the most endured form of exploitation. The most recent wave of sex-trafficking generated more than 2/3 of all illicit profits (International Labour Organization, 2024). Notably, Romania (UNODC, 2022a), and Bulgaria (U.S. Department of State, 2022) are primary states where sex-trafficking is most profitable for clandestine channels.

Migration Patterns: Push and Pull Factors

In terms of the causes of trafficking, multiple organisations such as UNODC, IOM, Polaris Project, U.S. Department of State, The Freedom Fund, Human Rights Watch, GAATW, Anti-Slavery International, UNICEF, and ILO have released the concept of the so-called Push and Pull factors for sex-trafficking. There are certain Push and Pull factors that directly relate to sex-trafficking. Push factors are what motivate individuals to leave their states of origin. These are often unfavourable influences that put pressure on them to change their existing environment or make it unsustainable. Pull factors are favourable circumstances or opportunities that draw individuals to a certain location. These elements give them a genuine or perceived attractiveness, which draw them in.

Push Factors	Pull Factors
Economic Difficulties (UNODC,2020).	Demand of Cheap Labour and Commercial Sex (U.S. Department of State, 2020).
Lack of Employment (NHTTAC, 2021).	Promise of Economic Opportunities (IOM, 2019).
Gender Inequality (International Labour Organization, 2017).	Weak Law Enforcement and Corruption (Transparency International, 2011).
Lack of Education (UNESCO, 2019).	Tourism (Human Trafficking Search, 2021).
Political Unrest (UNODC, 2018).	

TABLE 1.1 – The Push and Pull factors

The underlying reasons for sex-trafficking are diverse and can vary among states. The complicated issue of trafficking is often fuelled or impacted by social, economic, cultural, and other variables. These elements are unique to certain trafficking patterns as well as the states in which they take place. The "pull" factors can draw a woman, knowingly or unknowingly, to another state (Winberg, 2003). Economic difficulties make women more susceptible to traffickers who promise them better economic opportunities abroad (UNODC, 2020). Lack of employment rates forces women to seek work elsewhere, making them a target to traffickers (NHTTAC, 2021). The discrimination and GBV in gender inequality increase the vulnerability of women (International Labour Organization, 2017). Limited access to education reduces forms of awareness, risks and knowledge of support systems about sex-trafficking (UNESCO, 2019). Political unrest and corruption forces women to seek safety and political stability

elsewhere (UNODC, 2018). In the absence of these conditions, a woman will not be ready to leave her state and will instead put herself in danger of being taken advantage of by people or organisations who will profit from her wants and needs. The demand for cheap labour and commercial sex in destination states fuels sex-trafficking (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Traffickers entice women with false promises of a better quality of life and job opportunities abroad (IOM, 2019). All lax legal systems and corrupt governments facilitate many clandestine trafficking operations (Transparency International, 2011). Due to high rates of tourism, the demand for commercial sex rises (Human Trafficking Search, 2021). These circumstances tend to put victims under pressure that "pushes" them into migration and, therefore, into the grips of traffickers.

PART III: THE EXISTING LITERATURE ON GENDER DYNAMICS

It is clear from the above that gender dynamics play an important role in sex-trafficking. This is further discussed below.

Gender Inequality and Discrimination: Economic Marginalisation

The concept of gender dynamics is complex and multifaceted, but it can be the most fruitful insight as to why CEE has had rising rates of sex-trafficking. Data from UNODC and EUROSTAT, as well as research by Voronova and Radjenovic (2016), indicate that gender is a significant factor in sex-trafficking. They contend that gender has a role in every aspect of the trafficking cycle, from the underlying factors that increase the vulnerability of female victims to the legislative strategies used to fight trafficking (Brooks and Heaslip, 2019).

While women's expectations for better opportunities improved in some areas after the fall of communist governments in East Europe in 1989, discrimination remains prevalent. The European Commission (2023) highlights how the feminisation of poverty, gender inequality, and limited educational and career prospects in source states like Romania, Ukraine, Moldova, and Serbia (Heyns, 2005) make women more susceptible to trafficking (Winberg, 2003). Despite legal entitlements to equal vocational education and retraining (Tavcer, 2006), women are often socialised that to succeed in a 'healthy' marriage and raising a family, they must choose 'gender-specific' careers, limiting their job opportunities. Compared to males, women still do not have equal access to jobs or working conditions (European Commission, 2020).

Gender discrimination, stereotypes, and a lack of care services hinder women's participation in business and the labour market, leading to reduced wages (Sevilla, 2020), which negatively impacts their quality of life, social inclusion, and living standards.

These gender biases create gendered labour market trends that disproportionately restrict women's career advancement (European Parliament, 2012). CEE labour markets, remain gender-segregated both horizontally and vertically, with women overrepresented in low-paying, part-time employment with unstable conditions (Sevilla, 2020). Because of their vulnerability, VOST are much easier to recruit and are often targeted based on their socio-economic issues (UNODC, 2022). Moreover, 44% of Europeans still believe a woman's primary responsibility is caring for her family and home (European Commission, 2021), which reinforces these trends. Young women, seeking better prospects abroad (Henderson, 2003), often pursue opportunities in the West (Caldwell et al., 1998), but many are unaware of the risks, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse (Kligman and Limoncelli, 2005).

TGR and Patriarchal Norms: Communism

Communism and the Soviet era significantly impacted the normalisation of sex-work and economic instability. States such as Romania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and Serbia—many of which were Communist or Soviet Union states—have experienced high rates of sex-trafficking (Kannan, 2019). Although communism often claimed to promote gender equality through its legal and ideological frameworks, this did not always translate into reality. Factors such as economic hardship (Szelenyi, 2014), weak legal and institutional frameworks (Sajo, 2002), social dislocation and migration (Șoșea et al., 2018), gender inequality, and entrenched patriarchal norms (Drakulic, 2015) may have inadvertently supported the sex-trafficking industry (Kligman and Limoncelli, 2005). It is true that "the widespread belief is of how male dominance corresponds to the subordination and obedience of women in the household" has been a constant conceptual vein of feminist theory throughout periods and across states (Mahoney, 2017).

The persistence of TGR, which often view women as inferior and reinforce patriarchal norms, plays a crucial role in sex-trafficking dynamics (La Strada International, 2011). Women, primarily responsible for family and household duties, are frequently financially dependent on

abusive partners and constrained by traditional values and religion. When these women seek help, intra-cultural pressures and institutional challenges compound their difficulties (Dumitrescu, 2014). Patriarchal norms in CEE have placed women in subordinate roles both at home and in the workplace, reinforcing views that reduce women to commodities rather than individuals with rights. This commodification facilitates trafficking, as traffickers perceive the exploitation of women as less of a moral or legal issue (Dahal et al., 2022; La Strada International, 2011).

VAW: DV and GBV

Sex-trafficking in CEE states is also profoundly influenced by entrenched gender dynamics, particularly the pervasive violence against women (VAW). Domestic violence (DV) serves as a significant driver, compelling many women to flee abusive environments, only to fall prey to traffickers who exploit their desperation with deceptive promises of safety and economic stability. For instance, a study conducted by the EIGE (2022) found that in Romania, over 30% of women have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV), creating a substantial pool of vulnerable individuals susceptible to trafficking networks. EIGE also revealed that Romania had one of the highest rates of GBV in the EU, with DV incidents often going unreported due to fear of social reprisal and lack of trust in authorities.

This issue is exacerbated by societal attitudes that normalise VAW and stigmatise victims, leading to significant underreporting of these crimes. Cultural acceptance of GBV, coupled with inadequate legal and social support systems, trap many women in cycles of abuse and increases their susceptibility to trafficking. In Poland, it is estimated that up to 90% of DV incidents remain unreported (GREVIO, 2021), driven by victims' fears of social ostracisation and mistrust in the criminal justice system (CJS)'s ability to provide protection and support (Amnesty International, 2021)**.** Similarly, in Hungary, societal norms often dismiss DV as a private matter, leading to a lack of effective intervention and support for victims (Human Rights Watch, 2013). This pervasive normalisation and underreporting of GBV create an environment where traffickers can operate with relative impunity. They exploit the lack of robust protective measures and societal support for VOST. The combination of these factors—high rates of DV, societal stigma, and inadequate legal frameworks—significantly contributes to the persistence and proliferation of sex-trafficking in CEE states, highlighting the urgent

need for comprehensive and culturally sensitive interventions to address these underlying issues (UNODC, 2022a; OSCE, 2023).

Lack of Gender-Sensitive Legal Protection: Corruption

In CEE, institutional fragility and corruption are important facilitators of sex-trafficking (Broad and Lord, 2018; Holmes, 1999). In many CEE states, the shift from communist to democratic administration arrangements has left state institutions debilitated and law enforcement capacities inadequate (Kligman and Limoncelli, 2005). Because of this, attempts to stop sex-trafficking are undermined by corruption. According to the European Commission's (2020a) report, corruption in public administration and law enforcement is still a major problem in many CEE states, making it difficult to effectively combat and eradicate trafficking activities and clandestine channels (Holmes, 2009). Corrupt authorities may be bought off to provide fake paperwork, shield traffickers from punishment, or overlook trafficking activity, all of which help trafficking networks operate. The problem is made worse by a culture that accepts corruption since law enforcement officers may be bought off, and the community may be reluctant to report suspicious activity because they do not trust the government (Transparency International, 2022; United Nations, 2023). Furthermore, the survival and growth of trafficking networks in these areas are directly facilitated by the absence of accountability and openness in government institutions. This includes an ineffective judicial system and the judiciary's lack of independence in certain areas sometimes lead to lenient sentencing for traffickers and a low likelihood of conviction, which further emboldens traffickers (Holmes, 2020). Inadequate laws and a lack of political resolve and dedication to uphold current laws or regulations are further elements that contribute to sex-trafficking (UNODC, 2006). Additionally, talking about sex-trafficking is stigmatised in many CEE states, which limits public conversation and understanding of the problem. Due to this humiliation and societal rejection, VOST may be discouraged from asking for assistance or coming forward (La Strada International, 2011).

Gendered Recruitment: Coercive Tactics and Relationships

Traffickers across CEE states would often employ the Lover Boy ruse to find women who are facing family, social, and financial difficulties or simply seem more withdrawn and socially ignored – 'I wanted someone... to show me attention... instead of being ignored' (FBI, 2014). Traffickers would take advantage of their victim's weaknesses to entice them with lavish presents, shower them with adoration and compliments and promises of a better life elsewhere. This is the reason why many VOST go abroad in quest of love and better prospects. But as soon as they are settled, abusive measures and threats against them and their family back home are used to pressure these women (EUROPOL, 2022) into becoming sex-workers.

According to the research Iulia Badea Caramello (2013) conducted on various VOST in published articles within Romanian borders. The majority of the women said that they had been recruited by a friend or had accepted a fictitious job offer from overseas. An analysis conducted by UNODC (2022), found that 80% of trafficking cases were due from traffickers enticing their victims and making false promises to be fulfilled abroad. Data since the early 2000s has demonstrated that, despite the illegitimacy of newspaper advertisements, an increasing number of Romanian women are prepared to take a chance in the hopes that 'it will not happen to them' or recognise up front that they will be employed in the sex industry but are ignorant of the working conditions (Caramello, 2013). Women who are taken in by these networks of sex-work are sold and ultimately resold, denying them any type of autonomy over their lives other than to provide their sexual services for the benefit of their 'owners'. A high proportion of recruiters are male, with whom many women have a relationship with. In Albania the main form of recruitment is through creating false intimate relationships (Bekteshi et al., 2012). In Romania and Bulgaria, the women are firstly groomed by their recruiters and then forced into sex-trafficking and other illicit activities abroad (OCCRP, 2023).

PART IV: IDENTIFYING THE GAP: RE-INTEGRATION

Sex-trafficking in CEE is driven by multiple gender dynamics as stated above. While significant research has attempted to explain the drivers and the gender dynamics that have influenced this upsurge, the aspect of how gender dynamics play their part in re-integration has not been thoroughly looked at or examined in the context of CEE. This section therefore discusses the existing gap in the literature regarding the challenges victims face when re-integrating back into their communities. Given the persistence of these gender dynamics, it stands to reason that re-integration is challenging in CEE.

Consequences of Sex-Trafficking: Social Re-integration Challenges

VOST must deal with severe societal repercussions and stigmas that hinder their capacity to re-integrate into society. Studies already conducted show that cultural beliefs in CEE states often place the responsibility on the victims, which makes their re-integration even more difficult. According to research by the IOM (2023), there are a lot of challenges and prejudices about the treatment of VOST. The victims' capacity to re-integrate into their communities is severely impacted by these sentiments. Women lose their social standing and are often shunned by their communities. For example, victims in Slovakia report serious difficulties in re-establishing their social networks, experiencing social stigma and often find themselves shunned of communal events and support services (IOM, 2013), which exacerbates their psychological suffering and makes it more difficult for them to start again

One of the biggest obstacles to VOST's re-integration is the shame that society places on them. Rather than being acknowledged as victims of major crimes, VOST are often stigmatised with the belief that they are involved in their exploitation. Victims often experience prejudice and unfavourable labelling, which may make it difficult for them to acquire housing, work, and social acceptability. Therefore, engaging in a communal life when there are attitudes like these, contribute to their marginalisation (Corbin, 2022). Serbia for instance has brought to light the widespread stigma that VOST experience, which often leads to their social and economic marginalisation (U.S. Department of State, 2020). This stigma may further impede victims' rehabilitation by influencing their desire to ask for assistance and take part in re-integration initiatives. Many forms of stigma impact victims on a number of levels—from interpersonal interactions to social and institutional responses. The task of re-integrating victims is made

more difficult by the multilayered stigma that makes them invisible and misunderstood in their communities (Fukushima et al., 2020).

An important factor in the re-integration process is family relations. Upon their return, VOST may encounter difficult familial circumstances, such as rejection, DV, or being held accountable for their involvement in trafficking. Brunovskis and Surtees (2012) researched women from Moldova, Serbia and Albania. They found that some families reject returning VOST because of the stigma attached to sex-trafficking, which makes them even more vulnerable and isolated. Additionally, women are not believed when they reveal their trafficking experience, leaving them misunderstood and left with no support or reassurance. On the other hand, familial trafficking could have occurred, making the situation dangerous for the victims when they returned (U.S. Department of Justice, 2024). The recuperation and re-integration of the victim might be severely hampered by the absence of family support.

Psychological Trauma and Recovery

Comprehensive psychological treatment is necessary for VOST due to their trauma, although this support is typically inadequate in CEE states. For example, research conducted in Bulgaria has shown that a large number of victims do not obtain proper mental health treatment (Stoyanov and Nakov, 2023), and resort to traditional psychiatric treatment (Dimova et al., 2018), which may result in long-term psychological problems including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), sadness, and anxiety. But it is worth mentioning that there is stigma and negative stereotypes linked to seeking mental health services (Manescu et al., 2023). Comprehensive mental health treatments are crucial for VOST. In a Bulgarian context, Litam and Neal (2022), highlight the need for specialised care to effectively treat PTSD and related disorders and discuss trauma-informed approaches that are critical for addressing the complex psychological needs of victims. This deficiency in programs and mental health supports in Bulgaria hinders the victims' short-term and long-term chances for re-integration.

Economic Independence

The same gender dynamics that enabled their trafficking also to limits their economic alternatives. For instance, a large number of victims in Moldova go back to places where there are few work options, often in rural regions with high unemployment rates **(U.S. Department of State, 2023).** VOST in Romania face ongoing stigma, which impedes their access to employment possibilities. Employers often hesitate to recruit those who have a history of sex-trafficking out of concern about possible harm to their reputation. Victims are further entrenched in cycles of poverty and vulnerability as a result of this economic marginalisation, which increases their susceptibility to exploitation or re-trafficking. For VOST, breaking out from this cycle of poverty and marginalisation is crucial to their long-term rehabilitation and independence (Dorcas, 2024).

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW:

We have attempted to delve into the multifaceted issue of sex-trafficking among women in CEE, uncovering the significant roles played by gender dynamics, economic marginalisation, and socio-political influences. While extensive literature exists on these contributing factors, there is a notable gap in understanding how gender dynamics play in the re-integration process for VOST. This thesis aims to identify and address this gap, presenting findings that will enhance our comprehension of the challenges in re-integration and inform the development of more effective support mechanisms for victims.

METHODOLOGIES:

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is approached by many CEE case studies to explore the experiences VOST endure. CEE was chosen due to its rich cultural background, collectivist nature, traditional mindset and post-communist remanence, despite all efforts of modernisation. The purpose of this thesis is to explore what role gender dynamics have on VOST when re-integrating back into CEE. It is to uncover what those gender dynamics are, and what part they play. This thesis aimed to answer the research question of How Do Gender Dynamics in CEE Influence Re-integration Experiences of Female VOST. Sub-questions it wanted to answer was In What Way Does Stigma Contribute to The Marginalisation of VOST During Their Re-integration Process and How Do Intersects of Tradition, Culture and a Male Dominated Society in CEE Affect the Recovery for VOST. To answer these questions, the findings section was split into various gender dynamic themes and subthemes (detailed in part 5; data analysis).

In this thesis, a radical feminist perspective is adopted as the foundational framework for analysis, emphasising the need to rethink and dismantle systems of oppression against women that are deeply embedded in societal structures (Taylor, 2020). This approach critically examines how patriarchal ideologies permeate and shape the literature under investigation, highlighting the systemic power dynamics that sustain gender inequality. By prioritising the voices and experiences of women—particularly those challenging TGR (i.e., coming back from sex-trafficking)—this thesis seeks to identify how literature can both reflect and reinforce gendered power relations.

PART I: RESEARCH TECHNIQUES

This research is a qualitative analysis (Aspers, 2019) that is solely desk-based. It utilises multiple methods and, a range of empirical materials (Silverman, 2013) and methodologies (Silverman, 2005). A qualitative analysis is inherently subjective and socially constructed (Fossey et al., 2002), requiring diverse techniques to capture multiple perspectives, such as sample case studies across various CEE states (Baškarada, 2014). These case studies are grounded in phenomenology; a theoretical approach that relies on qualitative data analysis and prioritises contextual descriptions over broad generalisations. Phenomenology's strength lies in its ability to uncover aspects not initially within the study's focus, due to its emphasis on the inductive collection of extensive data. The goal of phenomenological research is to create "thick descriptions" of women's experiences and perspectives in their environments (Gray, 2014). Interpretive research was also conducted to explore individuals' experiences, opinions, and perspectives, particularly in the context of re-integration (Williams, 2021). This approach is typically inductive and closely associated with qualitative methods of data collection and analysis (Rowlands, 2005). The theoretical perspective of this research is constructivist, with a focus on gender dynamics (Lombardo, 2016). Constructivism rejects the notion that reality exists independently of the researcher and should be examined through scientific inquiry (Charmaz, 2008). Instead, it posits that truth and meaning are products of individuals' interactions with the external world, therefore meaning is created rather than discovered. Consequently, the same event may be interpreted differently by different people, leading to multiple, conflicting, yet equally valid interpretations of a phenomenon (Schwandt, 1998). Employing these diverse research methods facilitates triangulation. According to Lauri (2011), data triangulation involves gathering information from multiple sources or time periods, often within cross-sectional designs. This research incorporates methodological triangulation by combining techniques such as case studies, interviews, and surveys. Each method has its own advantages and limitations, so using a variety of techniques not only enhances data triangulation but also helps mitigate potential shortcomings of any single method. This approach has enabled a comprehensive analysis and a deeper understanding of the gender dynamics affecting sex-trafficking in these regions.

PART II: SAMPLING

In qualitative research, data sampling involves selecting a subset of sources or instances that provide rich and relevant information to address the research questions. This process is crucial for ensuring that the results are representative and offer insightful information about the issue under investigation (Bryman, 2016). This section outlines the methods and criteria used to select research, focusing on the gender dynamics influencing sex-trafficking in CEE and the challenges hindering re-integration within CEE communities. The geographical focus includes Albania, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Russia, and the Czech Republic. There is also some mention of Slovakia, Belarus, Estonia, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are a couple of reasons as to why there are more findings on some states than others. The first is the trafficking routes and source states like Albania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Moldova, that serve as major hubs for sex-trafficking (Lindstrom, 2004). The second reason is the EU membership and international focus. The EU has placed great pressure on many of their member states to address trafficking as part of their broader reforms tied to EU accession (Jandl, 2007) – thus leading to more reporting, research and ultimate funding. The third is NGO presence, especially in Romania, Albania, Serbia, Ukraine and Moldova. NGO networks have documented on cases and data, like La Strada International (2024) for instance. Whereas states like Latvia or Slovakia, have less governmental efforts and NGOs to give this visibility on sex-trafficking. The fourth is cultural and religious factors, where states like Albania and Moldova have deep rooted patriarchal values on gender roles (Kaser, 2021). On the other hand, in smaller Baltic states, although patriarchal, have more progressive gender norms. Finally, media coverage and research. The news industry is somewhat responsible for figures of victimisation (Velásquez et al., 2020), and therefore if states like Lithuania and Estonia have less international scrutiny, the media is less likely to cover rates of crime, in comparison to states like Romania.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria are critical in desk-based research as they define the scope of the review by specifying which papers or data sets are considered for analysis. Inclusion criteria determine which sources are appropriate and applicable based on factors like relevance, date, language, and methodological quality (Booth et al., 2016). For this thesis, inclusion criteria focused on sources directly related to the research questions, with data from the 2000s onwards to ensure relevance to the current state of affairs, given that earlier data may reflect outdated laws and regulations. Exclusion criteria eliminated sources that did not focus on sex-trafficking or related cultural dynamics, as well as publications predating 2000 and those not

from reputable or academic publishers without rigorous peer review. Initial screening is a crucial phase in desk-based research and involves a systematic assessment of potential sources to evaluate their quality and relevance. This typically includes a preliminary review of abstracts and titles to exclude unrelated studies, followed by a thorough evaluation of full texts to determine if they meet the predetermined inclusion criteria (Booth et al., 2016)

Three sampling techniques were employed in this thesis. The first was purposive sampling, where cases and data sources were deliberately chosen for their relevance and potential to provide insightful information about the phenomenon. This method is effective for gaining a deep understanding of specific issues, such as the cultural norms and TGR exacerbating sex-trafficking in CEE, rather than generalising to a broader population (Patton, 2015). The second technique was snowball sampling, which follows from purposive sampling. In this method, initial sources identify additional potential sources (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), facilitating the discovery of grey literature and data not found in major databases (Noy, 2008). This approach is particularly useful for uncovering hard-to-reach or hidden sources. The third technique was stratified sampling. This method involves dividing data into distinct strata or groups based on specific traits or criteria, ensuring a diverse representation of viewpoints and variations within the data (Suri, 2011). For this research, stratified sampling was crucial for incorporating a wide range of sources across different periods, geographical contexts, and types, including both governmental and non-governmental documents, or for example sources directly from Romania, versus sources from Slovakia. This approach ensured a balanced and comprehensive representation throughout the research.

To manage the data effectively, a database was created to track each source, noting details such as the publisher, publishing date, type of source, and its relevance to specific sections of the research. Each entry in the database included a brief summary outlining how the source contributed to the research questions and themes. The data sampling procedure for this research involved a systematic and meticulous process of selecting relevant secondary sources. By employing purposive, snowball, and stratified sampling methods, and by defining clear inclusion and exclusion criteria along with strategic search approaches, the research ensured a comprehensive and representative sample of literature. This robust sampling technique underpins the validity and reliability of the subsequent data analysis and conclusions.

PART III: DATA COLLECTION

To conduct a well-rounded and comprehensive literature review, related articles and academic databases were used as search strategies, such as Google Scholar, Maynooth Library and Scopus. Additionally, documents and reports published by the United Nations, United Nations of Human Rights (OHCHR), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UN Women, Council of Europe, European Commission, European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), EUROPOL, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED), U.S. Department of State, U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), World Health Organisation (WHO), Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and La Strada International were investigated. Many key terms were used such as, 'sex-trafficking', 'CEE', 'Cultural Influences', 'Stigma', 'Patriarchy', 'GBV', 'Gendered Labour', 'Gender Dynamics', 'Sex-work', 'Community Values' and 'Victim Mental Health'. The included criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles and relevant reports within the time frame of 2000-2024. The excluded criteria disregarded research that was not directly linked to the research questions, yet it was informative, nonetheless.

PART IV: ETHICAL ISSUES

Several ethical issues were encountered, primarily related to data handling and bias. Proper attribution was ensured by giving credit to the original authors of all literature, reports, and data used, with quotes, graphs, and paragraphs cited using the Harvard style. Qualitative research is particularly vulnerable to bias, which can arise from the researcher's viewpoints, data selection methods, and interpretation processes. Desk-based research, in particular, faces the risk of incorporating material that supports preconceived ideas (Galdas, 2017). This research identified inherent biases in certain reports from CEE, with some selectively presenting findings that could mislead or misrepresent the topic. To avoid cherry-picking— where only data supporting intended results is included while contrary evidence is disregarded (Mays and Pope, 2000)—a wide range of research was consulted. This included studies from different perspectives, such as those linking its prevalence in CEE to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to social unrest, economic instability, and the exploitation of vulnerable groups, particularly women (Shelley, 2010). This diverse information was synthesised and

cross-referenced to present a balanced, accurate argument while minimising bias. Given the sensitivity of this topic, efforts were also made to handle it carefully, considering its potential to be distressing for both victims and readers.

In qualitative research, respectful portrayal is crucial, especially when dealing with victims and sensitive subjects. This research balanced the ethical need to preserve the dignity and well-being of victims with the requirement for accurate data (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). It is important to note that the term 'victim' is used, as opposed to survivor. In many ways this term can pose numerous issues. Nonetheless, it is included here since it is still the most widely used and acknowledged term in the legal field. The term "victim" is not meant to minimise, reject, or exclude any women who have been exploited and who exercise their freedom to decline identification as victims, instead choosing to be known as survivors.

Misrepresentation or sustaining preconceptions can further cause harm by distorting policies or perpetuating false narratives (Mackenzie et al., 2007). To avoid this, no stigmatising language or harmful stereotypes were used when discussing the gender dynamics at play. Instead, a range of articles, journals, and legal papers were reviewed to reflect the diversity of regional approaches (e.g., how the Romanian government has raised public awareness of victims), avoiding a reductionist perspective. A reductionist view, which oversimplifies complex social phenomena, often strips the material of its depth and context (Flick, 2009). Given the traumatic experiences of VOST, the research maintained their dignity and rights, safeguarding their privacy and confidentiality by not revealing any identities (e.g., in interviews). Moreover, their experiences were not sensationalised, ensuring ethical sensitivity throughout. It is important to tackle ethical concerns in desk-based research to preserve legitimacy and integrity (Bryman, 2016). This thesis attempts to respect high ethical standards by making the sure correct acknowledgement is given, avoiding plagiarism, properly describing data, addressing delicate themes with care, and reflecting on personal biases (Flick, 2014). These steps not only improve the research's quality but also guarantee that it will further discover the aspect of post-sex-trafficking re-integration and shed light on the trauma and stigma VOST in CEE endure.

PART V: DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis stage is crucial for synthesising and interpreting the substantial amounts of secondary data gathered during research. It involves systematically integrating data from various sources to identify patterns, make informed judgments, and provide insights that address the research questions (Bryman, 2016). The collected literature, articles, and reports were organised, ensuring a systematic approach to data collection, storage, and analysis. Systematic organisation is essential for developing clear procedures for classifying and coding data, facilitating easier retrieval and interpretation (Yin, 2018). Sources were then coded based on their themes or relevance to categories such as cultural factors, sex-trafficking patterns, gender dynamics, and geographical locations.

A thematic analysis was employed to identify, evaluate, and summarise patterns (themes) within the data, organising it and offering detailed insights into various facets of the research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for the examination of sources by recurring themes related to sex-trafficking and gender dynamics. The initial phase involved coding each source (based on the first reading) and highlighting key concepts that aligned with the thesis focus. These codes were categorised into thematic categories based off of recurring patterns. For instance, the theme of stigma was analysed thoroughly through sub-themes of stigmatised cultural and gender norms, honour and sexuality, and internalised stigma and shame. The theme of mental health was analysed through the sub-themes of gendered barriers, emotional bonds, and limited support and gender bias in care. The theme of victim-blaming and victimhood was analysed separately, with no subthemes. The theme of patriarchy and GBV was analysed through the sub-themes of TGR and socio-economic factors, GBV as a 'private' issue, and weak legal protection. The theme of family structures and community values was analysed through the sub-themes of cultural and religious norms and, pressures and exploitation by trusted members. Lastly the theme of gendered labour markets was analysed through the sub-theme of economic instability and risks of re-trafficking. A comparative analysis was also applied, in which data from multiple cases (e.g., states) was not only described but explained (Pickvance, 2001). This method helped explore the reasons behind observed differences and similarities in gender dynamics across CEE states. By analysing each state's specific cultural and socio-political background, common patterns and characteristics emerged. The combination of thematic and comparative analysis created a coherent narrative, integrating multiple themes and highlighting the relationship between cultural influences and sex-trafficking.

PART VI: DATA LIMITATIONS

Several limitations were encountered during this research. The primary limitation was the absence of relevant primary data, requiring reliance solely on existing literature and data. Primary data is firsthand information gathered directly by the researcher through methods such as surveys, interviews, or observations, while secondary data comes from previously collected and published sources, such as government reports and scholarly journals (Hassan, 2024). This reliance on secondary data created potential information gaps, with some research findings being outdated. While arguments based on 1990s data might have been solid, many figures remain unknown or undiscovered today, raising concerns about accuracy. Additionally, the findings are context-specific to CEE and may not necessarily apply to other regions, such as South America or Asia. Another unanticipated limitation was the difficulty in accessing 'grey literature'—materials produced by academics, businesses, or government agencies that are not regulated by for-profit publishers. Grey literature can be invaluable in a systematic review, as it provides information not found in commercially published sources, helping to reduce publication bias and offering a more impartial evaluation (Paez, 2017).

Difficulty was encountered when accessing many NGO reports, governmental documentation, and policy papers, which likely limited the scope of the data. These sources could have provided valuable, context-specific information that academic research alone may not cover. As a result, there was an over-reliance on qualitative data, such as case studies and academic articles, with a relative underrepresentation of quantitative data. This limited the ability to generalise findings and identify broader trends. Given the focus on CEE, challenges with language barriers were faced. Romanian was easily read and interpretated but, there was a gap in accessing local research conducted in languages like Polish, Ukrainian, and Russian, potentially skewing the analysis. Additionally, the ever-changing socio-political context in CEE means that academic research struggles to keep pace with these shifts, which may have led to misalignments between the data and the current state of affairs.

SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGIES:

With this thesis the aim is to contribute to this academic field by developing an understanding of the gendered barriers VOST face when re-integrating back into CEE. By incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives from criminology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology, in hopes to shed light on these challenges. Despite the inherent limitations of desk-based research, including variability in the quality of secondary sources and the difficulty of accessing comprehensive, up-to-date data, maintained transparency and pave the way for future research. The thesis's scope was limited by geographical and temporal constraints in the reviewed literature and the absence of primary data. This limited the depth of analysis on gender dynamics in sex-trafficking. However, future research could address these gaps through fieldwork—such as interviews or ethnographic studies—that would provide greater insight into the lived experiences of victims. Additionally, on a comparative note, cross-regional studies within CEE could further explore the variability of sex-trafficking dynamics. A longitudinal study tracking changes in social norms, cultural attitudes, and trafficking trends in CEE would also be valuable. This research contributes to a deeper theoretical and holistic understanding of the gender dynamics of sex-trafficking in CEE and the issues faced upon return. Comprehensive strategies could combat the ongoing surge of sex-trafficking and could potentially support VOST. Through ongoing research and commitment to culturally competent practices, we can better navigate the interplay of gender dynamics and unravel the complex re-integration of VOST from CEE states.

FINDINGS:

INTRODUCTION TO THE GAP

Examining post-sex-trafficking re-integration through a gendered lens requires analysing how gender dynamics continue to shape the experiences and outcomes of VOST as they attempt to re-enter society and their communities. While extensive research has been conducted on the causes and mechanisms of sex-trafficking, there remains a significant gap in understanding the post-trafficking experiences of victims, particularly in terms of re-integration and the barriers they face. Sex-trafficking demands in the richer West European states (Kirsch et al., 2019), reflects the political and social attitudes towards sex-work, with ambiguous and contradictory policies and regulations, sustaining the vibrant 'markets in women' (Hubbard et al., 2008). In situations of fast, globalised marketisation and militarisation across CEE, sex-trafficking consists of force and social control of women (Chong and Clark, 2017), exacerbating gender disparities, that further entrenches patriarchal beliefs, family traditions, cultural standards (True, 2012), and higher rates of GBV (Song et al., 2020; Kalra and Bhugra, 2013).

The Palermo Protocol emphasises the importance of protecting VOST once they have returned. It adopted a victim-centred approach, addressing the 'three R's' – Rescue, Rehabilitate and Re-integrate. It notes that there must be something beyond just rescuing the women, and stresses that the victim's dignity must be restored (U.S. Department of State, 2008). This is an important note as it underlines the need for gender-sensitive support. Although some research has examined the elements that promote and hinder re-integration, such as Talens and Landman (2003), who mapped out various factors influencing the process, there is still a lack of focus on the gendered aspects that hinder re-integration for VOST. Key barriers include Stigma, Mental Health, Victim-blaming and Victimhood, Patriarchy and GBV, Family Structures and Community Values, and Gendered Labour Markets. These components will be explored in more detail as they relate to internal (i.e., psychological) and external (i.e., social) factors affecting the re-integration process. All of these barriers in some way contribute to the risk of re-trafficking for victims.

Zimmerman and colleagues (2011) note that the 'psychological hazards' (which we will note as the internal factors) are stigma (also including internalised/self-stigma), and mental health. The 'social hazards' (which we will note as the external factors) are Victim-blaming and Victimhood (Pinciotti and Orcutt, 2017), Patriarchy (Rahman, 2021) and GBV (Opanasenko et al., 2021), Family Structures (Engle et al., 2011), and Community Values (Cheeseman et al.,

2011), and Gendered Labour Markets (Maestripieri, 2015). The reason for this collaborative and merging approach between external factors with social hazards, and internal factors with psychological hazards, is because literature has not yet found and applied these terms to sex-trafficking re-integration. Although in essence, these terms are the same, the clarity is important to target the specific and unique characteristics of gendered re-integration. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced.

PART I: INTERNAL FACTORS:

Stigma

Stigmas are strong social labels that have significant effects on the people they are applied to, hence 'norm-breaking behaviour' results to stigma (Adler-Nissen, 2014). Link and Phelan (2014) state that stigma is used for exploitation and control. This feeds into the concept that stigma exacerbates issues of social exclusion and inequality for VOST, thus making them feel inferior and devalued. This section of the thesis focuses on how stigma and self-stigma are gendered and how social norms, a lack of social integration, barriers to opportunities and employment, and discrimination, all enhance the victim's vulnerability (European Commission, 2012; Chuang, 2006). The dynamic consequence of the gendered interplay of social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental forces causes vulnerability, and stigma can generate vulnerability (i.e., personally, situationally and contextually) negatively impacting VOST (Daniel-Wrabetz and Penedo, 2015).

Stigmatised Cultural and Gender Norms

The deep-rooted social, cultural, and institutional stigmas that victims in CEE encounter significantly hampers their ability to reconstruct their lives and re-integrate into their communities. Cultural and gendered standards are a major factor in the stigma surrounding VOST. According to Link and Phelan (2001), stigma is dependent on social, economic, and political power – it takes power to stigmatise, even though 'the role of power in stigma is frequently overlooked'. Dahal et al., (2015) found that stigma leads to victimisation, continues violent cycles, and keeps victims from escaping abusive situations, as a result hindering their capacity to seek help since it perpetuates oppressive structures (Wagner et al., 2016). Rajaram

and Tidball (2018), state that many organisations can exacerbate VOST's pain as they fail to engage with them due to stigmatised responses to sex-trafficking (Fukushima et al., 2020). According to a report by the IOM (2018), VOST experience significant stigma not only when they seek assistance but also when they fear being discovered as sex-workers. This stigma reinforces poverty and gender-related risk factors for sex-trafficking (Cody, 2017a), often leading victims to avoid seeking assistance, support, or disclosing their experiences about being trafficked due to the coercive nature of their imprisonment (Djuranovic and Kuosmanen, 2009; U.S. Department of Health and Human Service, 2009). Disbelieving sentiments, victim-blaming attitudes, stigmatisation, diversionary and dominating behaviours are a few examples of the negative impacts of stigma on victims (WHO, 2007).

Here, in this thesis, stigma is seen as a kind of governance that perpetuates cultural norms and socio-economic systems fostering sexualised and gendered divides. This shifts the perspective from seeing stigma as merely an interactional phenomenon to highlighting how macro-level socio-economic structures and institutions embed stigma within local and national power structures and hinder re-integration (Richardson and Laurie, 2019). Force, compulsion, isolation, and threats exemplify the dominance and gendered imbalances traffickers impose, exacerbating the stigma VOST endure (Counts, 2014). Traffickers enforce stigmatising attitudes, that become ingrained in the victim's self-perception, and therefore perpetuating re-integration. Miller, et al., (2011) discovered that avoidance coping after sexual victimisation is influenced by fear of unfavourable responses such as blame, contempt or humiliation, which hinders their process of re-integration and increases the risk of re-trafficking. Re-integration is further impeded as stigma fosters isolation, silencing victims and preventing them from seeking help (Rajaram and Tidball, 2018; Curran et al., 2017; Palmer and Foley, 2017). As a result, stigma hinder re-integration, as many of their friends, family, acquaintances, and service providers still stigmatise or discriminate against them. These women encounter hostile reactions from society after revealing their experiences with sexual violence, which were a result of gendered cultural norms (Safdar and Khan, 2023).

Honour and sexuality

Gender norms, surrounding sexuality and honour, are often based on patriarchal ideals, traditional customs, and religious convictions that impede social re-integration (Cihangir, 2012). Because of the combination of patriarchal family dynamics and gender-based shame, VOST often find it difficult to re-integrate into social networks. It is common for families and communities to reject VOST since they are seen as "damaged" or "tainted" in some groups (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012). In Moldova, Romania and Albania many women keep their trafficking a secret in hopes of avoiding stigmatisation or blame by association, continuing to exist as a hidden population (GRETA, 2018; Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012). In some cases, families chose to sever ties with their rescued daughters due to the perceived social damage caused by their association with sex-work (Guha, 2018). In many CEE states, a woman's honour is strongly associated with her sexual purity, reflecting a multifaceted cultural construct encompassing various cultural schemas, and roles. TGR portray women and their bodies as the protectors of men's honour (Mahmood and Jensen, 2024), and therefore are often perceived as having lost their "virtue," leading to the biggest barrier of re-integration, due to severe stigma, social shame (Pandey et al., 2018), rejection (McTavish, 2017), and moral judgment (Doezema, 1999). For instance, in Moldova and Albania, a woman's modesty and virginity are highly valued (GRETA, 2021) and the concept of shame in Albanian culture is the most notable. In these contexts, shame tends to overshadow honour, influencing societal attitudes and behaviours. The focus on communal rather than individual honour in Kosovo and Albania means that victims are frequently viewed as dishonouring their families and communities. This perception can lead to social distancing of the families and isolation of the victim, especially in rural areas where communal customs are common and deeply ingrained (Marion, 2012). Women in the Balkans are often shunned by their communities because they are seen as 'participating' in their exploitation (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2007), complicating re-integration effects (Surtees, 2008). An important indicator of a woman's social worth in traditional CEE states is her suitability for marriage. They are deemed permanently stained and have no place in the social structure of the community (Schwartz, 2004). In Albania, those who have been sexually exploited are particularly stigmatised as unfit for marriage (Niumai and Rajesh, 2022), resulting in severe social exclusion. The societal expectation for girls to maintain their virginity underscores the historical importance of marriage as a means of upholding family honour (Marion, 2012). In Albanian culture, a woman's identity is traditionally tied to her husband, highlighting the profound social value placed on marital status (Davies, 2009).

In many CEE states, religion has a big influence on cultural views and attitudes. Major religions such as Islam, Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity impose stringent moral codes on sexuality and gender roles. Consequently, VOST often face rejection and shunning due to perceived breaches of moral norms, particularly in Orthodox Christian communities where they may be deemed "unclean" and face open hostility and rejection, potentially harming the church's integrity (Knight et al., 2021). Instead of being tortured by guilt, VOST are more tormented by shame because they feel judged and excluded from their religious community, which takes its sexual morals from church practices (Deguara, 2019). The church, that is typically seen as a place of rectitude, sanctuary and for seeking refuge (Guardado, 2023), stigmatise and displace VOST instead (Kraft and Wilkinson, 2020).

Internalised Stigma and Shame

Many VOST internalise moral judgements, stigma and blame themselves for their exploitation, thus suffering obstacles to re-integration. These feelings stem from their environments that feed the belief that they chose this lifestyle (Fraser, 2010). This internalisation results in withdrawing from social networks, increased self-deprecation, and depressive symptoms (Fife and Wright, 2000; Wong, et al., 2011). Stigma operates bi-directionally, meaning those who are stigmatised and those that stigmatise are affected (Liu et al., 2011). Victims not only experience marginalisation through societal stigma but also perpetuate their own marginalisation by internalising these negative perceptions. For instance, in Poland, Romania and the Czech Republic victims did not seek services because they were afraid of feeling ashamed about disclosing their experiences of sexual exploitation (Manavalan, 2017). In the Czech Republic, in particular, the state deems sex-workers as 'social parasites'. Link and Phelan (2001) suggest that this internalisation of stigma prevents victims to acknowledge their trauma and discourages them from seeking networks of support (Schlegel, 2015), such as social (Hossain et al., 2010), legal, or psychiatric assistance (Pattyn et al., 2014), further solidifying their marginalisation and complicating re-integration. They feel compelled to conceal their status as a VOST, due to the societal conditioning fostering shame. This self-stigmatisation makes women perceive their bodies are 'spoilt', and that they would be shunned by society, their family, and their community, and seeing their only choice is returning to the sex-trade. Many Bulgarian VOST for example, suffer severe feelings of shame and self-blame, resulting in a vicious circle of helplessness, remaining trapped due to an unwillingness to ask for help

(Bruhns et al., 2018; Corbett, 2018). The dearth of sufficient assistance for repatriated victims in Bulgaria reinforces their susceptibility and sustains their exploitation (Ernewein, 2021).

Gendered cultural norms in many CEE states reinforce that VOST are to blame for their perceived complicity, with society to hold them accountable for the coercion and brutality involved in sex-trafficking. Research from Romania and Bulgaria has shown that upon returning to their communities, victims often encounter mistrust and moral condemnation (GRETA, 2021). In cultures like Bulgaria and Albania, myths about VOST, frame them as accountable, with the same beliefs that align with the 'damaged' and 'spoilt' narrative (Martin, 2013). This can be seen in a field-work study conducted in three Albanian cities, where VOST endured internalised stigma due to experiencing feelings guilt, shame, family exclusion, and a lack of support upon returning re-integration (Ramaj, 2023). Similar incidences occurred by this dynamic in Russia, as see though a survey by Buckley (2009). Moreover, VOST do not consider themselves as victims, normalising the abuse the received, as they are judged through a moral lens (Vijeyarasa, 2016). They have been conditioned to believe 'they are responsible for selling themselves' and are 'treated as the perpetrators' (by society) of the 'crime' of losing their virginities. This public perception reinforces internalised shame and justifies their rejection and expulsion. Traffickers exploit this further by insisting that if they seek help from the legal system, NGO or the police, they will be shunned and disbelieved (Mukesh, 2018). These stigmas only marginalise victims, complicating their re-integration into their communities.

Mental Health

Sex-trafficking 'results in significant psychological trauma and negatively impacts development' (Sprang and Cole, 2018). Sex-trafficking has received more attention in recent years, and among victims, mental health issues are the most common health problem. However, if or when victims are located, there are not many specialised resources accessible to aid in their escape and recovery. The fragmented societal reaction to GBV has been linked to the contemporary sex-trafficking service framework. Even though research has shown the need for an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach of mental health treatments for VOST, many services offered are deemed unsatisfactory, and adequate practices have not yet been developed (Judge, 2018). VOST experience short- and long-term repercussions on their psychological and physical health (Corbett, 2018), enduring trauma and unfavourable outcomes (Bruhns et al., 2018; Judge et al., 2018), that often go unreported, disregarded, or experience inadequate care. Anxiety, sadness, depression, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and PTSD are common conditions (Chisolm-Straker et al., 2018; Okech et al., 2018a; Zimmerman et al., 2003). Other health issues include STDs, pregnancy, abortions, headaches, stomach-aches, and generalised discomfort (Okech et al, 2018; Beck et al., 2017; Le, 2017). The lack of awareness among healthcare personnel about the warning signs of trafficking, coupled with victims' inability to disclose or self-identify abuse, frequently leads to missed opportunities for recognition and intervention (Judge et al., 2018; Rajaram and Tidball, 2017).

Gendered Barriers

Gender norms that discourage women from expressing vulnerability or seeking help can prevent victims from accessing mental health services (Fleming and Agnew-Brune, 2015). The trauma experienced by these victims frequently persists post-trafficking (Jones, 2009; Pandey et al., 2018), as they are part of an environment marked by drug misuse, poverty and/or criminality (Banovic and Bjelajac, 2012). Police officials and social workers may not take victims' claims seriously (Spencer et al., 2018), or may prioritise reuniting them with their families, even if those families were complicit in their trafficking (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012). Abas et al., (2013) found that among 120 VOST returning to Moldova, 54% had mental illness, 36% had PTSD, and 13% suffered from depression without PTSD (Levine, 2017). Similarly, Hossain et al., (2010) reported high rates of anxiety (48%), depressive symptoms (54.9%), and potential PTSD (77%) among VOST, particularly those who had experienced

sexual assault during their exploitation. Albanian VOST, experience the same complex traumas, but their mental health is exacerbated further by their cultural background (Chase et al., 2022). This reflects a broader disparity in autonomy between men and women in CEE, where patriarchal norms perpetuate the control, stigmatisation, and subjugation of women in sexual relations (Mukesh, 2018).

When engaging with VOST, cultural sensitivity and understanding are crucial for preventing re-traumatisation and giving victims a chance at recovery (Galicia, 2023). Re-integration programs must therefore work to create safe and empowering spaces where VOST feel comfortable seeking the help they need without fear of judgment (Sinko and Saint Arnault, 2020). This stigma, coupled with the lack of a reliable healthcare system, exacerbates their health problems. Disparities in healthcare, alongside cultural and gendered barriers, often result in VOST being handled by professionals who lack awareness of the systemic causes (Hemmings et al., 2016) and are ignorant of the prevalence of trafficking and the specific needs of victims (Shandro et al., 2016; Ernewein, 2021), contributing to victimisation (Bryant-Davis and Tummala-Narra, 2017). Women may avoid medical professionals out of fear of being judged for their conditions, believing that seeking care violates social norms (Govender and Penn-Kekana, 2008). Self-stigmatisation, victim-blaming and patriarchal values are all aspects of these gendered experiences. For instance, the Albanian Kanun addresses honour which views the disclosure of mental health issues as a sign of weakness (Iusmen et al., 2024). As they re-integrated into society, VOST expressed that they felt insecure and unprotected (Rajaram and Tidball, 2018). The sustainability of re-integration depends on providing a safe recovery environment, which necessitates increased community and state involvement (Judge et al., 2018; Le, 2017)

The trauma and psychological toll of sex-trafficking is exacerbated by patriarchal norms that silence women and discourage victims from speaking out about their experiences due to blame attributions, unfavourable social reactions towards victims (Ullman and Filipas, 2001). In states like Macedonia and Poland, VOST often face inadequate psychological support due to stigma and a lack of understanding of their trauma. This lack of support forces many victims to cope with their experiences in isolation, making the process of rebuilding their lives and re-integrating into society even more challenging (Surtees, 2005). Research indicates that the gendered experiences of violence and exploitation that VOST endure (Galicia, 2023), lead to mental health struggles like trauma, anxiety and depression (Littlewood, 2002; Theisen-Womersley, 2021; Iusmen et al., 2024). Hong and colleagues (2010) discovered a correlation

between elevated levels of societal stigma and higher levels of depression and suicide attempts among sex-workers (Counts, 2014). This contributes to long-term psychological and physiological effects (Pasmatzi et al., 2016).

Emotional Bonds

The emotional ties that VOST form with their traffickers is a possible hinderance to their re-integration. Many victims do not seek mental health care due to emotional and personal bonds. Traffickers often recruit and coerce women through complex bonds, presenting as 'boyfriends', partners, or lovers, obscuring the reality of their endured abuse (Dorahy, 2017). They have been emotionally manipulated and groomed (Kometiani, 2019), therefore allowing men to control them and form a false sense of dependency (Hamel, 2013). Establishing trust and an emotional bond is part of grooming (Wood and Wheatcroft, 2020), and it may entail taking on the role of a 'lover', thus leaving the VOST to believe their trafficker acts in good faith and remains loyal to him despite the abuse (Bossard, 2023). Due to these ties, victims find it difficult to see their traffickers as abusers (and in some ways want to protect them) since their psychological need for stability and connection takes precedence over their awareness of exploitation (Casassa et al., 2021). This only shows how deeply ingrained these emotional connections are and how this dependency significantly impacts the healing and re-integration process for VOST, making it harder for them to sever emotional ties, confront their trauma, seek support, and rebuild their lives.

Limited Support and Gender Bias in Care

In many CEE states, psychological services for VOST are either underdeveloped or inaccessible. Women as a result face difficulties in accessing professional mental health care due to financial constraints, limited services in rural areas, and the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Trauma-informed care serves as a springboard for standardised treatment, which outlines a culturally aware strategy. It addresses the complexity of their experiences, the societal context, the capacity to cope, and the availability of support networks (Emsley et al., 2022). Gendered trauma, including sexual violence (Menaker and Franklin, 2015) and reproductive coercion (Grace and Anderson, 2016), requires gender-sensitive mental health interventions. Traditional mental health services may not be equipped to handle the complex,

culture-specific and gendered nature of trafficking-related trauma (Powell et al., 2017). In Poland, despite the long-standing scientific interest in psycho-traumatology (Lis-Turlejska, 2008, for example), there is a shortage of highly qualified practitioners, and a lack of standardised clear legal regulation around certification and training (Witteveen et al., 2012). Similarly, Lithuania faces a lack of trauma-informed practitioners with the required mental health training addressing the trauma endured by VOST. Many practitioners specialising in trauma often operates outside health insurance systems, placing the financial burden on victims (Kazlauskas et al., 2016). Families of victims may not have been financially supportive before their departure from Albania, leaving them without necessary funds upon return (Ramaj, 2023). Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland face both financial and organisational challenges in establishing effective therapy centres for victims. Despite advancements over the last 20 years, such as the introduction of Brief Electric Psychotherapy for PTSD in Lithuania and the expansion of trauma-informed therapies like existential therapy and cognitive behavioural therapy, there remains a shortage of trained professionals, knowledge of trauma, PSTD, and stress, and evidence-based therapies in the region. Unfortunately, there are relatively few evidence-based trauma-focused therapies available for victims (Kazlauskas et al., 2016). Many treatments in CEE have not been adequately evaluated, and modern medicine often lacks suitable and specific procedures for addressing these complex needs (Kamusheva et al., 2021).

PART II: EXTERNAL FACTORS:

Victim-Blaming and Victimhood

Cultural expectations and gender norms play a significant role in shaping societal perceptions of victimhood and victim-blaming. A widespread misconception in many CEE states is that VOST chose to be exploited or could have prevented their exploitation. This belief is a result of entrenched gender norms that dictate the moral decisions of women to avoid situations of exploitation. However, this viewpoint ignores the complex realities victims face, including compulsion, manipulation, abuse, and limited viable choices. Factors such as social isolation, low education, and economic hardship place women in circumstances where they are forced to make difficult decisions (Surtees, 2008).

The World Society of Victimology (2012) defines victims as '*persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power'*. Victims may endure stigmatisation, face ostracism, punishment, or even brutal death. Given the severity of the situation, it is to no surprise that victims could be reluctant to come forward and hide their identities, even if doing so might increase their chances of surviving (Fohring, 2018). Research by Demir and Finckenauer (2010), involved interviews with 18 VOST from Ukraine, Romania, Moldova, and Belarus, who were sent to Turkey, and found that they did not anticipate being victimised, abused, or re-trafficked when they initially agreed to migrate. Victim-blaming is prevalent due to the widespread notion that they may have chosen or somehow "deserved" their fate (Beddows, 2022). This form of victim-blaming ties into how mislabelling victims (e.g., delinquents, runaways, damaged, unclean, and illegals) stigmatises them (Fukushima, 2019; Srikantiah, 2007).

Misconceptions, such as the belief that "sex-workers enjoy their work" or are not victimised, reflect lower educational attainment, sexist attitudes, patriarchy, low self-control, and acceptance of rape myths (Menaker and Franklin, 2013). These misconceptions marginalise victims, reducing public and institutional support, and weakening the social safety nets that are crucial for successful re-integration. According to Cunningham and Cromer (2016), victim-blaming shapes societal perceptions of VOST, reinforcing gendered stereotypes and influencing actions in various contexts. These gender roles not only impact the perceptions of

sex-trafficking, but dictate who is deemed a victim, thus enforcing stereotyped behaviours that complicate successful re-integration (Schwarz and Britton, 2015). Cultural and social views on gender relations and sexuality shape how victims are perceived (Menaker and Franklin, 2015). Victim-blaming delves into situational assessments, where VOST are scrutinised through a gendered lens, thus reinforcing these stereotypes (Cunningham and Cromer, 2016; Digidek and Baka, 2020). This highlights how significant the role of gender plays in victim identification, and how gendered biases highlight the difficulties and shape the opportunities of re-integration (Hanna, 2023).

Patriarchy and GBV

Gender inequality in CEE, is rooted in historical, traditional, religious, cultural, and socio-political contexts and plays a significant role in shaping the re-integration experiences of VOST (Kovacevic and Sehic, 2015). While the degree of patriarchy varies across the region, certain states stand out for their deep-seated patriarchal attitudes, such as Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania, which perpetuate gender inequality, reinforce harmful stereotypes, increase the prevalence of GBV and limit the social, economic, and political opportunities available to them (O'Brien, 2015). The dehumanisation of women in these cultures contributes significantly to their vulnerability, violating their human rights that are evident in sex-trafficking (IHF, 2000). These environments create conditions where women are more likely to fall victim to trafficking and once trafficked, are further stigmatised and marginalised by their communities, thereby experiencing re-victimisation (Boggiani, 2016).

Cultural consent and normalisation of women as property (Serughetti, 2017; Cameron et al., 2023), combined with low levels of education, inadequate law enforcement assistance (Reid, 2012), and insufficient independent resources, exacerbate vulnerability to sex-trafficking and exploitation (Deshpande and Nour, 2013). According to UN Women (1992), violence is defined as '*violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty*. FRA (2014) reports that, 33% (1/3) of women in the EU have endured physical and/or sexual assault since being 15 years old, with 22% experiencing DV. Additionally, 55% have undergone a form of sexual harassment and 43% experienced psychological abuse by a partner. These statistics underscore the widespread prevalence of GBV and abuse, and its deep roots in cultural and societal norms. In Moldova, reports of DV are continuously increasing, and in 2020 13,000 cases were made (United Nations Development Program, 2021). A commonality faced is that many of their family members witnessed their abuse (Ismayilova, 2015). In CEE men often "inherited" violent conduct from their elder male relatives via social learning, culturally accepted ideas, and stereotypes. The majority of police officers are men, and they often believe the perpetrator's justification that the wife's behaviour had agitated them. The majority of Moldovan women who are trafficked say that their decision to flee their home-country was motivated by a desire to escape their awful home life than by a desire to pursue a better one abroad (Revenco, 2002).

TGR and Socio-economic Factors

Many CEE states were influenced by the Napoleonic Code, which was patriarchal in nature. This code gave men control over their wives and families, institutionalising the idea of women as subordinate to men (Meade and Wiesner-Hanks, 2004). This legal framework persisted well into the 20th century in states like Poland, Hungary, and Romania, reinforcing gender inequality. Patriarchal societal and familial norms are fundamental drivers of GBV, heightening their risks of re-trafficking in the Balkans (Browne, 2021). In these male-dominated family structures, victims are often seen as dishonourable and are either ostracised or pressured to conform to TGR as caregivers or wives (Shelley, 2010). The pressure to fulfil these roles, despite the trauma they have endured, significantly hampers their re-integration (Kiss et al., 2015). Without access to financial independence, psychological support, or legal protection, victims struggle to rebuild their lives, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and re-trafficking networks. Socio-economic factors fuel gender inequality in CEE, with poverty remaining highly gendered. Women's economic reliance on men limits their access to justice and increases GBV (Carter, 2021). This dependency makes women vulnerable to trafficking networks that exploit their need for work (True, 2012). Patriarchal norms in CEE restrict women's access to education, employment, and economic resources, reinforcing TGR. In Moldova, these entrenched norms perpetuate rigid gender roles, positioning men as breadwinners and decision-makers while relegating women to their TGR (Carter, 2021). According to OECD (2019), these norms contribute to women's marginalisation both politically and economically, as seen in their under-representation in political offices, low participation in the labour force, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. Structural discrimination and household responsibilities intensify the challenges women face (Bingham, 2016; OECD, 2019). These societal expectations to conform to TGR further isolate victims, trap them in cycles of economic dependence and prevent them from fully re-integrating.

In Hungary, the government has actively promoted traditional family roles, positioning women primarily as mothers and homemakers and emphasising the importance of large families. This rhetoric reinforces patriarchal norms and reflects the government's broader illiberal agenda, which contrasts with Western liberal democracies. These values are often framed as 'masculine', serving as a means to assert the state's sovereignty in contrast to what it perceives as the 'feminised' international order (Lehotai, 2023). This environment significantly impedes social re-integration as it prioritises TGR over women's rights and independence. The

government's emphasis on patriarchal family structures diminishes support for women's empowerment and restricts access to resources that could aid victims in rebuilding their lives. Additionally, Hungary has resisted certain EU initiatives on gender equality and has even taken steps to curb gender studies programs in universities in 2018, reflecting a strong commitment to preserving TGR. This has created an environment where women's rights are often secondary to preserving patriarchal family structures (Kent, 2018). The suppression of gender equality initiatives and academic programs further limits opportunities for victims to challenge societal norms, leaving them isolated and more vulnerable to re-trafficking.

GBV as a 'Private' Issue

Patriarchal attitudes often normalise GBV (i.e., DV and sexual exploitation) (McKinley et al., 2021) and is seen a 'private' issue (one that is meant to be kept indoor) rather than a societal problem (Meena, 2023). This belief is held by the majority of Moldovan women for instance (OSCE, 2019). Despite legal reforms, patriarchal norms contribute to high levels of DV in Romania and Serbia. In Romania, similar to Moldova; DV is often viewed as a private matter, and societal attitudes can make it difficult for women to seek justice or protection. A 2016 study found that 55% of Romanians believe non-consensual sexual contact can be justified in certain situations, with 30% considering rape justifiable if the woman was under the influence of drugs or alcohol, and 25% attributing responsibility to "provocative" clothes (European Commission, 2016). Reflecting these troubling attitudes, the European Institute for Gender Equality ranked Romania near the bottom of the 2021 European Gender Equality Index (EIGE, 2024), just above Hungary and Greece.

Deeply ingrained cultural beliefs, such as "a slap is not a beating," "if he beats me, it means he loves me," and "a woman must be punched from time to time, or she will grow too big for her boots," continue to persist in Romanian society. Conversations with feminist activists and NGOs reveal that GBV remains one of the most pressing issues facing Romanian women today (Hau, 2023). Romanian proverbs that trivialise VAW demonstrate how deeply rooted gender norms sustain such behaviour such as 'A woman's role is to suffer', 'The woman who is not beaten is like the unbound mill', 'Don't worry, your wife knows why you are beating her' and so on (Dumitrescu, 2014). These proverbs, while seemingly harmless or humorous, highlight how deeply ingrained gender norms perpetuate violence and make it an extension of 'normal' behaviour. Such cultural acceptance allows for widespread subjugation and VAW, reinforcing

the notion that GBV is an accepted part of societal conduct. Similarly, Serbia grapples with high rates of GBV, and deeply rooted cultural beliefs in male authority and female subordination. By the end of 2021, over 20,000 Serbian women shared stories of violence they endured but never reported (UN Women, 2022). The Prenerazena report highlights severe gender inequalities, including an alarming statistic that a Serbian woman is murdered by her partner in her home every two weeks. Additionally, the state suffers from inadequate healthcare services, with only one gynaecologist available for every 5,812 women (UN Women, 2024). The deeply established concept that a woman's worth is determined by her ability to withstand pain creates a cycle of re-victimization and reliance (Boggiani, 2016), hampering attempts to reclaim autonomy and re-integrate into society.

Weak Legal Protection

This cultural acceptance of violence leads to under-reporting and under-prosecuting of such crimes, creating a climate where sex-trafficking can flourish, as women are less likely to seek help or be protected by authorities (Juarros-Basterretxea et al., 2024). A case study in Greece found that Albanian women were reluctant to report DV to the authorities due to cultural norms. Their financial dependence on their partners/lovers/husbands further marginalised them. These abusive environments make them more susceptible to trafficking as they sought to escape through risky migration or employment opportunities (Poteyeva and Wasileski, 2016). In 2018, despite the Bulgarian cabinet's approval of a national program for preventing DV, both the government and the main opposition Socialist Party resisted ratifying the Istanbul Convention on GBV, reflecting ongoing societal resistance to addressing GBV (Cheresheva, 2018). Bulgaria has faced criticism for its weak enforcement of GBV laws and its reluctance to fully embrace international conventions like the Istanbul Convention. Patriarchal attitudes contribute to societal acceptance of GBV and continue to hinder progress towards gender equality. This normalisation of GBV undermines the safety and well-being of VOST. The societal acceptance (Montoya and Agustin, 2013), and weak legal protections create an environment of distrust in support systems, thus impeding access to essential services for re-integration. Additionally, it isolates them from their communities by perpetuating this stigma around GBV. This systemic inequality impacts any form of opportunity for economic independence and social re-integration, increasing their susceptibility to trafficking and other forms of violence (Ong et al., 2021).

Family Structures and Community Values

Family structures and community values play a significant role in shaping the re-integration experiences of VOST. It is difficult for VOST to be accepted by their communities after being seen as 'spoilt', 'impure' or 'deviant' (Armstrong, 2018), even if their families are willing to accept, their communities still hold strong values (Chen and Marcovici, 2003), and share criticism against them (Corrin, 2005). Both Moldovan and Ukrainian returning victims are seen with contempt, appearing to be a strong belief that sex-work poses a fundamental danger to Moldovan and Ukrainian community values (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2000). Cultural norms around female honour often led to community rejection of victims, hindering recovery (Kostovicova et al., 2020). This can be seen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where disowning women is practised by family members and their communities as they have broken family units (Bljesak, 2017). The importance of maintaining social harmony, fulfilling collective responsibilities and not disrupting these values complicates the re-integration process for VOST. This community-driven rejection causes victims to be isolated from the assistance they need, adding layers of shame and social judgement. In some cases, victims would prefer to stay with their trafficker rather than returning home, fearing the suffer societal shame their families would face (Tomura, 2009).

Cultural and Religious Norms

In CEE states, collectivism is deeply embedded in gender dynamics and family structures, emphasising family cohesion and community responsibilities (Nelli, 2022). Women have cultural expectations to prioritise family duties, over personal ambitions as demonstrated by Galligan and Clavero (2005) by conducting 117 interviews with women from Estonia, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland. In Albania, as in many collectivist cultures, the group is valued more than the individual. In a collectivist culture, for women to receive a positive reputation, they must respect their parents, honour their spouse, bear male offspring, and abstain from all immoral activity. Collectivism is an obstacle to re-integration, as the pursuit of honour and avoiding humiliation are two important facets (Marion, 2012). This collectivist orientation links the identity of a woman to the roles of the family and community.

In Poland, the Catholic church significantly shapes societal attitudes towards gender and family, promoting TGR. This is evident in national policies, including attempts to limit reproductive rights (i.e., restrictive laws on abortion) and resistance to gender equality initiatives (i.e., the withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention on VAW) (Graff, 2014). Traditional family values are often prioritised over women's autonomy, perpetuating gender inequality (Gwiazda, 2021). The Romanian Orthodox Church holds considerable influence over societal norms, where 81.1% of the population adheres to Orthodox Christianity (World Population Review, 2024). The church promotes conservative views on family and gender, reinforcing the notion of male superiority (Roibu and Roibu, 2016). In rural communities, the adherence to specific gender roles within religious rituals underscores their centrality in daily life. Practices like patrilocality, where women move in with their husbands after marriage, require them to adapt to new rituals and traditions, which are passed on through generations. This lifelong engagement with religious and cultural practices highlights the significant role of these gender norms in shaping women's lives and identities in rural Romania (Bucur, 2011). In both Poland and Romania, the church reinforces patriarchal norms and TGR, which prioritise the subordination of women and limit autonomy.

In Albania, the Kanun, a traditional code of conduct, profoundly influences social behaviour, particularly in rural and conservative areas. This patriarchal system enforces strict gender roles and often justifies GBV to control their behaviour. Women are viewed as subordinate, described in the Kanun as a "sack for carrying things" and are expected to be highly obedient to all male relatives. Customary law grants husbands' authority over their wives, including the power to discipline them for their wrongdoings (Sadiku, 2014). The concept of honour is crucial, with any dishonourable act against a family member being considered a transgression against the entire family. The patriarchal system is enforced by the Kanun, justifying GBV and reinforcing yet again the subordination of women. This only complicates re-integration as it fosters environments of control for victims and marginalises them within their family and community structures. These fundamental values act as a barrier, limiting any form of support and perpetuating stigma against VOST.

Pressures and Exploitation by Trusted Members

Women in CEE face cultural pressures to support their families financially and these social expectations play a role in their trafficking. In Moldova and Ukraine for instance, families often encourage their daughters to travel abroad for economic opportunities. In some smaller communities sending a woman overseas to work as sex-worker is not an issue if it means generating money (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2000). Returning without money can be disastrous, and often seen as unacceptable (Long, 2002). Their ongoing economic crisis exacerbates this fear (Pandey et al., 2018). The line between labour and exploitation is blurred (Skrivankova, 2010), and this reality often diminishes their experiences to an unfortunate necessity or sacrifice (Brennan, 2014). Therefore, re-integration is hampered by this contempt and inability to live up to their family's expectation. CEE family structures and communities values can be both a source of support or a site for exploitation and re-victimisation. Trafficking can originate from either the family or the community. Family members or romantic partners would directly facilitate trafficking; for instance, in 2022, a Romanian criminal network was dismantled for using the lover-boy ruse on Romanian women (EUROPOL, 2022), and in 2024 a Hungarian couple was arrested for forcing 6 of their children into sex-work) (EUROPOL, 2024; Safdar and Khan, 2023). In Albania, a high percentage of victims knew their traffickers, with some women even giving false testimonies about them out of fear (Ramaj, 2023). Similarly, in Bulgaria and Romania, victims were recruited by people they knew, including friends and family members (Surtees, 2008). This breach of trust, where these 'support systems' deceive and manipulate victims, highlights a darker side of the collectivist framework. As many sex-trafficking causes originate among the family, these structures are not always safe havens for victims. This facilitation and exploitation pre-trafficking make it difficult to re-build their lives and trust, as the very 'protectors' whom they should be re-integrating back to, were the ones that had placed them there. This familial exploitation adds another layer of vulnerability hindering re-integration.

Gendered Labour Markets

Gendered labour markets in CEE limit the economic re-integration for victims by enforcing social norms that confine women to feminine low-paying jobs. These norms, particularly in conservative cultures, dictate the roles deemed appropriate for women and usually restrict their access to a wider range of economic opportunities. Re-integration programs that offer vocational training frequently reinforce these norms by focusing on traditionally feminine skills, such as sewing or domestic work, which tend to be unstable, low-paying and perpetuate economic dependency (Tsutsumi et al., 2008), thus undermining efforts for long term financial independence and, increasing vulnerability to re-trafficking (Shelley, 2010). Additionally, gendered economic structures exacerbate these challenges. Even when victims attempt to seek employment and break free of traditionally feminine roles, they often face a gender pay gap and limited upward mobility. Equal participation is vital to democracy, progress, and justice (UN Women, 2012), eliminating these prejudices is critical for advancing human development and empowering VOST, and not falling into the hands of traffickers (Tsutsumi et al., 2008). Understanding how gender discrimination, diminished human rights, and personal vulnerability are amplified by social stigma (Mukesh, 2018), is essential for creating more effective economic re-integration programs that genuinely empower victims and provide them with sustainable livelihoods.

Economic Instability and Risks of Re-Trafficking

Economic instability and the lack of sustainable livelihood opportunities play a critical role in increasing re-trafficking risk. Fears for their safety, unknown legal situations, and financial difficulties are some of these stressors (Judge et al., 2018; Beck et al., 2017; Dahal et al., 2015). Victims often lack necessary skills to achieve economic opportunities post-rescue (Roby, 2005), perpetuating feelings of helplessness, making it difficult for VOST to move past their trauma, and in some cases driving them back to their exploitative situations out of sheer necessity. A Moldovan psychologist observed that many victims, unable to find employment in Moldova, left again to pursue sex-work abroad, driven by promises of financial gain and pressure to provide for their families (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2000). Re-integration is heavily dependent on economic stability and sustainability (Okech et al., 2018a), as financial stress undermines victims' sense of empowerment and self-efficacy (Hickle, 2016;

Le, 2017). Ultimately, the economic conditions that made these women susceptible to trafficking initially remain the root of their ongoing vulnerabilities (Islam and Fay, 2024).

Many of these women lack a full understanding of trafficking's reality, despite their awareness of potential risks (Ornelas et al., 2023). Victims from lower socio-economic backgrounds with limited education are particularly vulnerable, often perceiving sex-trafficking and sex-work as viable options (Osezua, 2013; Pandey et al., 2018), as the 'working in order to live' mentality is significant in states with prominent masculinity levels (e.g., Romania and Bulgaria) (Gaweł, et al., 2023). Family and community support are crucial for successful re-integration, with familial love playing a key role in reducing re-trafficking risks (Aninoşanu et al., 2016; Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012a), and aiding rehabilitation (Stenius and Barchiesi, 2019). Following their rescue VOST often go back to the same neighbourhoods, experience unstable economies, and have other risk factors that made them vulnerable to sex-trafficking in the first place (Okech, 2018a). Brunovskis and Surtees (2012) interviewed 19 VOST in Moldova, revealing that many women felt disappointed by their families' reactions when they returned home. These women had hoped for support but instead had been met with a lack of encouragement, felt misunderstood (Le, 2017), and received very little financial support (Hickle, 2016). These situations result in women feeling compelled to return to their abusive circumstances (Pandey et al., 2018). According to Gallagher (2010), re-integration and preventing re-victimisation go hand in hand. Many women prefer to distance themselves rather than confront the stigma tied to their involvement in sex-work (Hennink and Simkhada, 2004; Ernewein, 2021). The key to socio-economic freedom is that which includes social empowerment and financial self-sufficiency.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS:

This research contributes to the understanding of post-trafficking re-integration by highlighting the pervasive gendered barriers that continue to affect VOST when attempting to re-integrate back into their communities and societies, a topic that has been underexplored in previous research. The findings have significant implications for developing more effective re-integration programs, particularly in addressing stigma and improving mental health support, areas that have been identified as critical yet underserved. Also, it has illuminated the multifaceted challenges of re-integrating VOST in CEE, revealing how deeply ingrained gender dynamics shape their experiences. Victims are subjected to enduring social exclusion and victim-blaming, creating internal and external barriers to integration. The interplay between internal psychological barriers—such as stigma, and mental health issues —and external social barriers that paint a vivid picture of the multifaceted nature of re-integration challenges – such as victim-blaming and victimhood, patriarchy and GBV, family structures and community values, and economic re-integration and gendered labour markets. The findings underscore the urgent need for a comprehensive, gender-sensitive approach to support VOST, addressing both the internal and external barriers they face.

ANALYSIS:

INTRODUCTION

Understanding how re-integration is hampered by the gendered dynamics for VOST is extremely difficult. The concepts of stigma, culture and traditional values are intertwined, and analysing each proves virtually impossible. Due to this nature, the thematic analysis of data revealed many themes and subthemes including stigma, mental health, victim-blaming and victimhood, patriarchy and GBV, family structures and community values, and gendered labour markets. Each theme is discussed based on the research questions at hand; How Do Gender Dynamics in CEE Influence Re-integration Experiences of Female VOST, In What Way Does Stigma Contribute to The Marginalisation of VOST During Their Re-integration Process and How Do Intersects of Tradition, Culture and a Male Dominated Society in CEE Affect the Recovery for VOST. The findings thus far will be synthesised with existing literature to answer the research questions. This analysis will be organised around the key themes and sub-themes to highlight the dynamics that shape re-integration for VOST in CEE.

LINKING FINDINGS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How Do Gender Dynamics in CEE Influence Re-integration Experiences of Female VOST?

Theme: Mental Health

The re-integration experiences of VOST in CEE are heavily impacted by complicated gendered barriers, emotional bonds with traffickers and limited support and gender bias in care. These variables, taken together, impede healing and re-integration, perpetuating the victims' stigma and marginalisation. In literature it is well established that women who seek mental health treatment face gendered oppression (Tseris et al., 2022), directly impacting their re-integration experiences. The socio-cultural structure in CEE frequently reinforces gender stereotypes that restrict women from showing vulnerability or seeking mental health treatment. As Fleming and Agnew-Brune (2015) point out, these rules can hinder VOST from accessing critical services. Agterberg (2017) noted that women encounter unique gender-based barriers, such as familial

duties, mental health and relationships. TGR are one of the fundamental reasons as to why it is difficult for women to seek care, as fear of judgment and ostracising is present. This is all in line with existing arguments that there are specific variables that disproportionately impair and undermine a woman's motivation and/or ability to seek care (Green, 2006; Tuchman, 2010).

Additionally, literature finds that the mental health care in CEE is shaped by structural inequalities, particularly post-1989, when the states faced systemic transitions in its health systems. These changes unjustly impacted the mental health support available to women, especially VOST. Gender dynamics play a key role in how these barriers manifest and affect re-integration experiences. VOST suffer gender-specific health concerns as they are biologically and socially specific to women (i.e., sexual injuries, sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies, and reproductive issues) (Jina and Thomas, 2013; White, 2013). These particular health concerns exacerbate and amplify the difficulties and challenges VOST have while seeking to navigate the mental health treatment system, which is frequently unable to meet their special requirements (Kazlauskas et al., 2016). For example, research shows that VOST have risky and unhealthy behaviour patterns (non-sexual and sexual), which shows how the trauma of sex-trafficking is gendered (Jina and Thomas, 2013; Basile et al., 2006). These behaviours are often a response to the extreme power dynamics and exploitation experienced, resulting in anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Hendriks et al., 2018). This gender-specific trauma highlights the need for gender-sensitive mental health care, which is often lacks in the state's healthcare systems.

The emotional relationships that VOST create with their traffickers provide a substantial impediment to recovery and re-integration. In literature thus far it has been noted that VOST, IPV, and hostage-taking sometimes form strong emotional bonds with their abusers or kidnappers as a means of surviving (George, 2015; Bailey et al., 2023). The psychological condition known as trauma-bonding (T-B) or Stockholm syndrome has been attributed to the aftermath of interpersonal trauma (de Fabrique et al., 2007). T-B occurs when a victim feels that they are being threatened physically or psychologically by their abuser, when they perceive their attacker to be kind to them, when they are isolated, and when they are unable to flee their situation (Reid et al., 2013).

Behavioural scientists have defined T-B as an inherent and automatic survival mechanism that is activated when experiencing violence and isolation, alongside kindness and benevolence from the abuser (James, 1994; van der Kolk et al., 2007). Many academics have drawn

comparisons and parallels between the victim-perpetrator dynamics in IPV cases and those into sex-trafficking (Farley et al., 2004; Kennedy et al., 2007; Stark and Hodgson, 2003), pointing out that the victim in both situations is physically and emotionally controlled. Traffickers frequently use social isolation as a means of manipulation, physical and sexual abuse to terrorise victims, and control their finances and employment opportunities. They 'are also likely to deny the sexual nature of their offence, and transfer responsibility' to the victims (Spidel et al., 2007).

Victims frequently struggle to come forward with their abuse. Jülich (2005) listed a number of reasons why victims remained silent about abuse, including threats of harm and exposure to family members. Traffickers in Serbia would threaten to expose the women to their parents of their sex-crimes if they attempted to run away (Brunovskis and Surtees 2007). In line with Jülich's findings, victims of various forms of interpersonal violence frequently develop the belief that they were somehow responsible for the trauma and violence, particularly when they are involved in T-B (Clawson and Grace, 2007).

Finally, gender dynamics in CEE takes precedence over the re-integration experiences VOST face. These relationships exacerbate the difficulties that victims confront during their recovery by perpetuating stigma, establishing emotional dependencies, and limiting access to necessary therapy. Addressing these difficulties necessitates a complete strategy that not only reconsiders cultural views towards gender and victimisation, but also creates accessible, gender-sensitive mental health treatments. By creating safe and supportive environments, it is possible to help VOST regain their narratives and effectively re-integrate into their communities.

Theme: Gendered Labour Markets

This analysis investigates how persistent the gendered labour markets impact the re-integration process via economic vulnerability and the risk of re-trafficking. These findings underscore the challenges to financial independence for female VOST, as well as the societal contexts that make them more vulnerable to re-trafficking. Gendered labour markets, particularly in conservative societies, have a substantial impact on the re-integration experiences of VOST by reinforcing patriarchal norms that limit women to traditionally feminine, low-paying precarious jobs (Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). This can be seen in Romania, where the agency of women is limited by their surrounding circumstances and social conditions (Roibu and Roibu, 2016). This increases the danger of re-trafficking since economic vulnerability remains ignored (Shelley, 2010).

Despite the political and economic revolutions in CEE from state socialism to capitalist democracies, gender disparities (i.e., gender pay gap and unequal opportunities) in the job market persist (Klenner and Leiber, 2010). Pascall and Kwak (2010) contend that under state socialism, challenges to patriarchal norms were restricted. While capitalist democracies put further strain on these structures, gender inequities remained, notably in the employment market. Even when female VOST try to break out from TGR, they confront additional obstacles, such as restricted career prospects and uneven compensation. Disregarding women risks locking them in cycles of poverty, limits their economic opportunities and exacerbates their vulnerability to sex-trafficking (Malgesini et al., 2017).

This gender disparity contributes to the 'feminisation of poverty', a phenomenon coined by Pearce (1978) to explain how women are disproportionately affected by poverty owing to gender disparities in salaries, intra-household resource distribution, and caregiving obligations. The gender wage gap is a key contributing element to these concerns. According to EUROSTAT (2022), women's gross hourly salaries in the EU are on average 12.7% lower than men's, with a 13.2% discrepancy. The gender pay gap is one of the main factors contributing to the feminisation of poverty in the EU (EIGE, 2020). The EUROSTAT database shows that states like Romania, Czech Republic, and Estonia, which have the highest rates of feminisation of poverty, also rank low in gender equality promotion in 2020 (Perzyńska and Guzowska, 2024). In CEE, minority and immigrant women are particularly vulnerable, as they often lack access to affordable childcare, social networks, and social security benefits (Alarcão et al., 2023; Lahuerta, 2012; Sahraoui, 2019). The gendered structure of labour markets not only

exacerbates economic inequalities but also increases women's vulnerability to sex-trafficking (Tavcer, 2006). Without addressing the underlying economic inequities, re-integration attempts risk failing, as women may feel pressured to return to exploitative employment to fulfil their financial requirements and survival (Pati and Yousuf, 2016; Fernandes et al., 2020).

Research done in Moldova discovered that many victims, unable to find job at home, are compelled to travel again, frequently resorting to sex work overseas for financial gain (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2000). This emphasises the need of re-integration programs that focus on giving long-term economic support to prevent re-trafficking. Research highlights the direct link between women's socio-economic backgrounds and their trafficking status (Lăzăroui and Alexandru, 2003; Aninoșanu et al., 2016). According to Tahira Abdullah, "Poverty has a woman's face" (Saeed, 2013), and the continual pressure of cultural, religious, or traditional conventions exacerbates poverty's feminine aspect. The socio-economic and political landscape in CEE continues to be shaped by gender inequality, as patriarchal norms restrict women's access to the workforce, education, and thus impacting their agency (Rogers et al., 2013).

Gender dynamics in CEE—such as gendered labour markets, economic inequities, and insufficient welfare programs—play a pivotal role in shaping the re-integration experiences of female VOST. To ensure successful re-integration and empowerment, re-integration programs must address these gendered dynamics by offering comprehensive support, including diverse vocational training, education, employment opportunities, and increased access to social services. By confronting the socio-economic factors that make women susceptible, CEE states can foster more equitable conditions that reduce women's vulnerability to exploitation and empower female VOST for long-term recovery and independence.

In What Way Does Stigma Contribute to The Marginalisation of VOST During Their Re-integration Process?

Theme: Stigma

These findings offer insight into the nature of stigma and the complex effects on VOST, specifically through a gendered lens of stigmatised cultural and gender norms, honour and sexuality, and internalised stigma and shame. The evidence shows that sigma is a tool of social control and marginalisation for VOST. For many victims, stigmatisation may be so extreme, literature defines it as a 'social death' due to the rejection from their community, less legal protection, shame, and loss of social identity (Králová, 2015). As argued by Rose (2023) stigmatisation is not merely an individualistic experience but it serves as a social penalty and punishment for failing to adhere to prescribed TGR.

The implications of this gendered stigma are severe. Victims are often abandoned by their families, spouses, and communities, which further isolates them emotionally and financially (UN Security Council, 2017). This ostracisation of VOST reflects how societal perceptions of 'honour' and 'shame' continue to dominate gendered moral frameworks, as evidenced by court rulings in Bosnia and Herzegovina (TRIAL International, 2020), where sexual abuse is framed as an assault on a woman's honour rather than an act of violence. This framing moves the societal attention away from the perpetrator's guilt and onto the victim, supporting gendered victim-blaming narratives. Fábián (2010) and Flood and Pease (2009) add that societal normalisation of GBV and exploitation in CEE make it difficult for VOST to label themselves as victims, leading them to minimise or justify their abuse as economic survival or standard gender dynamics.

Rose's (2023) empirical study further highlights the social identity loss that is common among VOST. Gendered discourses surrounding sexual purity, infidelity, and notions of being 'damaged goods', or their bodies as 'spoilt' reinforce this stigmatisation, making it impossible for them to resume their prior positions in the community and deem the return of sex-work as the only viable option (Mukesh, 2018). The findings highlight the importance of 'othering' in the social marginalisation of VOST, particularly in patriarchal states in CEE. Sayers (2013) and Vanwesenbeeck (2001) argue that women involved in sex-work frequently experience othering, are stripped of their community citizenship (Campbell, 2015) and are negatively labelled by society (Scambler 2007). The cultural process of 'social othering' promotes disposability and disdain for victims, resulting in further violence and marginalisation (Lewis

et al., 2013; Sanders and Campbell, 2007; Seshia, 2010). According to Lewis et al. (2013), the enduring and widespread nature of sex-work stigma is at the heart of the marginalisation faced by VOST. This structural stigma perpetuates their social isolation, worsens their economic opportunities, and negatively impacts both their physical and mental health (Benoit et al., 2018; Green et al., 2005; Link and Phelan, 2001).

Interpersonal barriers are linked to the gendered shame and self-blame that VOST face as a result of the stigma and taboo nature surrounding sex-trafficking. An abundance of research shows that VOST who experience shame are less likely to seek support out of fears of being ousted or judged (Carson et al., 2020). This aligns with broader gender norms in CEE, where women are often held to higher moral standards regarding sexual purity and honour, making the stigma surrounding sexual victimisation particularly grave. Furthermore, the response and reaction of those closest to them exacerbates feelings of shame. When close relationships fail to validate their experiences, for example, by not believing the victim or not taking them seriously (Carretta et al., 2016). It can reinforce internalised stigma—the victim is more likely to doubt their experience and, as a result, not report the victimisation or engage in support services (Ullman et al., 2020; Kennedy and Prock, 2018).

Furthermore, Link and Hatzenbuehler (2016) identify structural stigma as a persistent factor in VOST's socio-economic marginalisation. The institutionalisation of stigma, whether via restricted access to mental health resources, gender-biased legal systems, or a lack of social support networks, reinforces their marginalisation. Many victims internalise these stigmas, resulting in a worse feeling of self-worth and contributing to cycles of helplessness, as observed in the cases of Bulgarian victims (Bruhns et al., 2018; Corbett, 2018). This internalised stigma not only has an impact on mental health but also impedes re-integration attempts. Bowen and Bungay (2016) suggest that power structures communicate and sustain this stigma, which serves to reinforce hierarchical dominance and marginalisation of VOST (Grittner and Walsh, 2020). Stigma acts on both a cultural and structural level, perpetuating inequality by strengthening obstacles to social inclusion and access to services. This adds to a self-reinforcing cycle of marginalisation in which the victim's perceived social positions and identities are permanently changed, limiting their capacity to re-integrate back.

Theme: Victim-blaming and Victimhood

Stigma is a key factor in the marginalisation of VOST throughout the re-integration process, as evidenced by the cultural practice of victim-blaming, which promotes detrimental myths about victimhood. Myths are commonly held beliefs that blame victims and excuse perpetrators—which are prevalent in both public opinion and institutional responses (including the CJS) (Bates et al., 2019; Bitton and Jaeger, 2019). Societal expectations, cultural myths, and ingrained gender norms in CEE communities frequently blame VOST for their own exploitation (Ornelas et al., 2023). Thus, reflecting a larger social inclination to hold women accountable for their moral decisions, regardless of the coercion or lack of agency involved in their exploitation (Easteal et al., 2015). According to earlier studies, perceptions have a significant impact on how society reacts and how victims react to their own victimisation (Policastro and Payne, 2013). The findings highlight victim-blaming attitudes, such as labelling victims as "delinquents" or "illegals," add to the stigmatisation VOST face (Fukushima, 2019; Srikantiah, 2007; Scambler 2007). This stigmatisation has several consequences for their re-integration. The use of dehumanising terms diminishes the multifaceted experiences of VOST, reducing their exploitation to personal failure rather than institutional coercion and abuse (Fukushima, 2019). There is power that is placed on labels. The term 'survivor' highlights the negative characteristics of the word, but the term 'victim' is socially used. It is associated with stigma, shame, weakness and draws blame (Fohring, 2018).

Dr Jessica Taylor (2020) dives into the concept of victim-blaming. Taylor argues that victim-blaming is a pervasive feature of patriarchal cultures, shifting the responsibility of the trafficker to the victim (Ali and Majdoubi, 2024). Victim-blaming attitudes from both informal and formal support, imply and deem VOST as unworthy of victim standards (Meyer, 2016), or that they are not the ideal victim which aligns with social stereotypes surrounding victimhood (Corteen, 2018). They are seen has having a choice in their victimisation and do not fit the stereotypical picture of being young, naïve and innocent, or one that has been deceived by traffickers, thus reinforcing the cycle of blame (Doezema, 2005). As a result, this preserves gender inequality and shields traffickers from any responsibility (Taylor, 2020; Kostovicova et al., 2020; CEDAW, 2005). This perspective for instance can be seen in a 2009 poll in Serbia. It highlighted that 52% of the population believed that VOST were to blame for their exploitation (Gallup, 2009). These social patriarchal attitudes against women not only deepen the trauma they have endured but limits public sympathy and institutional support. Victims being perceived as undeserving of assistance, limits their access to critical resources for re-

integration, such as healthcare, legal aid, and employment opportunities (Menaker and Franklin, 2013).

Community perceptions categorise women based on their perceived level of choice, lessening their victimisation. This binary framing reduces the complexity of their sex-trafficking experiences and divides women into those who were forced into trafficking versus those who willingly entered into relationships with traffickers–simplifying the complexity of sex-trafficking experiences. This reductionist view results in a lack of sympathy and support for victims in states such as Moldova or Bulgaria (Davidson, 2003). Institutional stigma exacerbates VOST's marginalisation throughout re-integration. According to the findings, encounters with law enforcement, healthcare professionals, and other official organisations frequently result in increased victimisation, with women feeling misunderstood, criticised, or blamed for their exploitation (Ahrens et al., 2009).

Due to a lack of institutional trust, many VOST often withhold information from official organisations out of fear of being held accountable for their mistreatment (Patterson et al., 2009), or being stigmatised (Pascual-Leone et al., 2017). This fear leads to diminished public and governmental support, depriving victims of the tools they need to recover, heal and rebuild their lives again (Davidson, 2013). As a result, they are denied the help they require to effectively re-integrate, continuing their marginalisation and making them prone to re-trafficking or exploitation. In order to effectively address these problems, it will be necessary to question cultural norms, raise awareness, and create support networks that provide VOST the tools they need to take back their stories and successfully re-integrate into society.

How Do Intersects of Tradition, Culture and a Male Dominated Society in CEE Affect the Recovery for VOST?

Theme: Family Structures and Community Values

The intersections of tradition, culture, and a male-dominated society in CEE have a significant impact on VOST recovery. Family structures and community values provide considerable challenges throughout the re-integration process. Victims frequently endure social stigma, leading to communal rejection, even if their families are ready to accept them (Chen and Marcovici, 2003). This stigma is based on strong cultural standards that associate female honour with family repute, making it difficult for VOST to obtain acceptance and support in their communities (Kostovicova et al., 2020). Women may be misled by close relatives into believing they are relocating for legal job possibilities, promising a better financial future (Okonofua et al, 2004; Hodge, 2008). According to Simkhada (2008), traffickers frequently have familial relationships to their victims, (i.e., cousins or uncles). In rural areas, sending daughters abroad for employment (especially if it involves sex-work), may not be troublesome in the eyes of the family if it results in financial gain. This underscores the unfortunate truth that individuals who should be protecting them may actually participate to their exploitation (Molland, 2012; Corbett, 2018), putting their safety and well-being at jeopardy (Long, 2002). In line with this, research has revealed how false job offers or romantic relationships are used to market individuals to sex-traffickers (Bossard, 2023). Traffickers in Albania that tend to be well-known, respected and credible by families, target those with limited finances and resources, mislead daughters with assurances of better prospects and avenues in order to negotiate an exchange of having them sex-trafficked (Gjermeni et al, 2008). Furthermore, VOST have additional hurdles due to cultural expectations in collectivist cultures. Women are frequently required to maintain family honour by adhering to conventional roles, limiting their autonomy and making them more susceptible to exploitation (Galligan and Clavero, 2005; Marion, 2012). Traditional values can produce pressure from either the family or their community. It makes women place their needs below the needs of others, to be subordinate and chaste (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2024). In other situations, victims may feel obliged to remain with traffickers rather than return home, fearing the embarrassment their family would face as a result of public stigma (Tomura 2009). This internal struggle hinders the re-integration process since victims are frequently separated from the very support networks they require to rehabilitate. Re-integration is further complicated by cultural expectations based on tradition

and religion. In Poland and Romania, the influence of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches promotes conservative gender roles, encouraging the perception that women must adhere to traditional family values at the price of their autonomy (Graff, 2014; Gwiazda, 2021; Roibu and Roibu, 2016). Such stringent expectations erect further hurdles for VOST, limiting them access to resources and prolonging cycles of vulnerability. Furthermore, the Kanun in Albania imposes tight gender norms and justifies GBV, hindering the healing process (Sadiku, 2014). To summarise, the intersections of family structures and community values have a substantial influence on VOST recovery in CEE. By maintaining stigma, societal rejection, and conventional gender norms, these factors impede re-integration attempts and lead to chronic vulnerability. Addressing these cultural and family issues is critical to developing successful support networks that empower victims and help them heal.

Theme: Patriarchy and GBV

Gender inequality in CEE is strongly ingrained in historical, traditional, religious, cultural, and socio-political contexts, and it has a substantial impact on VOST's re-integration experiences (Kovacevic and Sehic, 2015). In Poland, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania, entrenched patriarchal beliefs oppress women, promote gender inequality, reinforce negative stereotypes, and raise the occurrence of GBV, restricting women's social, economic, and political prospects (O'Brien, 2015). This all has a substantial influence on VOST experiences (Rose, 2023). Cultural consent and the normalisation of perceiving women as property (Serughetti, 2017; Cameron et al., 2023), along with low levels of education and insufficient law enforcement support (Reid, 2012), increase female vulnerability to abuse and exploitation (Deshpande and Nour, 2013). Alarmingly, FRA (2014) revealed that one-third (33%) of women in the EU have been physically or sexually assaulted since the age of 15. This demonstrates the broad occurrence of GBV and its deep roots in cultural and societal norms. In many CEE states, GBV is considered a private matter rather than a public concern (Meena, 2023). This thinking system hinders victims from getting help because they are afraid of societal reaction and judgement. For example, in Moldova, the cultural inclination to keep domestic affairs inside the family results in underreporting of DV and a lack of institutional support (OSCE, 2019). Victims frequently confront cultural hurdles that prevent them from interacting with law enforcement or support agencies, leaving them isolated and vulnerable (Surtees, 2005). This seclusion might help to continue the exploitation cycle by convincing victims that they have no other options.

The interplay of TGR and socio-economic circumstances have a substantial impact on VOST recovery experiences. Redai (2021) found that states such as Moldova, Hungary, Bulgaria and Russia have conservative views on the gender roles of women, often relegating them to lower economic positions, especially in rural regions (Mishra, 2002). Women's economic reliance on male partners or family members renders them especially vulnerable to trafficking networks that abuse their need for work (True, 2012). This cycle of poverty and dependency on male figures in their life impedes VOST's rehabilitation, as they strive for financial independence and re-integration into society (Kiss et al., 2015). Furthermore, Roby and Tanner (2009) note that the traditional expectations that daughters provide for their families lead many women into sex-work, masking the reality of their exploitation. Dunlop (2008) points out, conventional beliefs, leading to an exaggeration of female inferiority and limiting their duties to parenting and domesticity, perpetuate perceptions of male dominance. In fact, as Dunlop succinctly points out, dehumanising women becomes ethically acceptable, and the commercialisation and selling of their bodies is appropriate given that patriarchy fosters the idea that males are superior to women and therefore have a rightful place of dominance. The genesis of VAW is founded in the structural influence of violence (Pati and Yousuf, 2016).

Weak legal frameworks and poor enforcement mechanisms increase VOST's recovery challenges**.** Despite existing laws intended to protect victims, cultural attitudes frequently impair their efficacy (Mackenzie and Louth, 2024). For example, in Bulgaria, legislative safeguards against GBV are rarely implemented, and victims are commonly treated with apathy or incredulity by authorities (Cheresheva, 2018). This systematic failure to handle GBV fosters mistrust, with victims fearing retaliation or shame more than they do their abusers. As a result, many VOST lack legal remedies, making them more vulnerable to re-trafficking and victimisation (Ong et al., 2021). Despite legislative structures designed to help VOST, cultural norms frequently impede successful implementation (Mackenzie and Louth, 2024). In places like Pristina, Kosovo, and Chisinau, Moldova, the stigma associated with requesting aid prevents many victims from receiving the psychological, legal, and financial support they require (Surtees, 2005). This widespread fear of stigma not only exacerbates isolation, but it also increases victims' vulnerability to re-trafficking. The combination of tradition, culture, and a male-dominated society in CEE have a significant impact on the recovery of VOST. These interconnected variables present hurdles to receiving support services, retaining autonomy, and achieving effective re-integration. Addressing these systemic challenges demands not just

legislative reforms, but also a cultural shift towards seeing GBV as a social issue requiring collaborative action and victim care.

SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS:

The re-integration of VOST in CEE is a complex process driven by many gendered barriers. Stigma rooted in cultural and gender norms, honour and sexuality, and internalised stigma and shame emerge as a substantial impediment and, examining these aids in understanding how these norms shape attitudes and contribute to the stigmatisation of VOST, giving insight into the faced barriers of re-integration. In addition to stigma, VOST suffer mental health issues that are aggravated by gendered barriers, emotional bonds and, limited support and gender bias in care impeding further re-integration. The internalised stigma and emotional scars left by their experience create an atmosphere in which victims can be at risk of re-trafficking. The dynamics of victim-blaming and victimhood are not a secondary consequence of sex-trafficking but one that is ingrained in societal norms and cultural attitudes. Patriarchy and GBV implement TGR, leading to the subordination and marginalisation of women, undermining their autonomy and agency.

Furthermore, family structures and community values in CEE present a challenging setting for VOST as cultural and religious norms, and pressures and exploitation by trusted members sustain stigma, discrimination, and marginalisation. The dependable connections can be both a source of support and one facilitating exploitation. Finally, the gendered labour markets contribute to the perpetuation of sex-trafficking. Economic instability is a contributor to re-trafficking, due to economic downturns, unemployment rates, and limited opportunities. Therefore, the idea of quick and attainable finance outweighs the hazards of exploitation and abuse. As a result, the interaction between all of these gender dynamics emphasises a need to break the cycle of sex-trafficking and promote real empowerment and recovery for VOST in CEE.

FINAL CHAPTER AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The plight of CEE women in the post-communist era paints a picture of systemic failures, pervasive corruption, and scars of economic and social despair. This thesis sheds light on the numerous barriers that VOST encounter and endure throughout re-integration in CEE. It highlights that the impact of gender dynamics shapes the re-integration experiences. Exploring issues including stigma, mental health, victim-blaming and victimhood, patriarchy and GBV, family structures and community values, and the gendered labour markets interact to impede healing. The story of CEE VOST is not a tale of individualistic suffering but that of broader societal failures.

Whilst many women fled their homes in pursuit of better prospects, their circumstances often led them into the exploitative and predatory realms of sex-trafficking. Yet in this tragic twist of fate, many victims had come to endure various barriers pertaining to their return. Barriers that could only be seen through that of a gendered lens, influenced by the very system that failed them to begin with. In a society and culture where poverty promotes exploitation and gendered powers, VOST saw no light at the end of their exploitation, with many repeating the cycle of trafficking and abuse. The findings corroborate and enrich re-integration, victimisation, and gendered oppression, demonstrating that VOST re-integration is a complicated struggle rather than a straightforward procedure. The trauma experienced during sex-trafficking is exacerbated by ongoing marginalisation, victim-blaming, and social rejection upon their return. The establishment of emotional attachments and internalised stigma emphasises the long-term psychological impacts of coercive interactions, demonstrating how these issues may prolong vulnerability and isolation long after the trafficking experience has ended.

Future research should look at the long-term psychological, social, and economic effects of re-integration on victims, through a gendered lens. A more comprehensive strategy also requires investigating the role of transnational collaboration in combating trafficking networks and promoting cross-border re-integration programs. Understanding the interconnections of gender, tradition, and socio-economic instability is essential for creating effective support networks for these women. The current socio-economic conditions in CEE make it challenging for victims to find sustainable employment. Some VOST have managed to support their families through earnings from sex-work, which can act as a deterrent to rescue and rehabilitation efforts (Pandey, 2015; Pandey et al., 2015). Economic factors, lack of awareness

about available services, limited resources, the nature of their removal from trafficking, and societal stigma all contribute to the failed re-integration of VOST (Okech et al., 2018a; Le, 2017).

Recommendations

Recommendations must target NGOs, community leaders, policymakers and healthcare providers. Efforts to support re-integration for VOST are growing but remain constrained by underfunding and limited resources. Scholarly discussions underscore the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the structural issues underlying VOST vulnerabilities, focusing on long-term socio-economic independence, self-determination, and dignity (Islam and Fay, 2024).

1. Governments in CEE must strengthen legal protections against GBV for VOST, ensuring proper enforcement of existing laws and closing loopholes (Anyidoho et al., 2021; George, 2011). Legal reforms should focus on holding traffickers accountable and improving victim protection services to prevent re-traumatisation during legal proceedings (Heiges, 2009)

2. Governments should fund culturally appropriate public awareness campaigns to reduce stigma by challenging harmful gender norms that tie a woman's worth to her sexuality (Fulu et al., 2014). These efforts should focus on rural and traditional communities, where cultural beliefs about honour and shame can impede re-integration. Community-based programs offering secure housing, vocational training, and jobs must be promoted to ensure successful re-integration (Brunovskis and Surtees, 2012; Curran et al., 2017). Effective re-integration requires not just resources but also shifts in cultural attitudes and the creation of social networks that offer acceptance and support. Without these changes, the re-integration process remains incomplete, leaving many women vulnerable to ongoing stigma and marginalisation (Shelley, 2010).

3. Law enforcement, healthcare workers, and social workers must receive cultural sensitivity training that highlights the gender and cultural dynamics in CEE (Anasti, 2019). Training should also focus on identifying familial involvement in trafficking, as trusted family members often play a role in exploitation.

4. Expanding gender-responsive, trauma-informed mental health care is critical, addressing the emotional bonds between victims and traffickers (Kinnish and Hopper, 2024; Mathis et al., 2024), including Stockholm syndrome. Programs should focus on building psychological resilience and restoring self-esteem by targeting internalised stigma (Drapalski et al., 2013). Expanding access to mental health services in rural areas via mobile units or telemedicine is crucial, with services ideally being free or low-cost.

5. Prevention programs should focus on identifying at-risk women, especially in regions where economic insecurity and gender norms increase vulnerability. Governments and NGOs must provide education, job training, and social support to prevent re-trafficking, as economic opportunities are critical to reducing risk (Ekonomi et al., 2006). Schools, community centres, and healthcare providers should be equipped to detect early signs of exploitation.

6. Collaboration between NGOs and governments is essential for developing comprehensive support systems, including rehabilitation centres, shelters, and re-integration programs. Sharing best practices can improve efforts to support survivors. NGOs like La Strada International play a key role but are often underfunded and overstretched, limiting their effectiveness (Fábián et al., 2021).

This comprehensive approach addresses the multi-faceted challenges facing VOST, ensuring long-term recovery and reintegration.

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