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**The Gendered Dimension of Human Trafficking:
International Politics, EU Governance, and the Structures of
Exploitation**

Relatrice

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Abstract

Despite the contemporary proliferation of international legal instruments and national action plans dedicated to combating human trafficking since the adoption of the Palermo Protocol in 2000, the number of people living in conditions of modern slavery has continued to rise. This thesis argues that the governance failure that shapes this phenomenon is both structural and purposeful, rooted in the gendered assumptions that are part of the architecture of anti-trafficking frameworks themselves.

Drawing on feminist political economy and feminist international relations theory, this thesis examines to what extent the gendered dimension of human trafficking shapes international and regional policy responses, and what the structural limits of existing governance frameworks are in addressing these dynamics. It argues that trafficking is a feature of neoliberal globalisation produced by gendered hierarchies of labour and mobility, organised through patriarchal social arrangements, and sustained by consumer economies whose demand for cheap and exploitable labour remains institutionally invisible.

Central to this argument is the critique of the Palermo Protocol's foundational design which has produced a security agenda that prioritises prosecution over protection and treats gender as a descriptive marker of vulnerability instead of an analytical category of power. Consequently, this design generates what the thesis identifies as the ideal victim paradigm: a gendered and racialised construction of legitimate victimhood that systematically excludes those whose experiences do not conform to institutionally legible categories of coercion and innocence, producing patterns of selective recognition and conditional protection that help maintain the pre-existing conditions of exploitation. Through a comparative analysis of anti-trafficking governance in Germany and the Netherlands, the thesis demonstrates that governance failure is not model-specific but intentionally structural.

The thesis concludes by arguing that addressing these structural limits requires both a victim-centred approach grounded in unconditional protection and intersectional identification, as well as a reconstitution of international cooperation based on Feminist Foreign Policy theory.

Sommario

Nonostante la proliferazione contemporanea di strumenti giuridici internazionali e piani d'azione nazionali dedicati alla lotta alla tratta di esseri umani dall'adozione del Protocollo di Palermo nel 2000, il numero di persone che vivono in condizioni di schiavitù moderna ha continuato ad aumentare. Questa tesi sostiene che il fallimento della governance che caratterizza questo fenomeno sia al contempo strutturale e intenzionale, radicato nelle assunzioni di genere che fanno parte dell'architettura stessa dei quadri anti-tratta.

Attingendo all'economia politica femminista e alla teoria femminista delle relazioni internazionali, questa tesi esamina in quale misura la dimensione di genere della tratta di esseri umani plasmi le risposte politiche internazionali e regionali, e quali siano i limiti strutturali dei quadri di governance esistenti nell'affrontare tali dinamiche. Si sostiene che la tratta sia una caratteristica della globalizzazione neoliberale prodotta da gerarchie di genere del lavoro e della mobilità, organizzata attraverso assetti sociali patriarcali e sostenuta da economie dei consumi la cui domanda di lavoro a basso costo e sfruttabile rimane istituzionalmente invisibile.

Centrale in questo argomento è la critica all'impianto fondamentale del Protocollo di Palermo, che ha prodotto un'agenda securitaria che privilegia il perseguimento penale rispetto alla protezione e tratta il genere come un marcatore descrittivo di vulnerabilità invece che come una categoria analitica di potere. Di conseguenza, tale impianto genera quello che la tesi identifica come il paradigma della vittima ideale: una costruzione di genere e razzializzata della vittimizzazione legittima che esclude sistematicamente coloro la cui esperienza non corrisponde alle categorie istituzionalmente leggibili di coercizione e innocenza, producendo modelli di riconoscimento selettivo e protezione condizionale che contribuiscono a mantenere le condizioni di sfruttamento preesistenti. Attraverso un'analisi comparativa della governance anti-tratta in Germania e nei Paesi Bassi, la tesi dimostra che il fallimento della governance non è specifico di un determinato modello, ma intenzionalmente strutturale.

La tesi conclude sostenendo che affrontare questi limiti strutturali richiede sia un approccio centrato sulla vittima fondato sulla protezione incondizionata e sull'identificazione intersezionale, sia una ricostituzione della cooperazione internazionale basata sulla teoria della Politica Estera Femminista.

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Para a minha mãe e pai.

Introduction

Human trafficking is among the most extensively documented and least adequately addressed phenomena in contemporary international politics. Since the adoption of the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children in 2000 – hereon by, the Palermo Protocol – the international community has developed an increasingly elaborate architecture of legal instruments, institutional coordination mechanisms, national action plans, and civil society interventions dedicated to combating what is now widely recognised as one of the most severe violations of human rights. And yet, according to the International Labour Organization's most recent global estimates, 49.6 million people live in conditions of modern slavery at any given moment – ten million more than in 2016, despite the proliferation of anti-trafficking commitments, treaty ratifications, and governance frameworks across that same period (ILO *et al.*, 2022). The governance of trafficking has expanded, but the phenomenon it claims to address has not diminished – something, evidently, is wrong.

To understand what is wrong, in this thesis I will analyse human trafficking through gendered lenses, revealing that this phenomenon is produced by gendered structures of inequality, organised through gendered assumptions about whose labour is valuable and whose body is exploitable, and addressed through governance frameworks that treat gender as a descriptive marker of vulnerability rather than as a constitutive dimension of the political economy of exploitation itself. By applying this gendered filter to the analysis of the phenomenon of human trafficking, through this work I will try to answer to what extent does the gendered dimension of human trafficking shape international and regional policy responses, and what are the structural limits of existing governance frameworks in addressing these gendered dynamics.

This question has several interconnected dimensions that will soon be addressed. It asks, first, how gender shapes the conditions of vulnerability to trafficking through the patriarchal social arrangements and political economic dynamics that produce exploitability across different gender identities and in different forms of exploitation. Second, how gender is incorporated, or fails to be incorporated, into the international legal frameworks, institutional governance architectures, and national policy systems

where anti-trafficking responses are coordinated. In third, it asks what the consequences of these governance patterns are for the recognition and protection of different categories of trafficking victims. And finally, what a genuinely gender-sensitive anti-trafficking governance framework would require at the level of domestic policy and international cooperation, and what structural obstacles stand between the existing governance model and that alternative.

These ponderings are not merely academic. The gap between the proliferation of anti-trafficking governance and the persistence of trafficking as a global phenomenon has real consequences for real people. Consequences that are distributed unequally along lines of gender, race, class, migration status, and sexual orientation in patterns that reflect the structural dynamics this thesis sets itself to analyse.

Theoretical Approach

The theoretical framework of this thesis is based on feminist political economy configurations, drawing on the tradition of Feminist International Relations theory. This framework was chosen as the most adequate analytical approach to the phenomenon under examination as it is one that renders visible dimensions of trafficking's production and governance that are continuously obscured.

Mainstream IR theories have historically approached human trafficking through lenses that are inadequate to its gendered complexity. The realist tradition conceptualises international politics as a competitive arena in which sovereign states pursue power and security within an anarchic environment, treating trafficking as a threat to state security and border integrity and, consequently, framing the appropriate response in terms of criminal prosecution and migration control (Sylvester, 1992). While the liberal theory, that sets itself to be more attentive to international cooperation and institutional design, similarly focuses on formal legal structures and measurable compliance indicators, neglecting the gendered social relations and political economic dynamics that determine who becomes vulnerable to trafficking (Harrington, 1992). Both frameworks share a fundamental limitation: they treat the structures and institutions of international politics as gender-neutral, when feminist scholarship has consistently demonstrated that those same mechanisms reproduce gendered hierarchies that privilege male authority and marginalise women's experiences (Sjoberg & Tickner, 2013). Feminist IR theory

addresses this limitation by treating gender as an analytical category, meaning a system of socially constructed power relations that shapes access to resources and opportunities at every level of governance from the household to the international institution (Hoffman, 2001). Applied to trafficking and the political economy dimension, the feminist IR extends its critique into the terrain of global capitalism, arguing that trafficking cannot be understood without situating it within the dynamics of neoliberal economic restructuring: the feminisation of migration, the devaluation of reproductive and care labour, the expansion of precarious and informal employment, and the dismantling of collective labour protections (Agustín, 2007).

This framework was chosen over alternatives such as constructivist or human rights approach because it is the only framework that maintains analytical consistency across all three levels at which this thesis operates: the structural conditions that produce vulnerability, the governance frameworks that claim to address it, and the political economy that both the vulnerability and the governance are rooted in. Constructivist approaches illuminate how anti-trafficking norms diffuse and how discourse shapes policy, but they do not adequately engage with the material conditions of exploitation. Human rights approaches illuminate the obligations that states bear toward victims, but they tend to treat legal compliance as the primary measure of success instead of examining the structural conditions that determine whether formal protections reach those who need them. The feminist political economy framework encompasses and transcends these factors, engaging with norm diffusion, network structure, and legal obligation while maintaining the operational critique that is necessary to explain the gap between governance expansion and governance effectiveness. Because of this, intersectionality, as developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and extended within feminist theory, is an essential theoretical commitment for this thesis. Vulnerability to trafficking is not determined by gender alone but by the convergence of gender with class, race, migration status, age, sexual orientation, and disability in configurations that produce differential exposure to exploitation and access to recognition and protection. Therefore, I will apply an intersectional point of view throughout this work examining how the ideal victim paradigm excludes those whose experiences do not conform to institutionally legible categories of vulnerability, including male victims, LGBTQ+ individuals, labour trafficking victims, and women who exercise any degree of agency in their migration or work.

Methodology

This thesis employs a qualitative, theoretically grounded approach to secondary literature analysis, organised around a comparative case study of anti-trafficking governance in Germany and the Netherlands within the broader context of EU and international governance frameworks.

The decision to work with secondary literature instead of primary empirical data was made on both practical and principled grounds. Practically, the ethical requirements for primary research with trafficking survivors and with the practitioners who work with them are substantial; survivor research demands specialised trauma-informed methodologies, sustained institutional relationships, multilingual capacity, and research ethics protocols that ensure informed consent and protect the safety of research participants in ways that exceed the capacities that I possess thus far. Conducting primary interviews with survivors without these safeguards risks reproducing the extractive and instrumentalising dynamics that I criticise, treating survivors as sources of data rather than as individuals whose participation in research must serve their interests and be conducted on their terms.

On principled grounds, the existing secondary literature on trafficking governance is extensive, methodologically diverse, and analytically rich. The sources on which this thesis draws include theoretical findings, policy analysis, empirical revisions based on survivor interviews, practitioner surveys, court case studies, statistical reporting, institutional ethnographies, and comparative policy assessments. By synthesizing and critically engaging with this body of scholarship as an alternative to generating new and superficial primary data, this thesis can operate at the level that of structural analysis that primary research at this scale could not adequately support.

Similarly, the comparative case study design, examining Germany and the Netherlands as national examples within the overarching EU governance context, was chosen for reasons that are both theoretical and empirical. Theoretically, comparative case study analysis is appropriate for a thesis whose central argument concerns the relationship between governance design and gendered outcomes which can only be examined through the scrutiny of how specific governance systems operate in practice. By comparing two cases, I can identify patterns and divergences that illuminate the components of

governance failure more powerfully than a single case study could. Germany and the Netherlands were specifically selected as comparative cases based on criteria that make their juxtaposition particularly methodically productive. First, both are major destination countries for human trafficking within the EU, with well-documented trafficking phenomena and extensive governance responses, meaning that the empirical material necessary for detailed institutional analysis is available and sufficiently developed. Second, and most importantly, they represent genuinely distinct governance models that the existing literature tends to position at opposite ends of a spectrum: Germany as enforcement-oriented with a criminal justice framework that criminalises trafficking while formally recognising sex work as labour, and the Netherlands as progressive and regulatory, with a legalised prostitution model and an explicit commitment to victim-centred governance through mechanisms such as the B8 residence permit scheme. This apparent contrast makes them ideal comparative cases for testing the thesis's argument that governance failure is structural as both enforcement-oriented and regulatory-progressive systems produce uneven and gendered outcomes, even if through different mechanisms. If the thesis's argument is correct, both cases should reveal similar patterns of selective recognition, conditional protection, and gendered misidentification despite their different institutional logics. Third, both countries operate within the EU governance framework that will be deconstructed in section 4.1, which means that this comparative study can examine how the same supranational framework is interpreted and selectively enacted through different national institutional cultures and political choices. Additionally, the EU governance context was chosen as the overarching framework for the comparative analysis because it represents the most developed regional anti-trafficking governance architecture in the world, incorporating legally binding directives, dedicated institutional actors, specialised agencies, funding mechanisms, and monitoring systems that make it possible to examine the relationship between supranational norm production and national implementation in unusually precise detail.

State of the Art

The existing literature on human trafficking is large, methodologically diverse, and interdisciplinary, spanning through criminology, international law, feminist theory, political economy, development studies, migration studies, and IR theory. It has grown substantially since the adoption of the Palermo Protocol created a common definitional

outline from which scholars can develop. However, navigating this literature reveals a persistent fragmentation where such rich bodies of work exist in parallel, each revealing a different dimension of the problem, but rarely in conversation with one another in ways that capture the full structural complexity of trafficking and its governance. This thesis thus positions itself at the intersection of three bodies of scholarship that have not been sufficiently integrated with one another.

The first is the feminist IR and feminist political economy literature on trafficking, which includes foundational works by scholars such as True (2014, 2018), Agustín (2007), Doezenia (2010), Shelley (2010), and Lee (2011). This literature has been indispensable to the theoretical architecture of this thesis; it is where the structural critique of trafficking as a product of gendered political economy is most fully developed. But it is limited as it does not directly engage with the specific institutional architecture of EU anti-trafficking governance or with the comparative analysis of national governance systems than the questions driving this thesis require. By applying their theoretical work to the concrete institutional terrain of EU governance and national case studies, I attempt to bridge the gap between the structural critique that feminist political economy has developed and the specific governance outcomes that critique is intended to explain.

The second is the legal and policy literature on EU anti-trafficking governance that examines the Palermo Protocol, the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, and national implementation frameworks by scholars such as Gallagher (2010), Askola (2007a), Marchetti and Palumbo (2022), and Grundell (2025). This is a literature that knows the institutional architecture of anti-trafficking governance in considerable depth and without it the governance analysis in this thesis would not have been possible. But it tends, by the nature of its disciplinary formation, to evaluate governance against its own stated objectives, asking whether states comply with their legal obligations and not why their structures consistently produce outcomes that those obligations were designed to prevent. As such, this thesis brings the feminist political economy framework to bear on the institutional detail that this literature has documented, in an attempt to produce a critical explanation of governance failure that goes beyond the identification of implementation gaps.

The third is the comparative governance literature on trafficking in specific national contexts, including a growing body of scholarship on Germany (Beck & Tassis, 2020; Sapeza, 2025; Köhncke, 2020; Thiemann, 2020) and the Netherlands (Musto, 2010;

Dina, 2009; Verhoeven, 2017; Wozniak-Cole, 2024; Smit, 2011). This literature is empirically rich, and each of the national studies offers genuine insight into how anti-trafficking governance operates in practice. What it has not done, however, is bring these cases into systematic comparative conversation within a framework capable of using their juxtaposition to delimit their own failures and flaws. This thesis then attempts to offer a comparative reading, arguing that what the two cases reveal together is more analytically significant than what either reveals alone.

The gap that this thesis therefore addresses, is the absence of a sustained structural analysis that maintains the feminist political economy critique consistently across all levels of anti-trafficking governance and connects that analysis to a concrete reform agenda grounded in feminist foreign policy theory. The existing state of the art tends to operate at one or two of these levels but not across all of them simultaneously, which means that the relationship between structural conditions and governance outcomes, the thesis's central concern, has not been analysed with the comprehensiveness that the question requires.

PART I: THE GLOBAL POLITICS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND GENDER

Chapter I: Human Trafficking in International Relations

To address the thesis's central research question – to what extent does the gendered dimension of trafficking shape policy responses, and what the structural limits of existing governance frameworks are – first, it needs to be established a clear account of what those frameworks are attempting to address and why the phenomenon they claim to govern is so resistant to the responses they have produced. For that concretisation, Sections 1.1 and 1.2 establish the definitional and network-level dimensions of this account, while Section 1.3 situates trafficking within the political economy of global capitalism, arguing that it is not a criminal aberration within an otherwise acceptable economic order but one of its most rational and efficient expressions.

1.1 Defining human trafficking as a transnational and gendered issue

Modern slavery, also referred to as trafficking in persons or human trafficking, is a pervasive and deeply complex phenomenon that extends beyond national borders, making it a fundamentally transnational issue (Ross, 2014). It is often linked to globalisation, economic disparities, migration patterns, and the rise of transnational organised crime (Burke *et al.*, 2022). And while adults and children of all genders can fall victim to trafficking, gender plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals experience exploitation and the conditions that make them vulnerable (Askola, 2007b). As such, recognising human trafficking as both a transnational and gendered issue is essential to developing effective policies and legal frameworks to address its root causes and long-term consequences (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008).

The transnational nature of trafficking means that it often involves multiple jurisdictions, making international cooperation crucial for effective prevention, prosecution, and victim protection (Goodey, 2004). Because traffickers operate across borders, they exploit gaps in national and regional legislation, targeting individuals in vulnerable situations such as poverty, displacement, social rejection and political instability (Gallagher & Holmes,

2008). Trafficking routes commonly follow global migration patterns, with individuals from economically disadvantaged regions being trafficked into wealthier countries where demand for cheap labour and commercial sex is high (Roth, 2012).

Over the years, international legal instruments have sought to define human trafficking in a comprehensive manner, ensuring a common understanding among states to facilitate cooperation. The most widely accepted legal definition of human trafficking comes from the Palermo Protocol (2000a). This protocol, which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (2000b), was a landmark agreement that established a globally recognised legal framework for combating human trafficking. According to Article 3 of the Palermo Protocol, human trafficking is defined as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of 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.

According to this definition, human trafficking consists of three essential and interconnected components: the act, which includes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons; the means, which involve the threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, or abuse of a position of vulnerability; and the purpose, which must always entail some form of exploitation, including sexual exploitation, forced labour, slavery, servitude, or organ removal (Burke et al., 2022). Such structuring is of crucial importance for the evaluation of flawed anti-trafficking governance as it implies that exploitation alone is insufficient to constitute trafficking – the means through which it is achieved must be proved. This requirement has far-reaching consequences for how victims are identified, how cases are prosecuted, and whose experiences of exploitation are recognised as falling within the legal threshold of the definition; consequences that, as this thesis demonstrates, are systematically gendered in their effects. The Palermo Protocol's positioning within the Convention against Transnational Organised Crime is in itself analytically significant and demands more critical attention because by supplementing a crime-control instrument the Protocol is, from its very beginning, institutionalised in a way where the primary referent of governance is the state and its security interests, not the individual and their human rights (Pati, 2019). Such an institutional positioning reflects the balance of political forces that

shaped the Protocol's negotiation in the late 1990s, in which law enforcement agencies and states concerned with border security proved themselves to be considerably more influential than the feminist and human rights advocates who sought a more victim-centred instrument (Charnysh *et al.*, 2015). The result is a definition that is simultaneously expansive in its breadth of covered acts and purposes, and restrictive in its requirement to demonstrate specific means of coercion that many victims cannot satisfy.

The transnational dimension of trafficking is another defining feature of the phenomenon that the Palermo Protocol sought to capture; one that makes international cooperation both necessary and structurally complicated. Trafficking routes commonly follow the contours of global migration patterns, with individuals from economically disadvantaged regions of the Global South moving into wealthier destination countries where demand for cheap labour and commercial sex is sustained by country's economic conditions and not criminal actors alone (Roth, 2012). Traffickers exploit the contradictions of globalisation with its concurrent expansion of economic opportunity and contraction of legal avenues for mobility, operating most effectively precisely where the desperation produced by poverty is greatest and where migration is most restricted (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008). Within these contradictions, structural conditions that heighten vulnerability are deeply gendered. The normalisation of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and the cultural practices of forced and child marriage, produces the displacement and desperation that traffickers exploit and use as a mechanism of control (Doezema, 2010). Gender-based discrimination in access to education, employment, and legal rights constrains women's economic independence in ways that make them more susceptible to false promises of legitimate work (Huebner, 2022). The invisibility of domestic work, which is performed primarily by women in a largely unregulated sector, creates conditions in which trafficking for domestic servitude can operate with minimal risk of detection (Askola, 2007b). And the global demand for commercial sex, sustained by patriarchal constructions of male entitlement and the commodification of women's sexuality, creates a market whose profitability provides sufficient economic incentive for the expansion of sexual exploitation networks that recruit, deceive, and coerce women and girls across regional and national borders (Bertone, 2000).

What these gendered structural conditions show is that there is not a homogeneous experience of trafficking, and to guarantee that international and regional legal

instruments are effective, it is fundamental that the trafficking phenomenon is recognised with all its gender inequalities since the experiences of victims are profoundly shaped by gendered vulnerabilities (Roth, 2012). As stated before, people of all genders and ages can be trafficked for sex and labour, but those at a higher risk typically come from vulnerable social groups such as women, LGBTQ+ individuals, runaways and at-risk youth, undocumented migrants, and people living in poverty. This happens because gender intersects with class, race, migration status, age, and sexual orientation to produce differential vulnerabilities (Crenshaw, 1989) in ways that leave these individuals with less resources and support mechanisms, making them easier to target and recruit (Burke *et al.*, 2022). The dominant trafficking narrative tends to focus on the young-foreign-female-naïve victim of sexual exploitation, neglecting to recognise that the varies enormously across lines of race, nationality, migration status, and economic class, so a definition that is organised around demonstrable acts, specific means, and identifiable purposes, can only capture the most visible and legally coherent expressions of trafficking, while remaining blind to its most structurally embedded and socially normalised forms. It can prosecute the trafficker who physically confines a woman in a brothel at the same time it remains unable to recognise the exploitation of the domestic worker whose passport has been confiscated.

In this sense, the definition is constitutively partial in ways that privilege the experiences of victims who conform to the legal and institutional expectation of what trafficking looks like over experiences that are more ambiguous or less legible within the categories that criminal law provides. It is this constitutive partiality and its gendered consequences that this thesis places at the centre of its analysis. Recognising human trafficking as both a transnational and a gendered issue is not simply a matter of adding gender-sensitive language to existing legal definitions or ensuring that statistics are disaggregated by sex. It is a matter of confronting the extent to which the definitional and institutional architecture through which trafficking is governed is itself shaped by gendered assumptions that determine what counts as exploitation, what victimhood means and looks like, and what kinds of responses count as adequate. The following sections of this chapter examine how those assumptions are rooted in the networks through which trafficking operates and the political economy that sustains it.

1.2 Trafficking Networks, Transnational Crime, and Gendered Patterns of Exploitation

Human trafficking is often imagined as a crime of individual predation whose main character is a trafficker who deceives and abducts a victim to subjugate them to exploitation. In reality, this phenomenon is a structured system of organised exploitation that moves millions of people across and within national borders and generates hundreds of billions of dollars in illegal profits annually (Albenese, 2004). This system functions with the same adaptive efficiency of any profit-driven market and its networks may vary in scale and organisational complexity from small family-based operations exploiting a handful of individuals within a single city, to sprawling transnational syndicates that move hundreds of people across multiple jurisdictions simultaneously (Finckenauer, 2019). Phil Williams's characterisation of these structures as "decentralised webs" rather than rigid hierarchies is analytically important: trafficking networks are not pyramid organisations with a single identifiable head that law enforcement can decapitate (Williams, 2001). They are adaptive systems that connect through kinship, ethnicity, diaspora, and trust relationships, allowing them to survive the disruption of any single node and reconstitute themselves rapidly when enforcement pressure forces reorganisation. What they share, regardless of scale, is a functional architecture organised around the reduction of risk and the maximisation of extractable value from human beings.

At a functional level, trafficking networks are organised around an interlocking division of labour that moves victims from conditions of vulnerability to conditions of exploitation through a series of specialised roles (Mcredmond, 2010). Recruiters identify and groom potential victims, exploiting central components of the victim's life such as social networks and economic desperation, to lower resistance and facilitate initial contact. Transport and logistics specialists manage the physical movement of victims across borders, selecting routes for the permeability of border controls and the corruptibility of checkpoints. Document and visa facilitators produce or purchase the legal and bureaucratic infrastructure that cloaks irregular migration in the appearance of legitimacy. Safe-house operators manage victims in transit, controlling their movement and communication while their status within the network is confirmed and their destination arranged. Violence specialists – often demobilised soldiers or experienced criminals – are

retained to enforce compliance through physical coercion when other mechanisms of control prove to be insufficient. Finally, at the point of destination, local managers such as brothel owners, labour contractors, domestic employers, debt collectors, extract the labour or sexual services that generate the network's revenue, while financial facilitators convert illegal gains into assets that can circulate within the formal economy (Europol, 2011). And even at the functional level, gender is already a constitutive organising principle of the network's entire division of labour. Women perform a disproportionate share of recruitment and local management functions precisely because they can exploit relational trust, maternal authority, and cultural expectations of feminine solidarity in ways that lower victims' suspicion and facilitate their initial entry into trafficking situations (Raigrodski, 2015). For example, Indian *nayikas* – brothel managers who are frequently former victims themselves – enforce compliance among younger women through a combination of debt bondage and manipulation of maternal and sisterly relationships that normalise exploitation as a form of care (Shelley, 2010). These women are not simply female participants in a gender-neutral criminal enterprise, they are performing gendered roles whose authority and effectiveness derive precisely from the patriarchal social arrangements that render their victims vulnerable in the first place. Male actors, by contrast, typically occupy roles that require the management of long-distance logistics, the exercise of physical violence, and the interface with other criminal markets; roles whose authority derives from the same patriarchal assumptions about masculine capacity for force and control (Raigrodski, 2015).

Recruitment is possibly where the gendered logic of network operation is most visibly expressed. This phase is rarely a single dramatic act of abduction as media paints it; as stated above, it is typically a progressive transformation of legitimate relationships into exploitative ones (Albanese, 2004). Traffickers exploit the social networks and informal community linkages within which potential victims already move through the use of shared ethnicity, neighbourhood familiarity, family connection, or romantic attachment, to lower suspicion and establish the relational foundation through which control will later be exercised. In Eastern Europe, the "lover-boy" strategy remains a common occurrence where male traffickers establish romantic relationships with young women, cultivating emotional dependency and a sense of mutual commitment before gradually introducing coercive demands for sexual services (IOM, 2024). In patriarchal societies where women's economic independence is structurally constrained, traffickers exploit that

constraint directly, offering promises of legitimate opportunity of employment or an advantageous marriage proposal that appear, from the victim's position, as genuinely attractive opportunities (Ollus & Jokinen, 2018) because they are provided by people they trust. Once recruited, victims are subjected to a process of control that is deliberately designed to erode autonomy progressively instead of directly imposing it through force – although force remains a constant possibility and a regular instrument. Control within trafficking systems is, as Shelley (2010) argues, institutional, psychological, financial, and profoundly gendered in its specific expression. The assignment of inflated debts for recruitment fees, transport costs, housing, clothing, and food, also known as debt bondage, transforms the trafficker's investment in the victim into an obligation the victim must work to repay, creating an economic rationale for exploitation that can be presented as a contractual relationship (Gallagher, 2018); the confiscation of identity documents removes the legal personhood through which individuals have access to state protection, and independent mobility, leaving victims dependent on the trafficker for their very existence within the bureaucratic systems of destination countries; and threats to family members remaining in countries of origin extend control beyond the physical space of exploitation, creating a geography of coercion that operates across borders and cannot be dissolved simply by removing the victim from the immediate exploitative situation.

But it is in the specifically gendered expressions of control that the deepest analytical insight into trafficking's operation is found. For women trafficked into sexual exploitation, violence specialists are regularly employed to administer what the literature describes as a "breaking-in" process through a routine of systematic rape, beatings, and in some cases public torture, and whose function is to demonstrate the consequences of resistance, creating the psychological conditions of learned helplessness and traumatic bonding within which compliance becomes the only way for survival (Lee, 2011). This violence is gendered not only in its targets but in its logic; it functions as an assertion of sexual dominance that draws on and reinforces the patriarchal construction of women's bodies as objects available for male use, transforming the cultural normalisation of gender-based violence into an operational instrument of compliance management. For LGBTQ+ victims, control is frequently exercised through the threat of exposure of the victim's identity, using blackmail that operationalises homophobia, transphobia, and in several instances the criminal law itself, creating a form of coercion that is invisible to governance frameworks designed around the detection of physical violence (Human

Rights Watch, 2018). In each case, traffickers are not inventing mechanisms of control from scratch, they are weaponising existing gender hierarchies, cultural stigmas, and social vulnerabilities, exploiting the same structural arrangements that produced vulnerability to recruitment in the first place.

The movement of victims through transit corridors and across borders is itself a gendered process, structured by the same asymmetries of legal access and institutional recognition that shape migration regimes. Routes are selected for the permeability of border controls and the availability of corrupt officials willing to facilitate irregular passage in exchange for payment – a selection process that reflects the degree to which trafficking is ingrained within the legitimate governance infrastructure. The state-crime nexus that Shelley (2010) documents in her analysis of trafficking through regional perspectives accounts that police and military complicity in trafficking operations is a common feature across contexts as diverse as Russia, Southeast Asia, and West Africa, peripheral for the success of trafficking. Without the active or passive cooperation of state officials who benefit financially from the perpetuation of trafficking networks, those networks could not function with the scale and impunity that they currently enjoy (Albanese, 2004). Higher-level networks depend extensively on document fraud and institutional complicity to move victims in ways that appear bureaucratically legitimate: the purchase of tourist or diplomatic visas through corrupt consular channels, the use of phony NGOs or language schools as cover for recruitment, the arrangement of sham marriages and business delegations to legitimise entry and prolong residence (Gallagher, 2018). Gender mediates these mechanisms in ways that are directly consequential for victim identification and protection. Women trafficked for sexual exploitation or domestic servitude are characteristically moved through family-reunion or marriage visas that disguise exploitation as voluntary migration, a bureaucratic legitimisation that simultaneously makes detection more difficult and increases victims' legal and financial dependency on those controlling their documents and status (Bertone, 2000).

Altogether, this examination reveals human trafficking networks are not gender-neutral criminal enterprises that happen to exploit women disproportionately; they are gendered systems whose organisational logic, division of labour, recruitment strategies, control mechanisms, and transit routes are all shaped by and dependent upon the same patriarchal social arrangements that produce the structural vulnerability their victims experience before they are recruited.

1.3 The Political Economy of Human Trafficking: Profit Chains, Labour Exploitation, and Gender Dynamics

The analysis of trafficking networks in section 1.2 established that gender is a constitutive organising principle of how trafficking operates at the level of recruitment, control, violence, and transit. This section pursues the deeper question that network analysis alone cannot answer: why are those arrangements so persistently available for exploitation? Why does the supply of exploitable people – particularly women, migrants, and the economically marginalised – remain so consistently available to trafficking networks despite decades of governance intervention? And why does the demand for trafficked labour and sexual services remain so structurally robust? In this section I will argue that the answer to these questions lies in the political economy of neoliberal globalisation, a system that produces the conditions of vulnerability to trafficking as a structural feature of its normal operation, organises those conditions through gendered hierarchies of labour and mobility, and sustains the demand for exploitation through cultural economies of consumption that render certain forms of suffering invisible or acceptable. From this perspective, human trafficking is situated, just like drug and weapon smuggling, as a logical extension of an economic order that excels through inequality.

The late twentieth century's neoliberal turn in global economic governance fundamentally reshaped the conditions of life for hundreds of millions of people across the Global South and the increasingly precarious working classes of the Global North. As states liberalised markets, privatised public services, deregulated labour, and dismantled the collective protections of welfare states, production became increasingly organised through global supply chains that sought the cheapest inputs and the most flexible labour in the least regulated environments (Phung & Crane, 2019). Capital achieved a degree of mobility across national borders that had no historical precedent while workers, by contrast, faced tightening restrictions on legal mobility as the immigration regimes of wealthy destination countries became increasingly restrictive precisely as the economic desperation driving migration became increasingly intense. This asymmetry is exactly one of the central operating mechanisms for the success of neoliberal globalisation, and it is the mechanism that creates the structural conditions within which trafficking thrives (Sharapov, 2018).

Traffickers exploit the contradictions of this asymmetry with rational efficiency (Lee, 2011). Where legal migration channels are inaccessible because of visa restrictions or permit requirements, illicit intermediaries emerge to meet the demand that those restrictions cannot suppress. The people who use those intermediaries are not, in the first instance, trafficking victims: they are economic migrants and refugees seeking the same opportunities that the global economy simultaneously generates and withholds access to. They become victims in the point where the intermediaries who facilitate their movement transform assistance into exploitation; a transformation that is only made possible by the legal precarity that restrictive migration regimes deliberately produce and that traffickers calculatingly leverage (Lobasz, 2009). Trafficking thus operates according to the same market logic as any other sector: responding to demand, minimising costs, maximising returns – with the distinguishing feature that the commodity it trades in is human autonomy.

The ILO's most recent global estimates places forced labour's annual illegal profit at over \$150 billion, with sexual exploitation alone accounting for approximately two-thirds of that total (ILO *et al.*, 2022). Trafficking generates returns of this magnitude because it solves, from the perspective of profit maximisation, a fundamental problem of labour markets: the problem of worker bargaining power. In any normal labour market, however constrained by inequality and precarity, workers retain some capacity to negotiate the terms of their employment, to exit exploitative employment, to organise collectively, or to appeal to legal protections. Trafficking eliminates that capacity entirely (Ollus & Jokinen, 2018). Debt bondage transforms mobility into obligation, making exit economically impossible. Confiscation of documents transforms legal personhood into dependency, making appeal to state protection institutionally unavailable. Wage withholding transforms work into compulsion, eliminating the economic basis for autonomous decision-making. Physical confinement, psychological manipulation, and threats to family members complete the architecture of total control. What trafficking produces, in economic terms, is a workforce with zero bargaining power, and in an economic order where the suppression of labour costs is integral to profitability in an expanding range of sectors, a zero-bargaining-power workforce is an extraordinarily attractive asset (Spapens, 2018).

Feminist political economists, from Silvia Federici (2012) to Tithi Bhattacharya (2017), have argued that the analysis of capitalism's value-generating processes has

systematically obscured the extent to which paid, formal labour depends on the prior existence of unpaid, informal, and reproductive labour – the domestic work, emotional maintenance, and biological reproduction performed predominantly by women, largely outside the circuits of formal employment, and structurally devalued precisely because it is associated with femininity. This daily social reproduction is the foundation upon which all other economic activity rests, and its systematic undervaluation within capitalist economies is very calculated; by reducing the value attributed to these forms of labour that are of absolute necessity for day-to-day activities and human survival, it reduces its cost of labour in ways that make the exploitation of formal workers more profitable and normalised. And the global feminisation of migration is the demographic expression of this dynamic. Over recent decades, millions of women have moved from the Global South to fill labour gaps in the Global North's domestic and service sectors (Agustín, 2007). Many of these women migrate voluntarily, seeking the economic opportunities that global inequality has made unavailable in their countries of origin, but because these sectors are characterised by informality and weak legal protection that formal sector workers nominally enjoy, women may find themselves in conditions of coercive labour from which the distinction between "trafficking victim" and "irregular migrant worker" becomes analytically meaningless and legally irrelevant (Ollus & Jokinen, 2018). The sexualisation and racialisation of women's labour within global markets adds a further structural dimension to this analysis. As Doezema (2010) argues, global markets construct femininity as a form of capital valued for its supposed submissiveness in ways that transform patriarchal cultural assumptions about women's nature into economic value. The "Asian caregiver," the "Eastern European beauty," the "African exotic" are not merely racist stereotypes, they are commodified archetypes that circulate within the global trafficking economy, structuring the demand for particular kinds of bodies in particular sectors and connecting the consumer preferences of men in the Global North to the structural vulnerabilities of women in the Global South.

As states continue to produce conditions that make trafficking profitable and sustainable through the implementation of unequal migration regimes that generate irregular legal status or through the labour market deregulation that creates easily exploitable informal sectors, these actors become actively complicit with the same prescriptions their official discourse condemns. (Doezema, 2010), where complicity operates through multiple dimensions, including the treatment of anti-trafficking policy itself. When trafficking is

framed primarily as a problem of criminal organisation and border security instead of a problem of political economy, states are able to respond through law enforcement – a response that is visible, measurable, and politically defensible – while leaving entirely intact the structures, migration regimes, and welfare state retrenchments that produce the conditions trafficking exploits. Chuang's (2014) concept of "exploitation creep" captures this dynamic precisely: anti-trafficking discourse expands rhetorically, encompassing an ever-wider range of exploitative practices within its definitional scope, while the neoliberal structures that enable exploitation are left unchallenged and even significantly reinforced by the enforcement measures adopted in trafficking's name. A big example of this, and one that I will later explore in more depth, is the "rescue industry" (Agustín, 2007) that has emerged around anti-trafficking where NGOs, international organisations, and government programmes focused on identifying and rehabilitating victims have minimal long-term effects because by focusing on individual rehabilitation and entrepreneurship rather instead of the structural conditions that produce vulnerability in the first place, they are simply reproducing the same neoliberal logic that feeds it.

For an adequate account of trafficking's political economy to be made, its demand side has also to be addressed. Demand represents more than simply a criminal phenomenon driven by individual moral failures as it also composes a structural feature of economies organised around the consumption of inexpensive services and cheap goods, something that Bhattacharya and Vogel (2017) describe as the "moral economy of consumption" – a social order where the exploitation of some sustains the comfort and convenience of others. This happens as economic arrangements are able to externalise the true cost of cheap labour onto the bodies of those who provide it, an essential component for maintaining competitive pricing (Phung & Crane, 2019). The demand for sexual services is a specific and critically important dimension of this consumer economy, and one whose gendered character is impossible to disentangle from its economic character. Feminist IR scholars link the demand for commercial sex to what Sylvester (1992) calls the patriarchal dividend, meaning the collective benefit that men derive from women's social and economic subordination, where the consumption of purchased sex, besides it being an economic transaction, is a clear affirmation of masculine entitlement to access women's bodies that is both enabled by and productive of the patriarchal hierarchies that make women's subordination structurally normal. The demand for commercial sex is racialised as well as gendered, structured by the same cultural imaginaries of exoticised and

commodified femininity that Doezema's analysis identifies as shaping the global trafficking market. What sustains the sex industry's demand for trafficked women is a cultural economy of desire organised around patriarchal and colonial hierarchies, something that anti-trafficking policies leave entirely untouched.

The trafficked person, within this system, occupies a position that the conventional categories of criminal law struggle to accommodate by simultaneously being a victim of individual criminal acts as well as a product of structural conditions that no individual criminal act created (Lee, 2011). She – or he, or they – is the embodiment of what happens when the devaluation of feminised and racialised labour is taken to the logical conclusion of neoliberal labour markets that thrive on the suppression of bargaining power of workers and labour cost reduction which, at their intersection, create a system of exploitation that is simultaneously criminal in its methods and entirely rational in its economics.

Having established human trafficking as a structural feature of the global political economy that relies on gendered hierarchies of labour, mobility, and consumption for its survival and success, the rest of this thesis is developed through this analytical standpoint. But understanding why trafficking persists is not the same as understanding why governance frameworks fail. As such, the following chapter turns to the theoretical frameworks of feminist IR theory, human security, and securitisation, to continue my argument that current anti-trafficking policies that are focused on criminal prosecution are insufficient to respond to this phenomenon.

Chapter II: Gender, Security, and the Political Dimensions of Trafficking

Chapter I established that human trafficking is a fundamentally gendered structural phenomenon produced and organised by gendered inequalities and assumptions and sustained by the political economy of neoliberal globalisation. The question that follows is why the international frameworks designed to address it have so consistently failed to engage with its gendered character. Answering that question requires moving from the phenomenon of trafficking to the theoretical frameworks through which it is understood and governed.

2.1 Feminist International Relations Insights into Human Trafficking

While early IR theories largely ignored gender as a relevant analytical category, the Feminist IR theory has fundamentally reshaped the way scholars understand global political processes by arguing that there are no such thing as gender-neutral institutions and that structures actively reproduce patriarchal structures that privilege male authority and marginalise women's experiences (Walker, 1992). As feminist theorists have noted, the concept of gender refers not merely to biological differences but to socially constructed relationships of power between men and women that are inserted in political, economic, and cultural institutions (Sjoberg & Tickner, 2013). On the rare occasions that women appear in mainstream IR, they appear as an afterthought, either as a category to be protected, or a demographic to be counted for. Feminist IR scholars have demonstrated, since the very beginning of its theory, that this invisibility has profound consequences for gendered power structures that traditional theories cannot explain.

One of the central contributions of Feminist theory is precisely its critique of the traditional assumptions underlying mainstream IR theories – realism and liberalism. These theories, despite their substantial differences, have historically conceptualised global politics and state governance based on gender-based assumptions and ideals that are associated with masculinity such as rationality, autonomy and control (Sylvester, 1992). But such narrow conception of international politics obscures the gendered dimensions of power and fails to account for the ways in which global political structures affect women differently from men (Walker, 1992).

Realism conceptualises the international system as a competitive arena in which sovereign states pursue power and security within an anarchic environment that provides no reliable mechanism for cooperation (Sylvester, 1992). The state is the primary analytical unit and within it, power – understood primarily in military and material terms – is the primary currency of international relations, while the pursuit of security against external threats is the organising imperative of state behaviour. The security that Realism seeks to explain and theorise is the security of borders, of sovereignty, and of state survival, a conception that systematically excludes the forms of insecurity experienced disproportionately by women such as sexual violence, domestic exploitation, labour coercion, and the everyday threats produced by patriarchal social arrangements that operate far below the threshold of interstate conflict. When trafficking appears within a

realist analytical framework, it appears as a threat to border integrity and state control instead of a violation of individual dignity and autonomy, a framing with profound consequences for what policy responses are considered appropriate and what forms of harm are considered governable.

Liberalism offers a more complex picture. It is more attentive to international cooperation, institutional design, and the rule of law, which in turn are dimensions of international politics that create more space for the protection of individual rights and the coordination of responses to transnational challenges like trafficking. Liberal IR theory has provided important resources for the development of international human rights law, including the treaty frameworks within which anti-trafficking obligations are provisioned. But much like Realism, Liberal IR theory has a profound limitation in its approach to gender: it treats the institutions and legal frameworks of international politics as the primary terrain of analysis, without adequately examining the social and economic structures that determine whether those institutions and frameworks operate in ways that are genuinely equitable across gender lines (Harrington, 1992). A legal framework that formally prohibits trafficking and provides equal protection to all victims is not gender-neutral in its effects if the identification classifications through which victims are recognised or the institutional cultures through which cases are prosecuted, all operate through gendered assumptions that disadvantage certain categories of victim.

These gendered assumptions and constraining rules ultimately influence how states define political priorities and respond to social problems and as a consequence, issues that disproportionately affect women are not seen as central, or even secondary, political issues (Hoffman, 2001). Feminist theory thus comes to oppose and critique the traditional theories by demonstrating that gender structures the organisation of distribution of resources and opportunities institutions and power structures of international politics are severely gendered that reproduce specific hierarchies of visibility and value in ways that marginalise women's experiences, devalue feminised labour, and render certain forms of violence politically invisible (True, 2018). From this perspective, trafficking can be understood as a form of structural violence which, as developed by Feminist scholars, refers to a set of social arrangements that systematically disadvantage certain populations by limiting their access to resources and protections and that are intrinsic to the world's organisational architecture (Huebner, 2022). Through the use of gender as an analytical tool that also operates alongside variables of race, class, and migration status, Feminist

scholars examine how the operation of labour markets and political institutions interacts to produce obscured patterns of exploitation, influencing who benefits from globalisation and who remains exposed to its risks (Lansink, 2011).

The most powerful feminist tool to understand trafficking as structural violence is Jacqui True's feminist political economy approach, which argues that violence against women is a political-economic phenomenon rooted in and reproduced by the structural inequalities of the global economy (True, 2014). True identifies three interconnected structural mechanisms through which the global political economy produces gendered vulnerability to violence and exploitation. The first is the gendered division of labour, which places women disproportionately in unpaid or severely undervalued reproductive roles within households and in the precarious, informal sectors of the formal economy; care work, domestic service, hospitality, and the sex industry, all sectors that are characterised by low wages, weak labour protections, and exclusion from the collective bargaining mechanisms through which other workers maintain some capacity to resist exploitation (True, 2014). This structural positioning limits women's economic independence, creates dependency on male income or on institutional support – that may be conditional or unavailable –, and channels women into precisely those sectors of the labour market where the boundary between legal employment and trafficking is most easily crossed and most difficult to enforce. The second mechanism is the global expansion of neoliberal economic restructuring, which has created demand for cheap and flexible labour in destination countries at the same time it has increased economic desperation in source countries (True, 2018). Export-processing zones and service industries across the Global North and South employ young women from economically marginalised communities to respond to the growing demand of cheap, appearing as the most rational market solution (Usman, 2014). The third mechanism is militarisation and conflict, which reinforces gendered identities that portray men as protectors and women as passive subjects requiring protection, identities that normalise forms of gender-based violence that extend far beyond conflict settings into the everyday social and economic relations of post-conflict societies, and that create the specific conditions of institutional breakdown and gendered vulnerability within which trafficking networks operate most freely (True, 2018). The connection between conflict and trafficking is not restricted to a matter of opportunistic exploitation by criminal actors of conditions that war creates; it is also a relationship ingrained in the ways that conflict intensifies pre-existing gendered

inequalities, destroys the social and institutional protections that partially constrain exploitation in non-conflict settings, and creates the mass displacement that feeds the migration flows through which trafficking networks recruit. In sum, what True's framework contributes that purely criminological or legal analyses cannot offer, is an account of why trafficking's supply, referring to the apparently inexhaustible availability of exploitable people, particularly women, is so persistently resistant to the governance interventions directed against it. If vulnerability to trafficking was simply a matter of individual bad luck or the cunning of criminal recruiters, enforcement-oriented would have reasonably reduced it over time. But if vulnerability is structurally produced by diverse mechanisms, addressing it requires interventions that can adequately navigate through them (Blanchard, 2003).

The feminist political economy framework, while analytically powerful, requires an important qualification: the structural conditions it identifies do not produce a uniform or homogeneous experience of vulnerability and exploitation. Has stated before, gender intersects with class, race, migration status, age, sexual orientation, and disability to produce differential vulnerabilities that vary significantly across individuals and populations, even though governance frameworks treat "women" as an umbrella term referent to homogeneous category of victimhood, consistently failing to reach those whose experiences do not conform to the most visible and institutionally legible forms of trafficking (Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality, as it was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes the way that multiple systems of inequality interact to shape individuals' experiences of privilege and oppression. Applied to trafficking, it reveals that the disproportionate victimisation of women is a complex arrangement shaped by the convergence of gender with other axes of structural disadvantage. Migrant women face not only the gendered vulnerabilities that True's framework identifies but the additional legal precarity of irregular immigration status and the social isolation of unfamiliar cultural and linguistic environments. Women of colour face the additional dimension of the existent racialised labour market segmentation that channels them into the most unprotected and least regulated sectors, as well as racialised assumptions about sexuality and submissiveness that structure demand for their bodies in both domestic service and the sex industry. LGBTQ+ individuals face vulnerabilities that are simultaneously gendered and sexual, rooted in the family rejection, economic marginalisation, and specific coercive mechanisms of blackmail (Wills, 2022). When identification systems

are calibrated to detect the most institutionally legible form of trafficking victim – young, foreign, female, sexually exploited, displaying visible signs of coercion – they systematically fail to identify those whose intersectional positioning places them outside this constricted template, leaving them behind and most vulnerable (Hand, 2024).

Although there is this shared commitment to address gender inequality, the Feminist school, like other IR schools, contains within itself diverse, and sometimes competing, interpretations that create a significant theoretical debate (Halley *et al.*, 2006). The most prominent debate between scholars concerns the relationship between trafficking and prostitution. The abolitionist position – commonly associated with the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women – argues that prostitution is inherently a form of patriarchal domination in which women's bodies are commodified for male consumption, that the distinction between "voluntary" sex work and trafficking is analytically incoherent in a context of structural gender inequality, and that reducing demand for commercial sex is the most effective strategy for combating trafficking (Lozano, 2011). From this perspective, the preferred governance framework goes to Nordic Model, where buyers are criminalised instead of sellers. On the other side though, the labour rights position – typically attached to the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women – argues that conflating consensual sex work with trafficking is diagnostically inaccurate and politically harmful, that the distinction between coerced and voluntary sexual labour is both real and morally significant, and that governance frameworks that treat all commercial sex as trafficking undermine the agency and safety of those who voluntarily engage in sex work by pushing the industry underground and removing the harm reduction mechanisms that partial legalisation makes possible (Lozano, 2011). From this perspective, trafficking is defined primarily by coercion, deception, and force, not by the nature of the labour performed, and effective governance focuses on the distinction between exploitation and consensual commercial sex.

This debate around governance choices influences legislations which has direct impacts in the identifications, protections, and criminalisation of the individuals whose lives these frameworks claim to govern, as the comparative analysis of Germany and the Netherlands in Chapter IV will demonstrate in detail. What the debate fundamentally reveals is that feminist IR scholars take seriously the tensions within its own normative commitments in ways that strengthen its theoretical contribution. A theoretical framework that is honest about its internal disagreements and willing to hold them in productive tension is more

intellectually serious, and ultimately more useful, for the analysis of a genuinely complex phenomenon.

Feminist IR theory, taken as a whole, provides the rhetorical and analytical foundation from which the rest of this thesis proceeds. The following sections deepen and extend its work toward the human security literature, which repositions trafficking explicitly as a challenge to individual security, rather than state sovereignty, and whose implications for governance architecture are examined in section 2.2, and toward the securitisation framework, which explains the specific institutional mechanisms through which migration governance produces vulnerability rather than addressing it, and which the analysis of section 2.3 develops.

2.2 Human Trafficking as a Human Security Challenge

As highlighted in section 2.1, classical security paradigms, rooted in realist and liberal traditions, have blindly been focused on the preservation of sovereignty and interstate conflict, measuring security through the capacity of states to defend their borders and deter external aggression (Blanchard, 2003). Such a perspective, however, leaves little room for addressing forms of violence that occur outside conventional battlefields (Kaldor & Martin, 2007). In order to understand the implications of trafficking for security, there is a need for a shift in analytical focus from the state to the individual.

The limitations of traditional security frameworks become particularly visible when examining forms of violence that do not manifest as direct threats to the territorial integrity of states but nonetheless profoundly undermine human well-being (Lobasz, 2009). And while concerns about state stability and military threats remain highly relevant, they only offer a partial account of contemporary security challenges (Newman, 2010). As non-traditional threats – such as organised crime, migration pressures, and economic instability – have become more prominent, it has become increasingly evident that a state-centric understanding of security in an ever-changing globalised world fails to capture the full spectrum of risks faced by individuals and institutions (Sjoberg, 2009).

Human trafficking perfectly exemplifies this analytical gap because it does not typically threaten the geopolitical stability of states in ways that conventional security threats do,

yet it produces severe and sustained harm to individuals and communities (Gooding & Clott, 2022). But despite these profound impacts, trafficking has often been treated as a secondary issue within security studies, addressed primarily through criminal justice mechanisms rather than as a central concern of international security since it rarely destabilises national borders or military power structures (Gebaska, 2020). This marginalisation reflects the enduring influence of state-centric security thinking, which prioritises the protection of states over the protection of human lives.

Critical security studies is a complex and heterogeneous field of research composed of different and sometimes competing approaches. What these approaches all have in common is that they all question the meaning of security that has been inherited from traditional security studies and have thus radically rethought the orthodoxy of the field, determining that security is a derivative concept rather than a fixed term, drawing its content from deeper and temporary political structures of meaning (Newman, 2010). The emergence of the concept of human security represents a critical shift in this regard. Introduced in the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 *Human Development Report*, human security fundamentally redefined the object of security from the state to the individual, emphasising the need to protect people from threats that undermine their survival and well-being. The report articulated a multidimensional understanding of security, encompassing economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political security. This framework was grounded in the idea that security should be understood not only as freedom from violence ("freedom from fear") but also as freedom from deprivation ("freedom from want") (UNDP, 1994). By expanding the concept of security in this way, human security challenged the dominance of military-centred approaches and the narrow focus of traditional security studies by introducing a more comprehensive understanding of the risks faced by individuals (Hoogensen & Stuvøy, 2006) in the global system and recognising that threats such as poverty and inequality can be as destabilising as armed conflict.

Scholars analysing trafficking through a human security lens determined that trafficking networks understand and take into their advantage the multitude of vulnerabilities (Gebaska, 2020) experienced by certain groups – their victims. In most cases, traffickers recruit individuals from regions experiencing unemployment and social instability, transport them through transit countries, and exploit them in destination countries where the labour demand is strong. This dynamic stresses the inadequacy of purely national

responses to trafficking and underscores the need for coordinated international strategies and a shift from reactive to preventive approaches. Rather than focusing solely on law enforcement and the prosecution of traffickers, the human security theory, much like the Feminist school, emphasises the need of addressing the root causes of vulnerability (Gooding & Clott, 2022). This includes improving access to education and employment, strengthening labour protections, and ensuring that migrants have access to legal pathways and social support systems. By reducing the conditions that enable exploitation, such measures can contribute to the prevention of trafficking.

The European context provides a particularly revealing case for examining the application of human security. Although Europe is often characterised by strong institutions, advanced governance, economic development, and relative political stability, the human security framework exposes significant internal disparities and liabilities. Rather than eliminating insecurity, European integration and globalisation have reconfigured it, producing new forms of vulnerability (Barrie & Barry, 2021) such as irregular migration, economic marginalisation and prevalence of organised crime, that create conditions conducive to human trafficking (Gebaska, 2020). The human security lens therefore makes visible a central contradiction of contemporary Europe: a region that is institutionally stable but socially uneven, where insecurity is concentrated in migrants, precarious workers, women in feminised labour sectors, and other marginalised groups. One of the clearest indicators of this contradiction is poverty and exclusion. In 2024, 93.3 million people in the EU, or 21.0% of the population, were at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The situation is even sharper for migrants: 43.8% of non-EU citizens residing in the EU faced the risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2024, compared with 26.9% of EU citizens living in another EU country (Eurostat, 2025).

Migration also plays a central role in shaping these dynamics. While the European integration has facilitated mobility for some populations, access to legal migration pathways remains uneven (European Commission, 2016), particularly for individuals from outside the European Union – hereon by the EU – or from economically marginalised regions. Frontex (2025) reported that irregular border crossings at the EU's external borders fell by 38% in 2024, to just over 239,000 detections, the lowest level since 2021. At first glance, that could be read as an improvement in security. But from a human security perspective, lower registers of crossings translate into a higher account of insecurity as when legal and safe mobility is restricted, migrants do not stop moving;

rather, they become more dependent on intermediaries, smugglers, or traffickers (Lobasz, 2009). That is exactly why migration control and human security are not the same thing. State security can improve on paper while human insecurity deepens in practice. Hence why these threats cannot be adequately addressed through conventional security mechanisms, because they do not originate from identifiable external enemies but from structural dynamics within the and regional political economy (Hoogensen & Stuvøy, 2006).

However, while the human security framework offers a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary threats, it is not without its limitations. One critique commonly made to the human security theory concerns its conceptual vagueness; by encompassing a wide range of issues – from economic inequality to environmental degradation – the concept risks becoming overly expansive and analytically diffuse (Newman, 2010). Critics argue that if security includes everything that affects human well-being, it may lose its analytical precision and political relevance. This challenge is particularly evident in policy contexts, where governments may struggle to prioritise among competing human security concerns or allocate resources effectively. In a context such as the EU, differences in national interests, political priorities, and institutional capacities can hinder cooperation between states (Kaldor & Martin, 2007). Additionally, public debates on migration and security are often shaped by concerns about national identity and economic competition, which can limit the willingness of governments to adopt more inclusive and protective policies.

Nevertheless, the human security approach comes in great relevance for the development of effective measures because it advocates for policies that address both the immediate and structural dimensions of trafficking through the expansion of access to education and employment and strengthening labour protections in sectors vulnerable to exploitation. Gender-sensitive policies are particularly important in this regard, as they address the specific vulnerabilities faced by women and other marginalised groups (Hoogensen & Stuvøy, 2006). Empirical evidence supports the effectiveness of such approaches. Studies on trafficking in Europe indicate that policies combining social protection measures with targeted interventions in labour markets are more effective in reducing vulnerability than those focused solely on law enforcement (Kaldor & Martin, 2007). Similarly, research on trafficking victims underlines the importance of victim-centred approaches that prioritise

empowerment and long-term support, enabling survivors to rebuild their lives and avoid re-exploitation and re-victimisation (Gooding & Clott, 2024).

Understanding trafficking as a gendered human security challenge requires moving beyond traditional security paradigms and adopting a more comprehensive analytical framework that integrates insights from feminist theory, human rights, and political economy (Sjoberg, 2009). While human security theory provides a valuable foundation for this analysis, its effectiveness depends on the extent to which it is applied in a manner that addresses the structural inequalities underlying trafficking. By incorporating gender-sensitive and intersectional perspectives, human security approaches offer a more nuanced understanding of trafficking and a more effective basis for policy intervention. At the same time, the persistence of state-centric security practices highlights the challenges of translating these insights into practice and as the European case demonstrates, these issues cannot be separated from questions of migration governance and border control (Kaldor & Martin, 2007). But as long as migration control and law enforcement remain the dominant tools of anti-trafficking policy, efforts to address exploitation will remain limited as policies in these areas can either mitigate or exacerbate the risks faced by vulnerable populations. Recognising the limitations of these approaches is therefore essential for developing more effective responses. As such, the following section examines how the securitisation of migration shapes trafficking dynamics and reinforces gendered patterns of vulnerability within the international system.

2.3 Migration and Borders: How Securitisation Produces Vulnerability

The governance of migration has undergone a significant transformation in contemporary international politics over the past three decades, increasingly shaped by security logics that frame mobility as a source of risk and destabilising phenomenon requiring containment rather than as a structural feature of global inequality and labour demand (Pruitt, 2018). This shift reflects a broader securitisation process that justifies exceptional measures such as intensified border surveillance, expansion of policing technologies, and restrictive legal regimes, where trafficking is positioned alongside transnational organised crime and irregular migration, aligning it with concerns about border integrity and internal security rather than with the protection of individuals (Lobaz, 2009).

Within critical security studies where the human security framework stems from, also emerge diverse schools of thought such as the Copenhagen School. Aligning with diverse theoretical influences such as realism, poststructuralism, strategic studies and peace research, the Copenhagen School has produced a robust and coherent theory and framework of analysis based on a specific research agenda and a series of innovative concepts, the fundamental aim of which has been to respond to the traditionalist conceptualisation that widening the meaning of security would void the term of all meaning (Grundell, 2025). Its three big pillars rely on the notion of security as “survival”, which speaks to its logic; “societal security”, which addresses the question of security’s referent objects; and, perhaps most importantly, “securitisation”, which explains the performative function of security as an ordering principle of reality. Securitisation refers to the discursive construction of an issue as an existential threat that justifies the use of extraordinary measures beyond normal political procedures. Applied to migration, this process does not reflect an inherent destabilising danger, but rather a political discursive redefinition of migration as a threat to public order and economic stability that requires intensified control (Grundell, 2025). As a result, migration governance has been transformed into a domain of surveillance, restriction, and enforcement, in which border control becomes a central instrument of state power.

Although human trafficking is formally recognised as a violation of human rights, it has consistently been incorporated into this securitised framework where the priority is dismantling criminal networks and controlling migration flows, demonstrating that the primary referent object of security remains the state (Askola, 2007a). This alignment is not incidental, but institutionalised, and it is directly reflected in key international instruments such as the Palermo Protocol, which mandates the criminalisation of trafficking, the strengthening of border controls, and the enhancement of travel document security, transforming trafficking from a manifestation of structural inequality into a problem of criminality, thereby shaping both the diagnosis of the problem and the policy responses deemed appropriate. And even though the Protocol includes provisions for victim protection, these are notably weaker and less binding than its enforcement measures (Gooding & Clott, 2022).

One of the most consequential effects of securitised migration is the restriction of legal mobility pathways (Pruitt, 2018). Increasingly stringent visa regimes, externalised border controls, and surveillance technologies limit access to safe and regulated migration

channels, particularly for individuals from economically marginalised regions. However, these restrictions do not eliminate migration pressures; instead, they displace mobility into informal and irregular routes, where migrants must rely on intermediaries to facilitate their movement across borders. This transformation is not incidental but structurally produced (Lansink, 2011). The risks associated with these journeys – financial, physical, and legal – are transferred onto migrants themselves, who must navigate increasingly complex and dangerous routes. In this context, the distinction between migrant smuggling and trafficking becomes blurred, as many individuals initially consent to being smuggled across borders but subsequently experience coercion and deception (Hand, 2024), illustrating the continuum between voluntary and forced migration. By limiting legal mobility, states effectively create a market for intermediaries, increasing migrants' exposure to exploitation and exacerbating their already pre-existing condition of vulnerability through migration governance.

Nowhere is this contradiction more evident than in the European context. The development of the Schengen Area and the simultaneous strengthening of external border controls have produced a system of stratified mobility (Askola, 2007b) in which internal movement is facilitated for some, while access is increasingly restricted for others. Agencies such as Frontex play a central role in enforcing this regime, emphasising surveillance, risk management, and the prevention of irregular entry. Within this framework, trafficking is frequently treated as an extension of illegal migration, reinforcing the integration of anti-trafficking measures into border control strategies. As legal analyses of EU policy demonstrate, this has contributed to what is often described as “Fortress Europe” (Grundell, 2025), a stratified system of mobility in which certain populations are systematically excluded from legal pathways while still being incorporated into European labour markets through informal and precarious arrangements. It is within this structural configuration that trafficking emerges as a predictable outcome rather than an anomaly.

A second mechanism through which securitised migration generates vulnerability is the institutionalisation of irregular legal status (Gebaska, 2020). Legal status operates as a key axis of power within migration regimes as migrants without authorised residence or work permits are systematically excluded from formal protections including labour rights, social services, and legal recourse. This precarity is further intensified by the increasing reliance on enforcement-based approaches such as detention practices, deportation

policies, and workplace inspections aimed at identifying irregular migrants, which are leveraged by employers and intermediaries to maintain control through the migrants' fear and mistrust of state authorities, limiting their capacity and willingness to seek assistance or challenge abusive conditions (Grundell, 2025). As a result, legal status becomes a critical tool of control and the boundaries between state regulation and private exploitation becomes blurred, with migration governance itself contributing to the conditions that enable trafficking. Empirical evidence from multiple contexts illustrates how these dynamics operate in practice. In the United States, law enforcement raids on trafficking operations have resulted in victims being detained for extended periods, only getting access to assistance and legal status – T visa – if they cooperate in the investigation and prosecution of traffickers (Lobasz, 2009). Similarly, the EU provides temporary residence permits only to the victims who agree to participate in criminal proceedings (Askola, 2007a). This dangerous conditionality reflecting an institutional tendency to prioritise immigration enforcement and prosecutorial objectives over the victim's protection and needs, results in the “double victimisation” of the trafficked person who is abused by both the trafficker and the state.

A deeper layer of precarity is added to the securitised framing of migration as it actively reinforces gendered narratives that influence how trafficking is perceived and addressed. Policy discourse is often narrowed down to sexual exploitation of women which is a direct reflection of the narrative of victimhood and the condition of the woman in the world, which only serves to depoliticise the conditions that produce exploitation and reinforces paternalistic approaches that depict women as passive victims (Lansink, 2011). In addition, this focus also obscures other forms of exploitation – particularly in labour sectors – as globalisation and labour market demands rapidly channels women and marginalised genders into specific sectors characterised by informality and invisibility.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that migration and border policies do not merely respond to trafficking – they actively shape its conditions of possibility. On the one hand, borders are fortified and access is limited; on the other, economic structures continue to depend on the incorporation of precarious and often undocumented workers. This tension generates differentiated legal statuses and hierarchies of rights, positioning certain groups as simultaneously necessary and disposable. This is not simply a failure of policy implementation but a reflection of the underlying logic of securitisation, which privileges sovereignty over rights.

So, if securitised migration regimes produce and intensify vulnerability, then understanding trafficking requires examining how these vulnerabilities are subsequently organised and exploited within broader economic structures. The questions that follow are therefore no longer how trafficking happens and who is responsible, but how is it transformed into economic value, and who ultimately benefits from these arrangements?

2.4 Power, Exploitation, and Structural Inequalities: Who Benefits from Gendered Trafficking Systems?

Once trafficking is no longer treated as an exceptional crime committed by deviant actors at the margins of the global economy and there is an understanding of how individuals become vulnerable to trafficking, a different analytical question arises: how vulnerability is converted into value, through which institutional arrangements, and to whose benefit? From this angle, trafficking is less adequately interpreted as a discrete criminal violation but rather as an extractive system embedded in labour markets and political economies that depend on differential access to rights and unequal relations of power (Sinnott & Clott, 2022). The problem is not simply that vulnerable people are exploited; it is that exploitation has economic utility, political functionality, and social legitimacy within existing structures of production and governance.

Toine Spapens's analysis of trafficking "from a business perspective" (2018) is especially useful here because it strips away the moral exceptionalism through which trafficking is often discussed and situates it within the logic of market and profit organisation. Following this rationale, traffickers are not merely sadistic offenders but actors that operate within business processes and networks of exchange designed to maximise financial returns. What becomes visible in Spapens's account is that trafficking is attractive not because coercion is irrational or chaotic, but because coercion can be organised as a labour-management strategy. The profitability of trafficking lies precisely in the capacity to produce a workforce with sharply reduced costs and sharply diminished autonomy.

This is where the economics of exploitation must be confronted directly. Trafficking reduces labour costs not simply by paying less, but by attacking the very conditions under which labour could be negotiated as labour at all (Sharapov, 2018). Debt bondage

transforms mobility into obligation. Confiscation of documents transforms movement into dependency. Wage withholding transforms work into compulsion. In each case, what is being dismantled is not only freedom, but bargaining power. The trafficked worker is economically valuable because they cannot easily exit, complain, unionise, litigate, or renegotiate the terms of work (Ollus & Jokinen, 2018). Exploitation in this sense is not accidental or residual; it is economically rational in sectors where the suppression of labour costs is integral to profitability. That is why trafficking cannot be reduced to a moral failure within an otherwise normal economy. It is better understood as an intensified form of labour extraction that becomes viable wherever legal protections are weak, enforceability is low, and workers are rendered substitutable.

The more difficult and more important question now is who benefits once exploitation is seen as a chain rather than an event (True, 2014). Traffickers and recruiters may organise the immediate coercive relation, but the benefits of that relation extend far beyond them. Employers benefit from labour that is cheaper, more controllable, and less able to resist abuse. Industries benefit from subcontracting arrangements that diffuse liability while preserving access to hyper-exploitable workers. Consumers benefit, however distantly, from lower prices and inexpensive services made possible by labour whose real cost has been externalised onto the bodies of migrants, women, and racialised workers. States benefit as well – even if not in the crude sense of openly endorsing trafficking – from the availability of workers who fill sectors that formal economies underpay and underprotect, and from the political convenience of treating exploitation as criminal deviation rather than as a feature of labour market design and structural embedded inequalities (Sinnott & Clott, 2022). In that sense, trafficking systems operate through layered chains of benefit in which exploitation is dispersed across multiple actors, many of whom remain formally detached from criminal liability while being materially implicated in the value extracted from constrained labour. And it is not that this logic is innovative or never talked about before within anti-trafficking policy discussions (Sharapov, 2018), but the active bracketing of trafficking as individualised crime serves an ideological function: it separates trafficking from the broader organisation of labour exploitation and allows policymakers to treat it as a deviation from an otherwise acceptable economic order. Once trafficking is severed from the informal economy, from labour flexibilisation, and from neoliberal restructuring (Ollus & Jokinen, 2018), exploitation appears as the work of individual criminals rather than as an outcome of normalised economic arrangements.

This point becomes even more apparent when placed in relation to labour market structures themselves. Trafficking thrives in deregulated markets not merely because regulation is absent (Cho, 2016), but because certain sectors are already organised around exploitability: domestic work, care work, agriculture, hospitality, and segments of the sex industry are not simply vulnerable to trafficking from the outside – they are sectors in which informality, weak oversight, personal dependency, and low labour valuation are crucial for them to function (Spapens, 2018). The issue, then, is not how individuals enter these sectors, but how these sectors derive economic advantage from workers who can be underpaid, hidden, and denied collective power. The exploitability within labour regimes is also deeply gendered. Gender does not merely designate who is likely to be harmed, it structures how certain forms of labour become profitable and socially accepted because the labour involved is already culturally coded as low-value, replaceable, or not fully labour at all (Sharapov, 2018). Care work appears as extension of femininity rather than labour deserving protection. Domestic work is privatised inside households and therefore shielded from scrutiny. Sexualised labour is moralised in ways that make the worker hyper-visible as a body yet invisible as a worker. Across these sectors, exploitation is normalised through expectations of service, obedience, intimacy, and dependency – all intrinsically misogynistic beliefs (True, 2014). That is why gender belongs in the analysis not at the level of descriptive victim profiles, but at the level of profitability itself.

But the ultimate determinant is global inequality that sustains these exploitation systems because it creates a transnational labour supply whose cheapness is structurally normalised, ensuring that labour from the Global South enters global markets already politically weakened and economically devalued (Pruitt, 2018). Wage gaps between regions, uneven development, debt, unemployment, and postcolonial dependency do not simply push people to move; they allow labour imported into richer economies to be treated as economically disposable and politically lesser. What is profitable in the Global North is often labour whose reproduction costs have effectively been borne by poorer states, impoverished households, and feminised systems of social reproduction. In this sense, trafficking has yet another layer of unequal exchange: value accumulates in one place because vulnerability is produced and absorbed in another (Spapens, 2018).

The role of the state must therefore be understood not only as a producer of vulnerability, but as a regulator of exploitation (Cho, 2016). States structure the conditions under which exploitative practices become profitable and sustainable through regulatory gaps, labour

inspection failures, visa regimes that tie workers to employers, selective tolerance of informal sectors, and the prioritisation of economic growth over labour enforcement (Ollus & Jokinen, 2018). Even where states know that feminised service sectors rely on exploitative grey zones, the usefulness of migrant labour to the economy reduces the incentive to intervene decisively. In such cases, the state does not simply fail to protect, it actually governs labour in ways that preserve exploitability as an economic resource (True, 2014).

All of these interconnected factors is why exploitation persists. It does not persist because regulation has simply missed it, or because traffickers are especially cunning, or because victims put themselves in liable positions. It persists because it is profitable, structurally embedded, politically tolerated, and socially normalised. In neoliberal economies – which is to say, in the globalised market – profitability depends increasingly on extracting more from labour than labour is paid (Sharapov, 2018). Under those conditions, trafficking appears not as an incomprehensible aberration but as an intensified form of the same extractive logic. Exploitation is not external to these systems, it is one of their organising principles – one that depends on constrained mobility, unequal rights, gendered labour hierarchies, and the normalisation of exploitation itself (Ollus & Jokinen, 2018).

The ideological dimension of trafficking discourse is therefore inseparable from material power. When trafficking is narrated primarily as a pathology located in criminal actors, the exploitative dependence of richer economies on cheap migrant labour is displaced from view. The focus shifts to rescue and policing, while the global divisions of labour and value that make trafficking profitable remain untouched. The problem is externalised even where its benefits are internalised; what remains visible is a personalised villain and a decontextualised victim. This is exactly the move that allows humanitarian discourse to coexist with structural exploitation, as I will explore in Part II.

The analysis developed across this chapter has progressively displaced human trafficking from its conventional framing as a discrete criminal activity toward a more complex understanding of it as a phenomenon that is ingrained in global systems of gendered power, economic organisation, and governance failure. Feminist IR theory revealed the gendered assumptions in which mainstream international relations frameworks are rooted, and their consequences for how trafficking is understood and addressed. The human security framework repositioned trafficking as a challenge to individual rather than state security, exposing the inadequacy of enforcement-oriented responses. The

securitisation analysis demonstrated that migration governance actively produces the conditions of vulnerability that trafficking exploits. And the structural analysis of who benefits established that exploitation is not located in criminal actors at the margins of the global economy but dispersed across a chain of beneficiaries that governance frameworks are largely designed to avoid confronting. Together, these analytical moves provide the theoretical equipment necessary to interrogate the governance architecture that Part II examines. The research question – to what extent the gendered dimension of trafficking shapes policy responses, and what the structural limits of those responses are – can now be pursued at the level of the institutions and frameworks through which international anti-trafficking governance is actually produced, analysing if contemporary approaches can confront the structural realities that sustain human trafficking.

PART II: INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE, POLICYMAKING AND GENDER

Chapter III: Global Governance and Anti-Trafficking Policies

The theoretical frameworks developed in Chapter II established that the gendered blindness of anti-trafficking governance is not incidental but structural, rooted in the state-centric assumptions of mainstream IR theory, the security paradigm within which trafficking has been institutionalised, and the political economy of a global order that benefits materially from the conditions that produce vulnerability to exploitation. This chapter descends from the theoretical to the institutional, examining the international governance architecture through which anti-trafficking responses are effectively coordinated. In doing so, it pursues the second dimension of the thesis's research question directly: what are the structural limits of existing governance frameworks in addressing the gendered dynamics of trafficking?

3.1 The Role of International Organisations in Gendered Trafficking Policies

The governance of human trafficking is frequently presented as an intergovernmental response to a transnational problem, but such a formulation obscures the extent to which anti-trafficking policy has come to operate through a dispersed and stratified institutional field composed of international organisations, regional bodies, expert monitoring mechanisms, law-enforcement networks, NGOs, and “state-empowered entities” (Kane, 2023) – that is, bodies that are formally empowered by states yet exercise real normative influence through guidance and oversight. Rather than merely assisting states in the implementation of obligations already agreed elsewhere, all these actors participate in the production, interpretation, circulation, and enforcement of anti-trafficking norms (Fitria, 2025). In that sense, international organisations do not simply support state action, they structure the field within which states act, shaping what counts as trafficking, what kinds of responses are considered legitimate, and which forms of suffering become visible in governance discourse. This dispersed architecture is one of the defining features of

contemporary anti-trafficking governance as its international legal framework as developed through overlapping treaty regimes, human rights bodies, criminal-law instruments, labour standards, regional conventions, and soft-law mechanisms rather than through a single coherent institutional design. The result is not a unified governance model but a transnational policy space in which multiple institutions exercise partially overlapping authority over prevention, protection, criminalisation, victim support, migration regulation, and compliance monitoring. This means that anti-trafficking governance is neither fully centralised nor reducible to the sovereign will of individual states. It is multi-level, multi-actor, and fragmented by design. (Gallagher, 2010)

Within this fragmented landscape, the integration of gender remains partial and uneven. One of the most striking features of contemporary anti-trafficking governance is that gender is highly visible at the rhetorical level yet only partially integrated at the level of institutional design (Grundell, 2025). The language of “women and children,” the repeated invocation of vulnerability, and the emphasis on sexual exploitation have ensured that trafficking is publicly recognised as a gendered issue (Lansink, 2011). Nevertheless, this visibility does not translate into structurally gender-sensitive policies and gender continues to be treated as a descriptive marker of vulnerability. Policies may identify women as the paradigmatic victims, but the institutions addressing trafficking remain overwhelmingly organised around prosecution, rescue, and risk management, and fail to address the broader gendered dynamics that structure labour markets, migration inequalities, and political exclusions that channel victims into their condition (Liévana & Chinkin, 2021). This limitation is then further reinforced by the way international organisations construct victims. Anti-trafficking frameworks often represent women as vulnerable in ways that depoliticise them; participation is often weak, accountability to trafficked women is thin, and the empowerment language that appears in policy discourse rarely reorganises the institutional balance between enforcement and support (Enrile, 2017). Even where governance has shifted toward protection in formal terms, protection itself is commonly tied to criminal-justice objectives, migration status, or cooperation with authorities. In this sense, international organisations have certainly helped mainstream gender into anti-trafficking discourse, but far less successfully into governance practice.

The value of international organisations produced discourse also comes into play in the definition of trafficking itself since definitions determine jurisdiction, priorities, and

intervention strategies. Depending on the actor, trafficking may appear primarily as a form of transnational organised crime, a violation of human rights, a labour exploitation issue, a migration issue, or some unstable combination of all four (McAdam, 2019). The Palermo Protocol remains the central point of condensation for this normative struggle as it standardised anti-trafficking governance by embedding it within the UN's Convention against Transnational Organised Crime. But the Protocol's significance lies not only in having supplied the first global definition of trafficking, but in having institutionalised a particular way of thinking about the problem – through privileging a criminal-law and security-oriented architecture in which trafficking could be addressed as a matter of prosecution, cross-border cooperation, surveillance, and control (Pati, 2019). This dominance of crime and security frameworks is not simply a matter of emphasis; it is embedded in the institutional forms through which trafficking is managed. The central tools of international governance continue to be criminalisation, prosecution, policing, cross-border intelligence exchange, and the enhancement of enforcement capacity and the cooperation against trafficking has become part of an expanding global law-enforcement assemblage. Institutions such as Interpol and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) facilitate coordination, training, data-sharing, and operational support, while the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) provides a platform for inter-agency exchange, and specialised entities such as the United Nation's Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) work to strengthen institutional responses on the ground (Scarpa, 2008). These are not marginal developments. They reveal that contemporary anti-trafficking governance is deeply invested in making trafficking legible as a governable crime problem. The human-rights register has been incorporated, but it has not displaced enforcement as the dominant operational logic (Pati, 2019).

At the same time, international organisations exercise a form of governance that is often less visible than treaty-making but no less consequential: they act as agenda-setters and funders that shape not only what anti-trafficking policies look like, but what kinds of interventions are considered legitimate. This form of influence operates through multiple channels. International organisations finance anti-trafficking programs, support national action plans, and provide technical assistance, but they also produce the metrics, indicators, and evaluative outlines through which success is defined (Resendiz & Espinoza, 2019). In contexts where state capacity is limited or uneven, for example,

international organisations and their partner NGOs frequently assume a central role in translating international commitments into domestic practices. This is not, however, a neutral process of implementation since it entails the prioritisation of certain policy models, often those aligned with donor countries expectations, available funding streams, and internationally recognised “best practices” (Noyori-Corbet *et al.*, 2019). As a result, national anti-trafficking policies tend to converge around standardised templates, not necessarily because they are the most effective in addressing local conditions and needs, but because they are the most legible within global governance frameworks and most likely to attract funding and institutional support. This dynamic also reveals that international organisations govern through knowledge production as much as through law (McAdam, 2019). By defining categories of victims, establishing reporting requirements, and ranking state performance through monitoring exercises and policy assessments over substantive results, international organisations create a system in which states are incentivised to align with externally defined priorities, thereby influencing policy trajectories in ways that extend beyond formal legal obligations.

However, monitoring systems – whether through treaty bodies, special rapporteurs, or periodic reporting mechanisms – rarely carry binding enforcement power, as much of this governance operates through soft law and indirect forms of compliance. The international legal framework on trafficking is dense with conventions, guidelines, recommendations, and interpretative instruments, but enforcement mechanisms remain comparatively weak, meaning that compliance with anti-trafficking obligations is largely dependent on state willingness, capacity, and political priorities (Gallagher, 2010). So even though soft-law instruments and guidance documents produced by international organisations can significantly shape state behaviour by clarifying standards and promoting best practices, they rely on persuasion and reputational incentives, which results in a governance system that is normatively expansive but structurally limited. This reliance on soft law is closely linked to the fragmentation of the anti-trafficking governance landscape. This field is populated by a wide range of actors, including UN agencies, regional organisations such as the EU and the Council of Europe, international law-enforcement networks, labour organisations, and a dense network of NGOs and civil society actors. Each of these institutions approaches trafficking from a distinct mandate, either through criminal justice, human rights, labour regulation, migration management, or development, which produces overlapping but not always coherent policy agendas (Sinnott & Clott, 2016).

While this multiplicity allows for a wide-ranging engagement with the issue, it also generates coordination challenges, duplication of efforts, waste of resources, and inconsistencies in priorities, where institutions tend to emphasise those aspects of trafficking that align with their institutional mandates: law-enforcement bodies prioritise prosecution and policing, labour organisations focus on working conditions, and human-rights bodies emphasise protection and victim support (Novak-Irons, 2018).

What emerges from this analysis is not the picture of a coherent global regime progressively aligning around the protection of trafficked persons, but an uneven institutional landscape in which anti-trafficking governance is shaped by layered forms of authority. International organisations matter because they define problems, authorise interventions, allocate resources, produce expertise, and create the standards through which state action is judged. Yet their ability to produce coherent, gender-sensitive, and fully effective responses is increasingly limited due to weak enforcement, and their agendas remain marked by the predominance of criminal-law and security rationalities. So, while international organisations play a central role in constructing and coordinating anti-trafficking governance, their influence is ultimately mediated through the legal instruments that codify these priorities and give them formal expression. Understanding the strengths and limitations of this governance system therefore requires a closer examination of the treaties that underpin it, particularly the Palermo Protocol and related UN conventions, which will be the focus of the following section.

3.2 Evaluating International Treaties: The Palermo Protocol and the 4Ps Framework

The international legal framework governing human trafficking is often presented as a progressive architecture, anchored in the Palermo Protocol and reinforced by a wider constellation of UN conventions and regional instruments. Yet this obscures the extent to which these legal instruments are the product of political compromise and competing normative agendas (Charnysh *et al.*, 2015). Evaluating these treaties therefore requires not a descriptive account of their provisions, but a critical interrogation of how they organise power, structure agendas, and produce specific and gendered outcomes.

At the core of international laws on human trafficking lies the Palermo Protocol. It is frequently referenced as a landmark achievement in international law, establishing for the first time a shared definition of trafficking and a coordinated framework for state action. However, the Protocol is embedded within the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, and this institutional positioning is not at all incidental (Gallagher, 2010). By framing trafficking as a transnational organised crime issue, the Protocol privileges certain forms of intervention such as prosecution and cross-border cooperation, turning what should've been two revolutionary pieces of contemporary legal instruments – to which I am referring to the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children (UNGA, 2003) and the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air (UNGA, 2004) – into a technology of governance and policing, reflective of the political conditions under which they were consented upon, organising both the visibility of exploitation and the hierarchy of interventions through which it is addressed (Scarpa, 2008). So, rather than emerging primarily from a human rights basis, the Protocol reflects a negotiated compromise between competing agendas – law enforcement, migration control, and feminist advocacy – culminating in a text that is simultaneously expansive and ambiguous, enabling states to selectively implement obligations in ways that align with domestic priorities rather than consistent international standards.

This tension is a direct result of the conditions under which the Protocol was created and negotiated. With the end of the Second World War and its remaining consequences, in 1949 the UN passed a resolution that entered into force in 1951, the Convention on the Suppression of Trafficking in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (UNGA, 1951) which rooted trafficking within a moral context that conflated sexual exploitation with concerns about social order and migration. This early legal architecture was therefore both gendered and selective: gendered in that it constructed women primarily as victims of sexual danger, and selective in that it ignored other forms of exploitation, particularly within the labour scope – an intentional exclusion that continues to shape contemporary understandings of trafficking, where sexual exploitation remains disproportionately visible when compared to the rapid expansion of trafficking into other sectors. And although that with the development of other universal human rights instruments trafficking was continuously addressed and extended, it was only with the adoption of the Palermo Protocol in 2000 that a consolidated international definition of

trafficking emerged (Gallagher, 2010). At the core of this process was the coexistence of multiple – and often conflicting – frames through which trafficking was understood. For some actors, particularly law enforcement agencies and states concerned with border control, trafficking was framed primarily as a form of transnational organised crime requiring strengthened surveillance and criminalisation. For others, including feminist and human rights advocates, trafficking was conceptualised as a manifestation of gender-based violence and structural inequalities. These competing framings were not reconciled during the negotiation process; rather, they were incorporated into the Protocol in ways that allowed each constituency to see its priorities reflected in the final text. As Charnysh (*et al.*, 2015) argues, this type of “constructive ambiguity” is central to the formation of international agreements, as it lowers the barriers to participation by enabling actors to project their own interpretations onto shared language.

The operational logic of this consensus is most clearly expressed through the 4Ps: prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnerships – a framework that has become the dominant template for anti-trafficking policy globally (Duong, 2019). Prevention focuses on reducing the conditions that make individuals vulnerable to exploitation, such as poverty, lack of education, and limited employment opportunities. Protection refers to the identification, support, and rehabilitation of victims, including access to shelter, healthcare, legal assistance, and reintegration services. Prosecution emphasises the investigation and punishment of traffickers, reflecting the strong influence of criminal law within the field. Finally, partnerships highlight the need for coordination between states, international organisations, NGOs, and other stakeholders, recognising that trafficking is a transnational and multi-actor issue. But although this framework is widely embedded in international policy, the mere presence of the 4Ps in policy documents does not guarantee effective or balanced implementation.

In fact, anti-trafficking governance has been consistently driven by the expansion of transnational criminal law and networks, while preventive measures and long-term victim support remain incredibly neglected, despite being formally recognised as essential components (Miller & Zivkovic, 2018). To this matter comes in particular relevance Article 9 of the Palermo Protocol (2000), which focuses on the “Prevention of trafficking in persons”, stating:

1. States Parties shall establish comprehensive policies, programmes and other measures:

(a) To prevent and combat trafficking in persons; and

(b) To protect victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children, from revictimization.

2. States Parties shall endeavour to undertake measures such as research, information and mass media campaigns and social and economic initiatives to prevent and combat trafficking in persons.

3. Policies, programmes and other measures established in accordance with this article shall, as appropriate, include cooperation with non-governmental organizations, other relevant organizations and other elements of civil society.

4. States Parties shall take or strengthen measures, including through bilateral or multilateral cooperation, to alleviate the factors that make persons, especially women and children, vulnerable to trafficking, such as poverty, underdevelopment and lack of equal opportunity.

5. States Parties shall adopt or strengthen legislative or other measures, such as educational, social or cultural measures, including through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, to discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation of persons, especially women and children, that leads to trafficking.

I highlight this article as it undeniably poses that prevention and protection are key factors on the combat against trafficking in persons, even though states have overwhelmingly focused on criminalisation (Charnysh, 2015). But this imbalance reflects a much deeper structural dynamic within international law. Prevention, unlike prosecution, requires engagement with complex socio-economic conditions that extend beyond the immediate control of law enforcement institutions; it demands interventions in labour markets, migration systems, gender inequality, and global development – areas that are politically sensitive, resource-intensive, and difficult to measure (Novak-Irons, 2018). By contrast, prosecution offers clear metrics of success: arrests, convictions, and sentences (Fitria, 2025). As a result, the governance of trafficking becomes oriented toward what is measurable so that policies can appear effective according to technical indicators, such as the number of prosecutions or identified victims, whilst simultaneously failing to produce meaningful change, therefore providing a framework in which prevention is rhetorically central, but practically marginal.

Kim Anh Duong's (2019) contribution to the analysis of the Palermo Protocol and the 4P's framework is particularly valuable because it moves beyond descriptive or normative discussions of anti-trafficking policy and instead proposes a structured way to evaluate whether such policies are actually effective and gender-responsive. Duong's framework introduces a layered approach that combines institutional analysis, policy design, and lived outcomes through the development of what she calls as a technical evaluation of anti-trafficking policies and programs, where policies are evaluated not only according to what they claim to do, but to how they operate across different levels of governance and how they affect individuals in structurally unequal positions, particularly women. This involves examining the allocation of resources across the 4Ps, the coherence between policy goals and implementation mechanisms, and the measurable outcomes of specific interventions. For example, a technically robust evaluation would not simply note that a country has victim protection laws in place; it would assess whether victims are actually able to access services, if those services are adequately funded, and if they address the specific needs of different groups, including women, migrants, and other marginalised populations. Similarly, in the area of prevention, evaluation would require examining whether policies target structural drivers of vulnerability or merely focus on awareness campaigns with limited impact. Importantly, Duong extends this technical evaluation by integrating gender-sensitive criteria such as participation, empowerment, and accountability. This means that policies must be assessed not only in terms of efficiency or output, but also in terms of whether they enable trafficked persons to have a voice in policy processes and whether institutions can be held accountable for failures in protection. This is where her framework becomes especially significant for feminist analysis as it reveals that many anti-trafficking policies, even when framed within the 4Ps, remain gender-blind in practice because they fail to engage with the power relations that shape vulnerability and exploitation. By contrast, a genuinely gender-responsive approach would require rebalancing priorities away from enforcement alone and toward structural interventions that address inequality, labour conditions, and social exclusion. In this sense, Duong's multilayer framework does more than provide a methodological tool; it exposes the limitations of existing governance models. It shows that anti-trafficking policy cannot be adequately evaluated through legal compliance or institutional presence alone, and that without a deeper engagement with gendered power structures, the 4Ps risk becoming a formal checklist rather than a transformative strategy.

The limitations of criminal law frame of the Protocol in this sense become even more apparent when examining how it operationalises victimhood as a legal and political construct. While the language of human rights is present, the development of obligations to “find” and identify trafficked persons has produced what authors like Miller and Zivkovic (2018) describe as a paradoxical “right to be found”, meaning a form of conditional recognition that depends on state surveillance and categorisation according to what institutional criteria determines a victim is or should be. This conditionality produces significant exclusions, particularly for individuals whose experiences do not fit neatly within the legal definition of trafficking or who are unwilling or unable to cooperate with law enforcement making it as that protection is not an inherent right but a negotiated outcome (Miller & Zivkovic, 2018), dependent on the intersection of legal status and institutional recognition in a process that can involve coercive interventions, misidentification, exclusion and, undoubtedly, victimisation. Gender occupies a similarly ambiguous and constrained position within the international legal agenda. The Palermo Protocol, like other international treaties, explicitly emphasises women and children as particularly liable to trafficking. However, this emphasis often reduces gender to a marker of vulnerability instead of a structure of power. For example, EU agencies involved in anti-trafficking efforts have formally committed to integrating a gender perspective into their policies and practices, recognising the need to address the specific vulnerabilities of women and other marginalised groups (EIGE, 2018). However, this incorporation of gender often remains superficial as it comes without addressing the devaluation of feminised work and the intersection of gender with class, race and migration status (Pourmokhtari, 2015). As a result, gender is visible within the discourse of anti-trafficking but largely absent from its structural analysis. Policies may target women for protection, but they do not fundamentally challenge the economic and social systems that make exploitation both possible and profitable.

These limitations are not simply the result of weak implementation – they are embedded within the structure of the legal framework itself. By situating trafficking within a transnational crime paradigm, the Protocol channels attention toward enforcement and control (Pati, 2019); by emphasising the need for measurable outcomes, it reinforces a focus on short-term results over long-term transformation (Miller & Zikvoc, 2018); and by framing gender as vulnerability rather than power and identity, it limits the scope of gender-sensitive policies (Gallagher & McAdam, 2018). In this sense, the international

legal framework does not merely fail to fully address trafficking, it actively organises the field in ways that prioritises prosecution over prevention and protection, reproducing the very hierarchies and exclusions that sustain trafficking as a global phenomenon.

This analysis points toward a critical conclusion: the international legal framework on trafficking, while indispensable in establishing common standards and facilitating cooperation, remains structurally incomplete in its capacity to address the root causes and gendered dynamics of exploitation. However, this does not render the framework irrelevant; instead, it highlights the need to examine how the Protocol's provisions are interpreted, implemented, and contested in practice, shifting attention toward the actors who operate within and alongside these legal structures, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society, whose role in shaping and responding to anti-trafficking policy will be explored in the following section.

3.3 NGOs and Civil Society Actors: Friends or Foes in Advocating for Trafficking Victims?

The incorporation of NGOs and civil society into anti-trafficking governance represents not simply an expansion of actors, but a reconfiguration of how knowledge and intervention are organised across the global field. As the preceding section has shown, legal frameworks establish norms and institutional priorities, but their realisation depends on a complex network of actors operating beyond the state. Within this landscape, non-governmental organisations NGOs and civil society actors occupy a central, yet deeply ambivalent, position. At a foundational level, they operate as key agents of norm interpretation and shaping, bridging the gap between international frameworks and lived experiences of trafficking (Dean, 2016), advocating for gender-sensitive services and strategies, and challenging forms of violence that were previously marginalised within policy debates (OSCE, 2018). However, this role has undergone a significant transformation over time, shifting from a politically feminist-led advocacy rooted in structural critique, to a more institutionalised and professionalised form of intervention that remains constrained to a superficial level of victimhood (Hossain & Mim, 2025). This transformation is central to understanding both the influence and the limits of civil

society in shaping responses to trafficking, particularly in relation to gender and structural inequality.

A crucial starting point is the recognition that civil society engagement with trafficking emerged from feminist and human rights movements in the late twentieth century, when transnational advocacy networks began to politicise trafficking as a form of violence against women linked to global inequality and patriarchal control (Ewart-James & Fischer-Daly, 2019). This meant that NGO activism was explicitly political. Campaigns led by organisations such as the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) played a fundamental role in bringing trafficking onto the international agenda and challenging the invisibility of women's exploitation within both international law and development discourse – although they did so from different ideological positions. CATW has notoriously been fixed in the abolition of prostitution considering that it composes yet another instrument of patriarchal exploitation, while GAATW advocates for prostitution as a recognised form of labour, emphasising agency and the importance of consent (Scarpa, 2008). This fragmentation of ideology between two major feminist-based organisations is analytically important; it demonstrates that civil society has always been a site of ideological struggle, not simply a vehicle for humanitarian intervention. With NGOs actively participating within the negotiation of the Palermo Protocol, they were instrumental in pushing for the inclusion of exploitation and gender-based violence within the definition of trafficking (Marlin, 2016).

Following the adoption of the Palermo Protocol in 2000, NGOs became central to the implementation and operationalisation of anti-trafficking governance; in practice, they often function as the primary interface between trafficked persons and the state, determining access to shelters, legal assistance, and rehabilitation programs (Dean, 2016). This is particularly evident in European contexts, where organisations play a formalised role within national referral mechanisms, as encouraged by the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005). However, as organisations became integrated into governance charters, their role shifted from advocates to service providers (Marlin, 2016), operationalising the meaning of trafficking. This is particularly evident in national referral mechanisms across Europe, where NGOs determine if individuals are recognised as victims, if they receive assistance, and if their cases are even pursued (OSCE, 2018), in a process that involves the

application of legal criteria such as cooperation with law enforcement or alignment with specific forms of exploitation, thereby producing inclusion and exclusion within the category of victimhood itself turning access to protection a contingent and negotiated reward, instead of an inherent right (Tzvetkova, 2002). In this sense, NGOs exercise a form of delegated sovereignty in a role that creates tensions that have profound material and social consequences as their collaboration with law enforcement may compromise the trust of the communities they serve.

One of the main roles taken by civil society actors is the production of epistemic authority within the anti-trafficking field. Through reports, data collection, and advocacy campaigns, NGOs generate the knowledge that underpins policy decisions and public discourse. In fact, much of what is “known” about trafficking – its scale, its patterns, its victims – derives from NGO-generated data (Ewart-James & Fischer-Daly, 2019). Yet this knowledge is not neutral. It is shaped by methodological constraints, institutional partnerships and policy strategies (Castellano, 2023). For example, the persistent emphasis on sexual exploitation reflects not only empirical realities but also the historical dominance of particular advocacy frames and the relative visibility of certain forms of harm. Labour trafficking, by contrast, remains underreported and under-recognised because it is embedded in everyday economic practices that are less easily identified as exceptional or criminal. This epistemic dimension is critical because it reveals how NGOs contribute to the construction of trafficking as a particular kind of problem. By defining what counts as trafficking, who counts as a victim, and which forms of exploitation are prioritised, civil society actors shape the boundaries of governance itself.

But all these changes in priorities within civil society actors have a main culprit: the necessity of funding (Castellano, 2022). As anti-trafficking became a global policy priority in the early 2000s, significant financial resources were which led to the rapid expansion of NGO activity but also to increased dependency on external funding. This dependency shapes organisational behaviour in profound ways as NGOs must align their activities with donor requests and demonstrate measurable outcomes (Dean, 2016), which in turn creates incentives to focus on interventions that are visible and quantifiable – such as the number of victims assisted or awareness campaigns conducted – and compatible with existing policy agendas, whilst narrowing down their advocacy space and discouraging real engagement to address systemic issues, becoming less and less “non-governmental” structures. Unfortunately, this shift is part of a much broader process of

neoliberal governance in which civil society spirit becomes crushed with policy architectures that must be flexible and cost-effective (Fitria, 2025). In the context of trafficking, this has translated into a focus on addressing the consequences of exploitation through service delivery such as shelters, rehabilitation programs, and awareness campaigns which are, of course, essential, but also reflect and reproduce the limitations of a governance model in which care is outsourced to civil society, while control remains with the state (Kane, 2023). All these factors culminate in a form of prevention that is reduced to information campaigns, protection to short-term assistance, and partnerships to coordination among institutional actors, reinforcing a model of governance that addresses symptoms rather than causes.

The duality of this role becomes even more detached of its original position when gender is considered (Tzvetkova, 2002). NGOs have been instrumental in ensuring that trafficking is recognised as a gendered phenomenon, advocating for services tailored to women and highlighting forms of exploitation such as sexual violence and domestic servitude. However, this focus often operates at the level of representation rather than transformation. Women are positioned as primary victims, but the gendered organisation of labour markets where women are concentrated in informal and precarious sectors, is rarely addressed as a central issue (Castellano, 2022). Moreover, the emphasis on trafficked women primarily as victims in need of rescue and protection may inadvertently reinforce paternalistic narratives that limit recognition of agency and complexity beyond victimhood. This is particularly evident in rescue-oriented interventions, which prioritise immediate removal from exploitative situations without adequately addressing long-term constraints or needs (Noyori-Corbett *et al.*, 2019). As a consequence, individuals may be returned to conditions of vulnerability, emphasising the limits of interventions that focus on individual cases rather than systemic change.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that NGOs and civil society actors operate within – and often reproduce – the very own structural limitations of anti-trafficking governance, leaving the detractor role they once performed in holding states accountable (Kane, 2023), and becoming incorporated into governance structures as partners, watchdogs, and even extensions of state authority therefore compromising their ability to act independently and critically (Fitria, 2025).

Nonetheless, this does not mean that civil society is ineffective. On the contrary, NGOs are indispensable in translating norms into practice, advocating for victims, bringing

trafficking to global attention, and in providing critical support to those affected. But their role must be understood in relational terms, as part of a governance system that both enables and constrains their actions. The central question is not whether NGOs matter – they clearly do – but how their contributions are shaped by the political and economic structures in which they operate, navigating a complex terrain in which advocacy, implementation, and power are deeply intertwined.

This raises a fundamental question that extends beyond the role of civil society: if governance is shaped not only by legal frameworks and advocacy efforts but also by underlying political and economic interests, then who ultimately benefits from the persistence of trafficking systems? Answering this question requires moving beyond the analysis of governance actors to examine the distribution of power and profit that sustains trafficking, which I will answer in the following section.

3.4 Anti-Trafficking Policy Governance: Recognition, Selectivity, and Gender in Implementation

If global anti-trafficking governance produces uneven outcomes, this is not only the result of implementation gaps or institutional fragmentation, but of deeper conceptual ambivalences embedded within the frameworks themselves. The dominant paradigms through which trafficking is understood – crime control, migration management, humanitarian rescue, and gendered vulnerability – do not simply coexist; they compete, overlap, and at times fundamentally contradict one another (DiMola & Lowe, 2022).

And at the core of these ambivalences lies a persistent contradiction: though gender is highly visible across anti-trafficking discourse in international agreements and national legislation through institutional processes that render it administratively legible, it is simultaneously stripped of its analytical and transformative capacity (True, 2003), meaning that the problem lies not in omission but in the mode of incorporation. At the multilateral level, gender mainstreaming has become the dominant strategy through which international organisations claim to address gender inequality. As Jacqui True (2003) argues, gender mainstreaming was originally conceived as a transformative project aimed at embedding gender analysis across all stages of policymaking. However, as it has been institutionalised within organisations such as the UN, the EU, and the ILO,

it has increasingly taken on a technocratic form. Gender becomes a matter of procedural compliance through impact assessments, disaggregated data, and targeted programmes, instead of a lens through which you can interrogate power relations (Dottridge, 2018). This produces a form of governance that is simultaneously gendered and non-gender-responsive and in the governance of trafficking, this technocratic incorporation can be seen in multiple levels.

International organisations routinely emphasise the disproportionate impact of trafficking on women and girls, and policy documents frequently include gender-sensitive language. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), for example, has developed a detailed guidance on gender-specific measures in anti-trafficking policy, highlighting the need for tailored support services and gender-aware risk assessments (EIGE, 2018). Nonetheless, these measures have only operated at the level of response, addressing the consequences of gendered vulnerability such as the need for victim shelters, without configuring pre-emptive tools that could diminish the need for such responses. The same pattern is apparent in the work of UNODC where reports consistently feature gender disparities in trafficking, noting that women and girls constitute the majority of detected victims (UNODC, 2024), but the institutional response remains restricted to a criminal justice agenda that only sees policing and prosecution (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008), locating the problem in individual experiences. The ILO offers a contrasting but equally revealing example. As an institution, the ILO has been imperative in reframing trafficking as a labour issue, and its programmes have contributed to expanding the focus of anti-trafficking governance beyond sexual exploitation, stressing the pervasiveness of trafficking in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work (ILO, 2008). Nevertheless, while the ILO recognises the gendered nature of labour exploitation, predominantly in feminised sectors such as care and domestic work, its interventions are only focused on improving labour standards and enforcement mechanisms without addressing the gendered division of labour or the socio-economic conditions that channel women into precarious employment.

As mentioned in previous sections, a central feature of anti-trafficking governance is the selectivity in recognition, meaning that certain forms of trafficking are more readily identified than others, as is true for cases of sexual exploitation of women and girls (Radjenovic & Voronova, 2016). This selectivity indicates not only evidentiary challenges as criminal justice responses tend to favour cases that align with established

investigative outlines, but also institutional biases based on passivity and moral innocence (Novak-Irons, 2018) – characteristics of “the perfect victim” – that are ingrained within the anti-trafficking agenda that seeks to prioritise cases that are more easily prosecutable and publicly legible (DiMola & Lowe, 2022). But if a woman falls outside of this biased form of victimisation, for example, if her experience involves elements of consent and agency and not solely of vulnerability and victimhood, she is likely less to be recognised as a victim that requires protection. This reflects what can be understood as the gendered determinants of misidentification, where institutional expectations about femininity shape who is seen as a “real” victim. Such dynamics are reinforced by the reliance on indicators that are themselves gendered, often focusing on visible signs of abuse rather than structural conditions of exploitation (Maya & Loubley, 2021). Gender, therefore, does not function as a transformative analytical lens, but as a classificatory tool (True, 2003) that determines whose experiences matter and are deserving of protection.

The consequences of this selective recognition are especially detectible when examining the conditional nature of protection. Protection is often tied to processes of identification, which themselves depend on institutional capacity and especially training and in most states, particularly in the EU, access to assistance is “nearly always dependent on victims’ cooperation with authorities” (European Migration Network, 2022), while key protections such as reflection periods and non-punishment provisions are inconsistently, contradicting the principle of unconditional support enshrined in legal frameworks. This creates a hierarchy of deservingness which also interacts with migration status. Non-citizens, particularly those in irregular situations, are subject to overlapping governance regimes that combine anti-trafficking measures with immigration control. The EU Anti-Trafficking Directive (2011/36/EU), for example, requires that member states must ensure victim protection and adopt preventive measures, also underlining the liability of women in this type of exploitation (Askola, 2007a). However, as national policies continue to prioritise criminalisation and migration control over victim protection and structural prevention (Marchetti & Palumbo, 2022), anti-trafficking operations in several EU countries such as Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands, have had victims of trafficking identified as undocumented migrants and subsequently subjected to detention or deportation (On the Road, 2003), reinforcing that control takes precedence over protection and illustrating how governance systems, despite their formal commitment to

protection, can reproduce harm through their operational logics in a phenomenon that is coined as “collateral damage” (Dottridge, 2018).

Taken together, these processes reveal that anti-trafficking governance operates through mechanisms of differentiation and exclusion rather than universal protection. Vulnerability is discursively identified but actively produced through processes of conditionality within institutional and state practice. Likewise, gender, while formally integrated into policy frameworks, is filtered through these mechanisms in ways that limit the transformative potential of the concept (True, 2003). The persistence of gender-blindness in anti-trafficking governance must therefore be understood as an outcome of institutional design rather than a failure of awareness or commitment. This analysis emphasises the need of shifting attention from formal commitments to the practical realities of implementation (Yagci & Besiou, 2025). It is at this level that the contradictions of anti-trafficking governance become most visible, revealing how global norms are reshaped through institutional practices and political priorities. The following chapter builds on this insight by examining regional and national approaches to anti-trafficking, with a particular focus on how gender is integrated within these frameworks, exploring whether specific governmental structures mitigate or reproduce the patterns of selectivity and unevenness here identified, and what this reveals about the possibilities and limits of gender-sensitive anti-trafficking policy.

This chapter has demonstrated that the governance of human trafficking at the international level is characterised by a fundamental tension between the rhetorical prominence of gender and its structural marginalisation in practice. International organisations shape what counts as trafficking, what kinds of responses are considered legitimate, and which forms of suffering become visible within governance discourse. The Palermo Protocol's 4Ps framework has produced a model in which gender is visible at the level of language but absent at the level of structural analysis. NGOs, despite their indispensable role in translating norms into practice, have been incorporated into governance in ways that constrain their capacity to challenge the structural conditions that produce exploitation. And the patterns of selectivity identified in section 3.4 – in recognition, in protection, in resource allocation – reveal that the gendered limits of anti-trafficking governance are more than failures of political will, they are features of institutional design. These findings set the stage for the comparative analysis that follows. Chapter IV examines how these structural dynamics operate within the specific

institutional contexts of the European Union, Germany, and the Netherlands, asking whether different governance configurations produce meaningfully different gendered outcomes, or whether the structural constraints identified at the international level reproduce themselves across the full range of policy models.

Chapter IV: Comparative Gendered Anti-Trafficking Policies

The international governance analysis in Chapter III established that the structural limits of anti-trafficking governance are engrained in the normative architecture of the frameworks through which it is coordinated. This chapter now tests that argument comparatively, asking whether different governance configurations at the regional and national level are able to overcome those structural limits or whether they reproduce them through different mechanisms. In doing so, it pursues the thesis's research question at its most concrete level: to what extent does the gendered dimension of trafficking shape the policy responses of specific governance systems, and what does the gap between formal gender commitments and substantive gender-sensitive outcomes reveal about the structural constraints that operate across governance models? The analysis proceeds through four sections. Section 4.1 examines the EU as a meso-level governance layer that receives global anti-trafficking norms, translates them into regional legal and policy instruments, and redistributes them through national systems whose institutional cultures and political priorities differ markedly. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 examine Germany and the Netherlands respectively as national case studies, chosen, as the introduction explains, precisely because they appear to represent opposite ends of the governance spectrum, and because their juxtaposition allows the thesis to test whether governance failure is model-specific or structural. And finally, section 4.4 draws the comparative conclusions.

4.1 The European Union as a Limited (un)Gendered Framework

As opposed to constituting a bounded geographical region, the EU operates as a multi-level governance system that receives global anti-trafficking norms, translates them into regional legal and policy instruments, and then redistributes them through national systems whose capacities, priorities, and institutional cultures differ markedly (Askola,

2007b). And it is important to take this matter into account because the EU does not merely “apply” global anti-trafficking standards, it reformulates them through its own internal architecture of directives, strategies, agencies, funding programmes, expert forums, and monitoring practices. In that sense, the EU occupies the intermediary position already identified in Section 3.1 as a meso-level governance layer between international norm production and domestic implementation (McRedmond, 2010), one that does not resolve fragmentation but reorganises it. The result is not uniformity but a patterned unevenness in which anti-trafficking policy is formally harmonised while its meanings and effects remain differentiated across policy fields and member states.

This governance role is anchored in a legal and institutional architecture whose significance lies less in its existence than in what it does structurally. Directive 2011/36/EU is often presented as the core of EU anti-trafficking law because it combines criminalisation, victim protection, prevention, and a formal commitment to a gender-specific approach (Marchetti & Palumbo, 2022). EIGE’s legal review (2018) notes that the Directive explicitly stresses that prevention, assistance, and support must be gender-specific, and that the broader EU strategy identified gender inequalities among the root causes of trafficking. Yet the same materials also show that this gender-specific language operates within a wider Justice and Home Affairs structural design in which trafficking is governed through law enforcement, border management, asylum, and administrative coordination. The Directive therefore does not simply protect victims, it inserts trafficking into the EU’s Area of Freedom, Security and Justice as a problem to be managed across multiple regulatory domains (Marchetti & Palumbo, 2022). The 2021–2025 EU strategy (2021) and the office of the EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator reinforce this structuring effect by coordinating actors and increasing coherence across police and judicial cooperation, migration, human rights, and labour law (Rossoni, 2024). But this cross-sectoral coherence is itself a form of governance power as it determines which institutions count, which forms of expertise matter, and which policy languages dominate the field.

Seen from this angle, EU agencies are not auxiliary actors but devices of policy translation. Europol converts trafficking into intelligence, focal points, and threat assessments, conflicting anti-trafficking with organised crime and migrant smuggling; Frontex inserts it into border surveillance, risk analysis, and operational support at the external frontier; EIGE, being tasked with producing gender expertise, converts it into

data, indicators, and the language of gender-specific measures; Eurojust and CEPOL further judicialise and police the field through coordination and training (Grundell, 2025). What matters analytically is that these agencies do not all “see” trafficking in the same way – their mandates pre-structure the problem. The issue that rises is therefore not that the EU lacks gender expertise, but that the institutional locations where gender expertise is housed are partly detached from the locations where anti-trafficking governance is most forcefully operationalised.

This is why the EU should be analysed through its institutionalised contradictions rather than through its formal commitments. The first contradiction is between migration control and protection. EU anti-trafficking policy is developed inside a migration order built on a dual logic: internal free movement and external restriction. The EU simultaneously treats mobility as an economic and political good inside the Union and as a threat when associated with non-EU nationals. Trafficking is then drawn into this distinction, becoming entangled with the governance of “bad migration”, especially external irregular migration, rather than consistently treated as a rights violation in its own terms (Askola, 2007b). This tension is not accidental; it is built into the policy environment itself. The victim residence permit model was watered down in ways that preserved national discretion and made access to protection difficult in practice, thereby limiting the very disclosures and cooperation anti-trafficking systems claim to need (Kamilova, 2025). Recent assessments of the Directive’s implementation show the same pattern that several member states still do not effectively apply reflection periods and assistance remains closely tied to cooperation with authorities, thereby increasing vulnerability rather than reducing it (Marchetti & Paljumbo, 2022). The EU therefore does not simply fail to overcome the migration-protection tension, it institutionalises it.

The second contradiction is between crime control and rights. EU anti-trafficking policy repeatedly invokes fundamental rights, dignity, and victim support, but the operational centre of gravity remains strongly criminal-justice oriented (Gallagher & Holmes, 2008). European anti-trafficking governance has developed through five approaches: legal measures, prosecution, protection, prevention in origin countries, and prevention in destination countries (Friesendorf, 2007); but while its structure makes cross-border case-building and organised-crime disruption institutionally thick, long-term social protection and structural prevention remain thinner and more diffuse (Bertozzi, 2009). The problem, then, is not only that rights are insufficiently implemented, but also that they are nested

within a governance field whose strongest capacities and clearest incentives remain tied to criminal law and security administration.

The third contradiction is between gender visibility and gender transformation. The EU officially recognises trafficking as gender-specific and, in some policy texts, explicitly situates trafficking in women for sexual exploitation as a form of violence against women. EIGE's legal review (2018) reflects this official position and even stresses that a "one size fits all" approach is ineffective because different forms of exploitation require tailored responses. Yet, that same material also reveals how limited this recognition remains. Some EU instruments, even when dealing with child victims, migrant children, or sexual exploitation, remain resolutely gender-neutral, such as Directive 2012/29/EU – the victim rights directive –, and Directive 2008/115/EC – the migration return directive. And even on the cases where they are gender-sensitive, it is frequently rendered into targeted measures for predefined victim categories and not into a structural analysis of labour markets, migration hierarchies, informal work, welfare exclusion, and institutional bias (FitzGerald & Freedman, 2021). So just because gender appears in a legal instrument, it does not mean it will construe structural reorganisation of policy or direct action; in fact, gender mostly appears just as a variable to be acknowledged, monitored, and managed, not as a framework capable of reorganising the premises of policy itself (Askola, 2007b). This limitation is intensified once one looks at how gendered knowledge is produced and authorised inside EU policymaking. When evaluating EU policy forums on sex trafficking, for example, it is palpable how "gender expertise" is instrumentalised since survivor perspectives and sex worker activists are absent from these forums, and even the experts included are filtered through formats that privilege conformist or institutionally useful contributions (FitzGerald & Freedman, 2021). In this setting, gender expertise becomes technical assistance and not political critique. Even EIGE itself, as they note, occupies a technocratic role oriented to support and data provision instead of reopening the normative premises of the debate. The questions that arise then is which kind of gender knowledge is admitted, by whom, and to what end.

Once these contradictions are in view, the EU's role in producing selectivity and uneven outcomes becomes clearer. Selectivity does not mean random inconsistency, it means patterned differentiation in what gets recognised, funded, measured, and governed. In the EU context, one visible form of selectivity concerns the exploitation types that are admitted and included. Sexual exploitation has historically been more politically legible

than labour exploitation, in part because it maps more easily onto moral panic, organised-crime narratives, and gendered victim imagery (Cho, 2015b). Labour exploitation, by contrast, implicates subcontracting chains, regulatory failure, and the economic organisation of the single market more directly, making it harder to isolate as a deviant crime problem (Prpic, 2024). A second form of selectivity that comes directly because of the former, concerns who counts as a recognisable victim. The research on the Netherlands – as I will later explore – underscores how access to assistance and integration is mediated through specific procedures and authorities instead of being guaranteed automatically as a given right (On the Road, 2023). The result is a system in which victimhood is not simply discovered but institutionally reinforced by anti-trafficking systems that are pre-emptively shaped by the same immigration control that rejected them and drove them into being exploited (Truong, 2003). A third form of selectivity concerns where political attention and material resources go. Literature on EU funding (Rossoni, 2024) shows that the governance environment, much like NGOs, is shaped not only by directives and agencies but by the allocation of money. Funding trends often mirror policy priorities, including technological solutions, criminal-financial investigation, and established organisational actors with repeated access to EU programmes. This matters because funding is never neutral. It rewards certain framings of the problem, certain types of expertise, and certain institutional capacities. If funding flows more easily toward projects that are legible in security, technology, or managerial terms than toward long-term structural work on labour exploitation, migrant women's rights, or redistributive prevention, then the EU governance framework is actively shaping the field in ways that reproduce its own biases.

For all these reasons, the EU should not be read as a uniform framework. It is a governance environment that actively structures possibilities, distributes incentives, and institutionalises contradictions, but it does so in ways that still leave substantial room for national mediation. Shared directives do not produce identical outcomes because implementation passes through different legal systems, administrative practices, labour market regimes, police cultures, and welfare infrastructures (FitzGerald & Freedman, 2021). For these reasons, the next sections turn to Germany and the Netherlands not as isolated national stories, but as sites where the same EU framework is filtered through different institutional cultures and political choices. The question is no longer whether the EU has an anti-trafficking framework; it is how that framework is interpreted,

operationalised, and selectively enacted in practice – and what those differences reveal about the real limits of gendered anti-trafficking governance in Europe.

4.2 Germany: Institutional Selectivity and the Limits of Legal Governance

Germany provides a critical site to examine how the EU's anti-trafficking governance framework is put into practice, as one of the primary destination countries for trafficking in Europe, particularly for women trafficked into sexual exploitation (United Nations, 2024). This analytical significance resides not only in scale, but in how national governance operates, demonstrating that formally comprehensive frameworks shaped by EU directives and national legislation are operationalised through institutional practices that produce selective recognition, gendered bias, and limited engagement with structural conditions of exploitation (Köhncke, 2020). What emerges is a failure of governance that patterns a conduct of implementation in which anti-trafficking policy is filtered through criminal justice logics, migration regimes, and labour market structures.

A defining feature of the German approach is the centrality of criminal law as the primary instrument of governance through which trafficking is recognised and acted upon. The 2016 reform Act to improve action against human trafficking and to amend the Federal Central Criminal Register Act and Book VIII of the Social Code (Germany, 2016), introduced to align national law with Directive 2011/36/EU, sought to expand the scope of criminalisation and facilitate cross-border cooperation. However, this reform echoes a tendency to treat trafficking as a phenomenon that can be addressed solely through legal refinement and enforcement, not resolving the existing limitations in the previous act (Beck & Tassis, 2020) – and this legal structuring has severe implications for how trafficking is identified and adjudicated in practice.

Empirical research on German criminal proceedings reveals that prosecutions are heavily dependent on victim testimony, which becomes the central evidentiary pillar of trafficking cases (Herz, 2006). For that, the law continues to rely on tightly defined narratives of victimhood – reliant on coercion and abuse – that must be proven within criminal proceedings. As many trafficked individuals occupy precarious legal and social positions that undermine their perceived reliability as witnesses – undocumented

migrants, temporary workers, or individuals who initially consented to migration or certain forms of labour –, they may not fit the legal criteria required to establish trafficking, even when they experience exploitative conditions. As such, only cases and forms of exploitation that are evidentially demonstrable and legally coherent will then be institutionally prosecuted, thereby excluding a wide range of lived experiences and completely neglecting patterns of structural exploitation, particularly those embedded in economic necessity or involving ambiguous forms of consent (Renzikowski, 2020). Moreover, individuals may fear retaliation, lack trust in authorities, or face precarious legal situations that discourage them from engaging with the system (Leister, 2020), meaning that the requirement to provide consistent and credible testimony places an additional burden on victims who must navigate legal expectations while processing trauma. Such a reliance on victim testimony introduces a defining and limiting paradox as victims are required to perform credibility to a system that has victimised them.

It is within this evaluative criminal space that gendered biases become particularly salient. Although German criminal trafficking law is formally gender-neutral, multiple analysis demonstrate that prosecutorial and judicial decision-making is deeply shaped by gendered normative assumptions about gender, sexuality, and behaviour that construct victimhood within criminal proceedings (Sapelza, 2025). Women who have been trafficked into sexual exploitation are often evaluated not on the basis of legal criteria, but through subjective judgments related to their lifestyle, emotional expression, or perceived morality. Victims who had prior involvement in prostitution, who maintained contact with traffickers, that appear economically motivated, or who did not display expected signs of coercion, were frequently considered less credible or even complicit (Leister, 2020), as their testimony was discounted on the basis that they appeared “too independent” or insufficiently victimised. This “ideal victim” framework is incredibly restrictive and introduces a hierarchy of harm, only recognising narratives of clear abuse, physical confinement, and complete lack of agency, while marginalising more complex experiences of exploitation. In such cases, agency is reinterpreted as consent, and vulnerability is minimised, even when exploitative conditions are evident. This places women in a position where they must perform victimhood in ways that align with institutional expectations. Emotional expression, narrative coherence, and perceived moral character all become part of the evidentiary landscape. Victims are thus required not only to recount their experiences but to do it in a manner that satisfies gendered

expectations of vulnerability and passivity. Failure to do so can result in their testimony being discounted, their case being weakened, or their status as victims being questioned. These practices reveal that gender operates as a criterion of legal intelligibility, setting normative expectations that structure how exploitation is interpreted and determining which experiences are legible within the legal system (Salpeza, 2025), proving that the system is more easily ready and better equipped to deal certain types of harm than others. Legal actors and institutions thus become active participants in the reproduction of gendered norms, embedding symbolic power within institutional practice.

The German's flawed governance on anti-trafficking is further aggravated by the Prostitution Act of 2002 and 2017 – which formally recognises sex work as labour – as this recognition has not been accompanied by the extension of full labour rights to sex workers or even the establishment effective protection mechanisms (Thiemann, 2020). This legal configuration was originally intended to reduce stigma, improve working conditions, and facilitate the identification of exploitation by integrating the sector into legal and regulatory frameworks. However, rather than resolving the challenges associated with trafficking and exploitation, this model has generated a set of structural tensions that complicate both governance and protection, focusing on framing sex work as an economic activity subject to administrative control and taxation which fills workers with bureaucratic duties and no concrete labour law privileges (Osmanaj, 2014). At the same time, sex work remains closely linked to moral and security discourses that associate prostitution with risk and exploitation. For migrant sex workers, this contradictory reading is extremely aggravated. A significant proportion of sex workers in Germany are migrant women, many of whom operate under conditions shaped by legal precarity and limited access to formal employment given that migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Germany face significant structural barriers to employment, housing, and social integration – all of these, conditions that increase their susceptibility to exploitation (Cho, 2015a). As such, migrant sex workers often find themselves pushed into more unstable and less visible environments where they are not recognised as legitimate economic actors like their national peers but are instead positioned at the intersection of multiple forms of suspicion, being as irregular migrants, participants in illegal markets or even facilitators of trafficking. Their claims to victimhood are assessed within limits of control and regulation where credibility is influenced by gender norms and assumptions about legality and economic behaviour, and women who do not fit neatly into the category of the passive

victim will undoubtedly be excluded from protection and reclassified within other legal categories. In this context, trafficking vulnerability is not external to the system but produced within it, as restrictive migration policies, exclusion from protection regulation, and labour market segmentation lay down the conditions under which exploitation can occur (Beck & Tassis, 2020).

While anti-trafficking governance in Germany is heavily oriented toward sexual exploitation, labour exploitation constitutes a significant dimension of trafficking in the country. The German market is characterised by strong industrial and service sectors that demand for flexible and cost-efficient labour, relying on the backs of marginalised people who face deep economic and social disadvantages – often non-EU citizens (Köhncke, 2020). So, by being so incredible intrinsic to the normal functioning of the economy, labour trafficking is not only constantly under-recognised, but a product of the system that persists within the boundaries of legality due to market needs. From a gender perspective, the marginalisation of labour exploitation reveals a more subtle form of gender blindness as the dominant narratives of trafficking that rest on apparent vulnerability are not designed to accommodate this reality, since it is more resource-intensive to investigate, there is more diffuse responsibility and cases are less likely to result in clear prosecutorial outcomes when compared to sex trafficking cases.

The German National Action Plan (NAP), which is the primary policy instrument through which the state seeks to coordinate and structure its response to trafficking, reflects an awareness of these challenges. At the level of design, the NAP relies on the 4Ps approach (BMFSFJ, 2025) bringing together a range of actors including law enforcement, labour inspectors, social services, and civil society organisations, with the goal of improving victim identification, recognising diverse forms of exploitation, and strengthening support services. This multi-actor approach – the partnership component of the framework – is established in order to address the fragmentation identified in previous sections and to create a more integrated response to the drivers of human trafficking. However, its outcomes fall short. The partnership relies more intensely on cooperation with authorities than with civil society, reinforcing the centrality of criminal justice within this governance framework which puts the prosecution aspect of the 4Ps approach at a heightened position (Sapelza, 2025); prevention strategies focus on awareness campaigns and regulation of recruitment practices without fully engaging with the structural drivers of exploitation such as the intense demand for low-cost flexible labour in Germany; and

the protection dimension remains conditional upon cooperation with authorities. In addition to these failings, which fundamentally limit the NAP's policy ambition in the midst of existing governance structures, its emphasis on measurable outcomes and performance indicators turns into more of a managerial mechanism than a transformation tool. And while these indicators – number of investigations, prosecutions, and identified victims – provide a sense of accountability and response, official statistics capture only a fraction of actual cases with estimates suggesting that the number of identified victims represents only a small portion of total trafficking occurrences, pointing to a significant “dark figure” of undetected exploitation and reinforcing the limitations of data-driven governance. A big reasoning behind this dark figure lies with the fact that statistics are heavily dependent on definitions and reporting practices, that make it difficult to assess the scale and nature of exploitation. Data collection is solely focused on detected cases, which are themselves the product of institutional priorities and capacities (Grundell, 2025). This creates a feedback loop in which what is measured reflects what is already recognised, reinforcing existing biases and blind spots. Ultimately, the NAP represents a show of good faith for Germany's combat on human trafficking, contributes to a system that is active and responsive, but it remains limited in its capacity to address the deeper causes of trafficking, meaning that governance frameworks, even when comprehensive in design, produce selective and constrained outcomes when ingrained within existing institutional and socio-economic structures.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal that the German anti-trafficking framework is characterised by a structured form of institutional selectivity rather than comprehensive protection. Criminal law defines the boundaries of intervention, gendered assumptions shape the recognition of victims, and migration policies produce the conditions of vulnerability that trafficking exploits. The German case thus demonstrates that even within a highly developed legal and institutional context, outcomes are shaped by structural priorities and preconceptions of what a victim should look like.

However, these limitations cannot be understood as unique to enforcement-oriented models alone. If Germany illustrates how a criminal justice-driven approach restricts recognition and intervention, the question is whether alternative governance configurations, particularly those framed as more progressive, rights-based, and victim-centred, are able to overcome these structural constraints. The Netherlands, often positioned as a leading example of such an approach, provides a critical site to examine

whether shifting from prohibition to regulation fundamentally transforms anti-trafficking outcomes, or whether it reconfigures selectivity and inequality in new forms.

4.3 The Netherlands: Progressive Governance, Carceral Protection and the B8 Scheme

The Netherlands is frequently positioned as a paradigmatic case of progressive anti-trafficking governance, characterised by early legalisation of prostitution, a multi-agency approach, and an explicit commitment to victim protection (Dina, 2009). Since the lifting of the brothel ban in 2000, Dutch policy has sought to regulate rather than prohibit the sex industry, framing prostitution as legitimate labour while simultaneously targeting coercion and trafficking (CATW, 2025). This dual approach has been embedded within a broader governance architecture that combines criminal law, administrative regulation, and social support mechanisms. However, rather than resolving the tensions inherent in anti-trafficking policy, the Dutch model reveals how governance structured around regulation, protection, and rights can still generate new forms of exclusion, and gendered bias.

At the core of this model lies the legalisation of prostitution as a governance strategy, premised on the assumption that formal recognition and regulation would reduce exploitation and improve working conditions (Zeegers & Althoff, 2015). However, when examined as a governance strategy rather than a normative policy choice, legalisation reveals a series of structural paradoxes that complicate its emancipatory claims. By formally recognising prostitution as a legitimate economic sector, the state contributes to its stabilisation and potential expansion. Legalisation can increase the scale and visibility of the market, attract investment, and normalise demand, particularly in contexts where the sex industry becomes integrated into urban economies and tourism, thereby incentivising the recruitment of more vulnerable populations (Dina, 2009). In this sense, legalisation is not external to trafficking dynamics but part of the economic environment in which they are produced. In theory, though, this should not happen given that at its core, legalisation operates through a logic of differentiation: it seeks to separate “legitimate” sex work from trafficking by establishing regulatory criteria such as registration, licensing, and compliance with labour standards, which allows for authorities

to focus enforcement on exploitative practices while safeguarding lawful activity (Verhoeven, 2017). In practice, however, this distinction proves difficult to sustain. The boundaries between voluntary and coerced labour are often blurred, particularly in contexts shaped by economic necessity, migration pressures, and unequal power relations. As a result, the governance system redistributes exploitation across a spectrum of legality. The paradox deepens when considering the selective inclusion and exclusion built into the regulatory framework, because while prostitution is legalised, access to the formal sector is not universal. The latest data shows that the Dutch sex industry is estimated to involve up to 30,000 individuals, a significant proportion of whom are migrant women originating from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America (CATW, 2025). However, many of them, as non-EU citizens, are effectively excluded from legal participation, as they lack the necessary residence and work permits. This discriminating “hiccup” works very well for the governance model as it preserves the legality of the sector while simultaneously producing a pool of workers who must operate outside it and be more vulnerable to the intrinsic exploitation of sex work. These workers are more likely to depend on intermediaries, accept precarious conditions, and remain hidden from regulatory oversight.

A central mechanism through which Dutch anti-trafficking governance operationalises protection is the B8 residence permit scheme, which grants temporary legal status to individuals identified as victims of trafficking. Under the scheme, individuals are granted a temporary residence permit during a “reflection period”, intended to allow them to recover and decide whether to participate in legal proceedings against traffickers (Staring, 2012). And while this reflection period may be congruent a victim-centred approach, in practice, however, the reflection period is often forgotten as cooperation with law enforcement is strongly incentivised – and in many cases, implicitly required. Continued access to residence status, protection, and support services is contingent upon the victim’s willingness to file a formal complaint and assist in prosecution. This creates a structural dependency in which victims’ rights are not unconditional but are mediated through their utility to the criminal justice system.

This conditionality has several significant consequences. First, it reconfigures the relationship between victim and state, transforming protection into a transactional process. Victims are not simply recognised as rights-bearing individuals but are positioned as key evidentiary resources within anti-trafficking enforcement (Verhoeven,

2017). Their narratives, testimony, and cooperation become central to the functioning of the system, effectively integrating them into the machinery of prosecution. This can place individuals in precarious situations, as participation in legal proceedings may expose them to retaliation, psychological stress, or re-traumatisation. Second, the B8 scheme produces selective access to protection (Winter *et al.*, 2023), as not all individuals are equally able or willing to meet the conditions required. Victims who fear authorities, lack trust in institutions, or are unable to provide coherent testimony due to trauma, language barriers, or complex migration histories, may be excluded from the scheme altogether. In such cases, the absence of cooperation can lead to the withdrawal of residence permits and eventual deportation, effectively transforming individuals from victims into irregular migrants subject to removal. Third, the scheme reveals a greater fusion of migration control with criminal enforcement and anti-trafficking governance that should rely on humanitarian objectives. As a consequence, data on the B8 residence scheme shows that only a limited number of identified victims ultimately obtain or retain residence status through this mechanism, as many either decline to cooperate with authorities or withdraw from proceedings. From a gender perspective, the B8 scheme also reinforces specific constructions of victimhood. Women trafficked into sexual exploitation – who are more likely to be identified and recognised within existing frameworks – may have greater access to the scheme, particularly when their experiences align with dominant narratives of coercion and vulnerability. However, those whose experiences do not fit these narratives – such as individuals involved in labour exploitation, or women who exercised some degree of agency in their migration or work – may face greater challenges in being recognised as victims and accessing protection (Wozniak-Cole, 2024). Gender, therefore, interacts with legal and institutional criteria to shape who is included within the protective framework and who is excluded from it.

These dynamics are inserted within an expansive system of multi-actor governance, where responsibility for anti-trafficking efforts is distributed across law enforcement agencies, social services, and non-governmental organisations, which can be understood through the concept of carceral protection (Musto, 2010), meaning, the fusion of welfare-oriented protection with coercive, punitive, and surveillance-based state practices including policing, criminal justice procedures and administrative monitoring, as exemplified by the B8 residence permit scheme. Importantly, carceral protectionism does not operate uniformly and it produces differentiated outcomes according to the victim

profile. Research shows that Dutch anti-trafficking frameworks are grounded in an image of the “ideal victim” as an innocent, coerced, and often foreign woman who is clearly distinguishable from voluntary sex workers. Victims are thus expected to narrate their experiences in ways that align with institutional definitions of trafficking. However, for migrant women, the system simultaneously constructs them as vulnerable subjects in need of protection and as potential risks requiring control (Staring, 2012), so if a victim does not conform into the “perfect” victim narrative, she will be reclassified as an irregular migrant and even an offender. In this way, gender operates as a mechanism through which carceral protectionism distributes both protection and punishment and reinforces selective recognition.

The question of who benefits from this system is therefore central. At the institutional level, carceral protectionism reinforces the authority and legitimacy of state actors, particularly law enforcement and migration agencies, by aligning humanitarian objectives with security mandates. Anti-trafficking interventions become a means of justifying expanded surveillance, data collection, and cross-border cooperation, while demonstrating an apparent commitment to human rights. At the policy level, it allows governments to reconcile competing priorities such as migration control and victim protection, without fundamentally challenging either. Carceral protectionism also benefits existing economic and social structures by failing to disrupt the conditions that sustain exploitation (Musto, 2010). By focusing on individual cases of trafficking and prioritising prosecution, governance systems divert attention from structural factors, allowing exploitative practices to persist within legal and semi-legal economic sectors, particularly those reliant on migrant and feminised labour. Understanding Dutch anti-trafficking governance through the lens of carceral protectionism therefore reveals that the apparent tension between protection and control is, in practice, a productive relationship.

A similar pattern of selectivity can be observed in the treatment of labour exploitation, which remains comparatively under-recognised within Dutch anti-trafficking governance. Despite legal provisions that encompass multiple forms of exploitation, institutional attention continues to focus disproportionately on the sex industry. Labour trafficking is less visible, more difficult to investigate, and less frequently prosecuted. This imbalance reflects not only practical challenges but also deeper institutional priorities, as forms of exploitation embedded in legitimate economic activities are less

easily framed as exceptional crimes (Smit, 2011). As in the German case, governance does not simply reflect the prevalence of different forms of trafficking but actively shapes which are prioritised and addressed.

Altogether, these incongruencies reveal what can be described as the Dutch paradox of anti-trafficking governance. A system designed to be progressive, rights-based, and victim-centred generates outcomes that are selective, conditional, and uneven. Legalisation reorganises rather than eliminates exploitation; protection mechanisms are mediated through control and conditionality; gender is acknowledged but not fully integrated; and dominant narratives obscure the diversity and complexity of trafficking experiences. The Netherlands thus does not represent a successful alternative to more enforcement-oriented models but rather a different configuration of governance, characterised by its own forms of inclusion and exclusion.

This raises a critical question for comparative analysis: does a more “progressive” governance model produce more equitable outcomes, or does it simply redistribute the mechanisms through which selectivity and inequality are produced? A comparison with Germany suggests that, despite differing institutional logics, both systems ultimately generate uneven patterns of recognition, protection, and gendered outcomes, pointing to the structural limitations of anti-trafficking governance within the European context.

4.4 Comparative analysis: Germany vs. the Netherlands

The comparison between Germany and the Netherlands does not reveal two opposing models of anti-trafficking governance, but rather two distinct institutional configurations of the same underlying logic: a system that selectively conditions protection and reproduces gendered hierarchies through its own operational mechanisms. While Germany is often characterised as enforcement-driven and the Netherlands as regulatory and “progressive”, this distinction obscures the deeper convergence that both systems ultimately govern trafficking not by eliminating exploitation, but by organising its visibility and intervention across differentiated legal and institutional terrains, reproducing consonant limitations through different mechanisms.

One of the major points for this convergence is the role of legal and administrative categorisation as a technology of governance. In Germany, the criminal law framework functions as the primary filter through which trafficking becomes legible (Sapelza, 2025). As previously shown, this produces an epistemic narrowing, where trafficking is equated with what can be prosecuted, excluding other forms of exploitation or cases that are characterised by diffuse coercion. In the Netherlands, by contrast, categorisation operates through regulatory differentiation having the distinction between “legal” and “illegal” prostitution structure the boundaries of protection. Yet this distinction performs a similar function. It determines who is visible to the state, who is eligible for protection, and who, by contrast, is relegated to the margins of governance (Wozniak-Cole, 2024). In both cases, recognition is not a reflection of exploitation but an outcome of institutional classification. This selectiveness of recognition in both countries is also transposed to the conditionality of protection. Germany’s reliance on victim testimony within criminal proceedings effectively ties access to residence permits and support services to cooperation with law enforcement. Similarly, the Dutch B8 scheme formalises this relationship, explicitly linking protection to participation in prosecution. While the Dutch model is often presented as more victim-centred and lenient with non-EU victims, the practical effect is similar: victims are incorporated into governance as functional components of the enforcement apparatus. And in the use of carceral protectionism by both models, gender is applied as a structuring principle anchoring trafficking governance in a gendered narrative that equates victimhood with female sexual vulnerability. However, this visibility does not translate into comprehensive gender sensitivity. Instead, gender is operationalised to privilege certain narratives of vulnerability while excluding others, as is the case for male victims, and to hinder differentiated forms of exploitation that do not fit into easily criminalised cases and ready-set data.

This uneven distribution of protection is closely linked to the role of NGOs, which in both Germany and the Netherlands function as key providers of support, advocacy, and labour market integration. NGOs often operate as *de facto* intermediaries between victims and the state (Bilger *et al.*, 2010), facilitating access to shelters, healthcare, and legal assistance. However, their role is extremely contingent upon short-term funding, donations, and project-based financing, limiting their capacity to provide long-term support or address structural issues. From a policy perspective, the emphasis on regulation as a strategy for reducing exploitation also raises important questions about resource

allocation and institutional priorities. In both countries, significant resources are directed towards monitoring and inspecting the licensed prostitution sector. While this may improve conditions for those within it, it risks diverting attention away from the informal and unregulated sectors where trafficking is more likely to occur. Evidence from local contexts (Walby *et al.*, 2016) suggests that enforcement efforts in regulated spaces can lead to the displacement of exploitation into less visible environments, such as private apartments or unregistered workplaces, or that it may improve conditions for those who are already relatively protected, while leaving the most vulnerable populations – particularly migrant women and youth – outside the reach of governance.

When it comes to prostitution governance, both countries adopt legalisation-based models framed as labour-oriented strategies aimed at improving working conditions and reducing trafficking by integrating prostitution into the formal economy. However, they operate through an “alternative demand reduction strategy” that targets intermediaries and profit-takers while leaving the demand side largely intact. This leads to a governance framework that contradictorily contributes to both the normalisation of sex work and the vulnerability of sex workers (Osmanaj, 2014), by increasing the scale of prostitution markets and, consequently, the demand for trafficked persons. So, while both models aim to reduce exploitation by targeting intermediaries and regulating businesses, there is comparatively limited emphasis on the role of buyers, who are predominantly men, meaning that regulatory frameworks’ only function is to control sex workers. This creates a gendered asymmetry in enforcement that perfectly shows how demand reduction strategies remain unevenly applied, limiting their effectiveness in addressing the structural drivers of trafficking. Additionally, in both models the formal sector coexists with an informal sector populated by those excluded from legal participation. In the Netherlands, this exclusion is particularly stark for non-EU migrant women, who are barred from legal work in the sex industry and therefore pushed into unregulated spaces. In Germany, while formal exclusion may be less explicit, similar dynamics emerge through informal employment arrangements, and limited access to labour protections. In both cases, governance produces what can be understood as stratified inclusion, where legality becomes a resource unevenly distributed across populations. The key distinction? Germany’s criminal justice model produces exclusion through legal classification and prosecutorial priorities, and the Dutch regulatory model produces exclusion through administrative structuring and conditional protection mechanisms. In both cases, these

are just reflections of much deeper constraints ingrained in the world through patriarchal and neoliberal structures.

This comparative analysis has examined how anti-trafficking governance is operationalised within the EU through the cases of Germany and the Netherlands, showing that the limitations of existing governance frameworks in addressing the gendered dynamics of trafficking – the second part of my research question – cannot be answered by examining any single policy model in isolation. This chapter challenges the assumption that shifting from an enforcement-oriented model to a regulatory or rights-based approach results in more equitable or effective outcomes. Instead, it shows that anti-trafficking governance within the European context is characterised by structural constraints that transcend specific policy models, rooted in the interaction between legal frameworks, economic systems, migration regimes, and gendered norms, even when there is apparent political effort. So, although Germany and the Netherlands may contribute to partial and localised improvements, they do not represent opposing ends of a spectrum but rather different configurations of the same underlying anti-trafficking governance logic, each producing its own patterns of exclusion and inequality. As such, this comparison provides a critical foundation for the broader argument of this thesis: that addressing trafficking requires moving beyond institutional adjustments and towards a more fundamental engagement with the structural conditions that produce vulnerability. Chapter V takes up that reform agenda, arguing for a victim-centred and gender-sensitive approach at the domestic level and for the reconstitution of international cooperation on the normative foundations of Feminist Foreign Policy, while remaining honest about what governance reform, however ambitious, can and cannot achieve within the limits that this analysis has identified.

PART III: THE FUTURE OF ANTI-TRAFFICKING GOVERNANCE

The analysis developed across Parts I and II of this thesis have progressively established that the gendered dimension of human trafficking operates through structural conditions – gendered labour markets, patriarchal social norms, the political economy of neoliberal globalisation –that international and national governance frameworks are largely constituted to manage rather than transform. The governance architecture that has emerged around the Palermo Protocol prioritises prosecution over prevention, enforcement over protection, and procedural compliance over accountability. And as the comparative analysis of Germany and the Netherlands demonstrated, even if through different governance models, produce mechanisms of exclusion with similar patterns of selective recognition and conditional protection. As such, the following chapter turns from diagnosis to response in order to finalise the pursuit of the thesis's research question at the level of what different governance would require, where section 5.1 argues for a victim-centred and gender-sensitive approach at the level of domestic policy design, and section 5.2 defends the reconstitution of international cooperation on the normative foundations of Feminist Foreign Policy. Both sections maintain the honesty that has characterised the thesis throughout acknowledging what governance reform can and cannot achieve.

Chapter V: Towards Gender-Responsive Anti-Trafficking Strategies

5.1 Designing Victim-Centred and Gender-Sensitive Policies

The concept of victim-centredness has become one of the most widely circulated terms in contemporary anti-trafficking discourse. It appears in the Palermo Protocol, in EU directives, in national action plans, and in the programmatic language of NGOs across the world. Yet, as the preceding analysis has demonstrated at length, the routine invocation of victim-centredness has not produced victim-centred outcomes. Protection

remains conditional on cooperation with authorities; identification is filtered through gendered assumptions about what a "real" victim looks like; and survivors are incorporated into governance as evidentiary resources rather than as rights-bearing individuals whose dignity and autonomy are ends in themselves. The task of this section, therefore, is not simply to advocate for victim-centred and gender-sensitive policy – it is to critically interrogate what those terms actually require in practice, and to argue for a substantively different approach to how vulnerability is understood, how victims are identified, how protection is delivered, and whose knowledge shapes the design of anti-trafficking responses. This requires, first and foremost, recognising that the problem does not lie in the absence of the right language, but in the mode of its incorporation into governance structures that remain institutionally oriented toward enforcement, conditionality, and the reproduction of gendered hierarchies of victimhood.

The starting point for any genuinely gender-sensitive policy must be a fundamental reconceptualisation of vulnerability. As the analysis in Parts I and II of this thesis has shown, trafficking governance has consistently treated vulnerability as an individual characteristic, rather than something that structural conditions produce. This individualisation of vulnerability has profound policy consequences: it locates the solution in the management of individuals rather than in the transformation of the systems that generate exploitability in the first place. The OSCE study on gender-sensitive approaches to combating trafficking identifies three overarching structural themes that shape vulnerability across gender lines: structural gender-based inequalities, culture-specific intersectional push factors, and patriarchal societal structures (OSCE, 2021). What is analytically important about this framing is that it positions vulnerability not as a fixed attribute of certain groups, but as the outcome of gendered social arrangements that systematically limit access to resources, education, legal protection, and economic independence. Women and girls face heightened vulnerability to sexual exploitation and domestic servitude precisely because gender discrimination in labour markets, unequal access to education, and the normalisation of gender-based violence converge to restrict their economic and social autonomy. At the same time, men and boys are rendered vulnerable through entirely different but equally structural pathways with patriarchal expectations of the breadwinner role exposing them to labour exploitation and forced criminality, while constructions of masculinity as incompatibility with victimhood impede both self-identification and institutional recognition (Hand, 2024). LGBTQ+

individuals face overlapping vulnerabilities rooted in family rejection, homelessness, economic marginalisation, and the specific forms of blackmail and coercion that become available when homosexuality or gender non-conformity is criminalised or stigmatised.

This structural understanding of vulnerability has direct implications for policy design. If vulnerability is produced by systemic conditions rather than individual failings, then prevention and protection cannot be reduced to awareness campaigns or rescue operations. Treating vulnerability as a problem of women's gullibility or naivety rather than of institutional failure has concrete policy effects: it channels resources toward the rehabilitation and moral re-education of women rather than toward the transformation of the economic and social systems that produce exploitability (Duong & Simon-Kumar, 2017). A genuinely gender-sensitive policy framework must therefore begin from the recognition that vulnerability is a product of the gendered political economy of labour market segmentation, restrictive migration regimes, unequal access to welfare and legal protection, and patriarchal social norms that devalue certain bodies and certain forms of labour. Addressing vulnerability at its root means confronting these structural conditions, not merely managing their consequences.

The second pillar of a genuinely gender-sensitive approach concerns the reform of victim identification practices. As demonstrated across the comparative analysis of Germany and the Netherlands in Chapter IV, the systematic failure to identify victims is not primarily a problem of insufficient resources or inadequate legislation, but of the normative assumptions embedded in identification systems themselves. Anti-trafficking institutions have consistently been organised around the "ideal victim" paradigm: typically female, young, possessing characteristics associated with vulnerability, weakness, and innocence, and trafficked specifically for sexual exploitation (OSCE, 2021). This paradigm actively produces a pattern in detection; when identification systems are calibrated to find a particular kind of victim, they consistently fail to find all others (Meneses-Falcón, C., & Uroz-Olivares, 2019). The consequences of this structural bias are extensive and gendered in multiple directions simultaneously. As demonstrated in the German case, women who do not perform victimhood in accordance with institutional expectations find their testimony discounted and their cases weakened, even when the exploitative conditions they describe are evidentially present (Sapelza, 2025). Male victims face the inverse problem: the cultural equation of masculinity with resilience and agency means that men and boys who experience trafficking are frequently not recognised as victims at

all, either by institutions or by themselves. Research shows that male victims are trafficked for an average of 2.3 years before identification, compared with 1.8 years for female victims, a gap that reflects not a difference in the severity of their exploitation but a difference in the institutional readiness to see them as victims (OSCE, 2021). And LGBTQ+ individuals fall outside both of the gendered categories around which identification systems are organised, effectively rendering them invisible to governance frameworks that have no adequate response to their specific experiences.

Moving beyond the ideal victim paradigm thus requires a fundamental reorientation of identification frameworks from detection of visible signs of coercion toward assessment of structural conditions of vulnerability. The UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking has advocated for an identification model centred on detecting the vulnerabilities of a person based on personal circumstances, with the purpose of determining access to early support, rather than singling out those who are perceived as "real" victims deserving of protection (OSCE, 2021). This shift has concrete institutional implications. It requires that frontline actors such as police, labour inspectors, healthcare and social workers, receive sustained gender-sensitive training (Noyori-Corbett *et al.*, 2019) that enables them to recognise forms of trafficking that do not conform to the sexual exploitation narrative, including labour trafficking of men, domestic servitude of women, forced criminality of boys, and the specific patterns of exploitation experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals. It requires that indicators of trafficking be designed to capture structural conditions of vulnerability rather than simply visible signs of physical abuse (Riken, 2018). And it requires that the non-punishment principle be meaningfully applied, so that individuals who have been compelled to commit crimes as a result of their trafficking whether it being by crossing a border illegally or engaging in criminalised sex work, are not prosecuted for those acts but recognised as victims requiring assistance and protection (McGregor, 2018). An intersectional lens is essential to this reform. As the existing literature on trafficking consistently demonstrates, vulnerability to trafficking is not determined by gender alone but by the convergence of gender with class, migration status, race, age, sexual orientation, and disability (Hand, 2024). Identification frameworks must be designed to capture this intersectional complexity, which means moving beyond standardised checklists toward qualitative assessments that engage with the specific circumstances of individual cases. The OSCE study's recommendation for multi-agency mapping of high-risk sectors is particularly relevant here: identifying the structural conditions of different

labour markets and migration contexts enables more proactive and targeted identification, rather than reactive detection after exploitation has already occurred for years (OSCE, 2021).

Perhaps the most consequential reform that a genuinely victim-centred approach requires is the decoupling of protection from prosecution. As demonstrated across both the German and Dutch cases, and as the analysis of the Palermo Protocol and EU governance frameworks has shown, protection as currently constituted is not an unconditional human right but a qualified and negotiated outcome. Victims receive access to shelter, legal assistance, healthcare, and temporary residence status only insofar as they are willing and able to cooperate with criminal proceedings against their traffickers (Riken, 2018). This conditionality has been shown to produce multiple layers of harm: it exposes victims to retaliation, re-traumatisation, and psychological stress; it excludes those who fear authorities, lack trust in institutions, or are unable to provide coherent testimony due to the effects of trauma; and it effectively transforms protection into a transactional process in which the state receives evidentiary cooperation in exchange for the temporary suspension of immigration enforcement. This model is both ethically problematic and institutionally counterproductive. By making protection contingent on prosecution, governance systems reduce the likelihood that victims will come forward at all, thereby undermining the very enforcement objectives that conditionality is supposed to serve. A rights-based approach to victim protection must begin from the premise that the state's obligation to protect individuals from exploitation and provide support for their recovery is independent of any criminal justice objective. This means that residence permits, access to shelters, healthcare, legal assistance, and social services must be available to all identified victims unconditionally and without the requirement of cooperation with authorities (McGregor, 2018), and the reflection period – already formally guaranteed in EU law – must be made meaningful in practice and not routinely subordinated to prosecutorial timelines.

A third dimension of gender-sensitive policy design concerns the role of survivors in shaping the governance frameworks that claim to serve them. As the feminist IR critiques developed in Chapter II argue, anti-trafficking policy has consistently been designed without meaningful consultation with those directly affected by exploitation. Survivors' only role in the eyes of the state is as evidentiary resources within prosecution. Other than that, they are positioned as passive beneficiaries of protection instead of individuals with

knowledge, agency, and complex social identities whose lived experience constitutes an irreplaceable source of understanding about how trafficking actually operates and what effective responses require. This exclusion actively constitutes a democratic and, above all, epistemic deficiency because all that is known about trafficking – its patterns, its victims, and the effectiveness of anti-trafficking interventions – derives predominantly from institutional sources such as law enforcement data, NGO reports, government statistics. As was found in Chapter III, all of these instruments are shaped by the same identification biases and normative assumptions that produce vulnerability the ideal victim paradigm and by the same actors who engage in the establishment of structural inequalities that lead to exploitation. Survivor knowledge, by contrast, reveals the gaps, the distortions, and the experiences that institutional frameworks systematically miss (Rijken, 2018). Including survivors in the daily operations of anti-trafficking organisations makes awareness a regular and operational part of those organisations' practices, constituting an approach demonstrably more effective than one-time or annual training events, precisely because survivor knowledge is contextual, specific, and grounded in the gendered realities of exploitation rather than in institutional presumptions (OSCE, 2021). Effective policy cannot be built on institutional knowledge alone; without the continuous incorporation of survivor perspectives into the design of anti-trafficking responses, those responses will continue to be calibrated to the experiences that institutions are already equipped to see (Noyori-Corbett *et al.*, 2019), rather than to the full range of experiences that trafficking actually produces. This means developing participatory frameworks that are genuinely accessible: that account for trauma, stigma, language barriers, and legal precarity, and that, above all, give survivor input real influence over policy outcomes rather than merely rhetorical visibility.

There is, finally, a necessary reckoning with what victim-centred and gender-sensitive policy, however well designed, cannot achieve on its own. The reforms outlined in this section – unconditional protection, intersectional identification and survivor participation – would represent a significant improvement on the current governance model. But they operate primarily at the level of response, that is, they address the consequences of trafficking, and not directly the conditions that produce it. They are designed to function within an international cooperation architecture that, as the analysis in Parts I and II of this thesis has demonstrated, is itself structurally constituted around priorities – prosecution, border enforcement, criminal intelligence exchange – that are fundamentally

incompatible with gender-sensitive governance. A victim-centred approach that is not anchored in a reformed international cooperation framework, risks being absorbed and neutralised by the same institutional logic it is trying to shift. Without transformative politics that centres human dignity at its core, efforts to address trafficking remain stop-gap measures (Duong & Simon-Kumar, 2017).

But this does not render victim-centred policy irrelevant. Protection of individuals from exploitation is a non-negotiable obligation of any state that claims commitment to human rights, and the failures documented in this thesis represent real and ongoing harms to real people that demand immediate remedy. But the victim-centred reforms here suggest must be understood as the necessary first layer of a deeper structural agenda, not a sufficient response in itself. Their effectiveness depends, ultimately, on whether the international cooperation architecture where they must operate is reconstituted on normative foundations that are genuinely oriented toward the protection of individuals from exploitation. It is precisely this reconstitution that section 5.2 takes up, arguing that Feminist Foreign Policy, as both a theoretical framework and an emerging governance practice, offers the most coherent foundation for reorienting international cooperation on trafficking away from the criminal-law and security paradigm that has governed it since the adoption of the Palermo Protocol, towards an architecture built around gender equality and accountability to the structural conditions that make exploitation possible.

5.2 Enhancing International Cooperation to Address Gendered Trafficking Challenges through Feminist Foreign Policy

The past two decades have witnessed a remarkable expansion of international cooperation on human trafficking. The number of states party to the Palermo Protocol has grown to nearly universal membership. Regional frameworks have proliferated, coordination mechanisms have multiplied, and the institutional landscape of anti-trafficking governance now encompasses a dense network of UN agencies, regional bodies, law enforcement networks, expert monitoring mechanisms, and civil society actors operating across multiple levels of governance (Castellano, 2022). By any procedural measure, international cooperation on trafficking has never been more extensive. And yet, as the analysis developed across Parts I and II of this thesis has demonstrated at length, this

expansion of cooperative architecture has not produced correspondingly gender-sensitive outcomes.

This disjuncture between the expansion of cooperative architecture and the persistence of gendered governance failures raises a question that cannot be answered by calling for more cooperation: it demands an interrogation of what kind of cooperation is being produced, on the basis of what normative commitments, and in whose interests. The argument developed in this section is that what is required for the existing international anti-trafficking governance is a reorientation of its underlying logic away from state security and criminal enforcement, and towards the protection of individuals from gendered exploitation. Feminist Foreign Policy, as both a theoretical framework and an emerging governance practice, offers the most coherent foundation for this reconstitution.

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), as a governance concept, emerged from the convergence of feminist IR scholarship and transformative political practice. Sweden's adoption of a self-described feminist foreign policy in 2014 marked the first explicit institutional articulation of the framework, followed by Canada, Mexico, France, and a growing number of states and regional bodies that have committed, with varying degrees of consistency and depth, to the principle that foreign policy must be evaluated not only by its effects on state interests but by its gendered effects on the most marginalised individuals within and across those states (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020). At its theoretical core, the FFP challenges the assumption that international politics operate through gender-neutral institutions and insists that gender equality must function as a central organising principle that restructures those priorities from within.

There are three dimensions of the FFP that are particularly significant for the anti-trafficking context. The first is its insistence on reorienting the normative hierarchy of international cooperation, placing the protection of individuals from gendered violence and exploitation above the protection of state borders and criminal justice objectives, as a binding organisational commitment backed by accountability mechanisms and resourced protection obligations (CFFP, 2020). Additionally, conditionality in victim support must be eliminated given its inconsistency with human rights framework that FFP places at the centre of foreign policy. The second dimension is FFP's demand for accountability to outcomes rather than compliance with procedures. Institutional actors are consistently incentivised to demonstrate procedural compliance either through treaty ratification or statistical reporting (McAdam, 2019). But a FFP approach demands that

the accountability logic of international cooperation has to be reorganised away from tracking treaty ratifications to assessing whether the gendered structural conditions that produce vulnerability have been addressed by the policies that states adopt in fulfilment of their international obligations (Bernarding & Lunz, 2020). The third dimension is FFP's insistence on policy coherence across domains meaning that gender equality is to be integrated into all dimensions of foreign policy simultaneously (Zilla, 2024) and not confined to an afterthought of "women's issues" that is structurally disconnected from trade, migration, security, and development policy. This dimension is perhaps the most politically demanding, but it is also the most analytically necessary given the structural analysis this thesis has developed. As Chapter I demonstrated, trafficking cannot be understood in isolation from the neoliberal trade agreements that create demand for cheap and exploitable labour, the migration regimes that produce irregular legal status as a mechanism of labour control, the development disparities that generate economic desperation in source countries, or the security doctrines that militarise borders and push migrants toward smugglers and traffickers. A foreign policy that claims to take trafficking seriously while simultaneously negotiating trade agreements that intensify labour exploitation and supporting migration policies that restrict paths and enhance vulnerability to human trafficking, is not pursuing a coherent anti-trafficking strategy. FFP therefore demands that states and international organisations develop explicit mechanisms for evaluating the gendered trafficking implications of their policies across all these domains from the very beginning of policy design.

Moving from the theoretical framework to its concrete institutional implications, a FFP approach to international anti-trafficking cooperation demands reform in three specific and interrelated areas. The first concerns the normative foundation of the international legal instruments through which anti-trafficking cooperation is coordinated. The Palermo Protocol was designed, as the analysis in Chapter III demonstrated, as a technology of criminal governance instead of a human rights instrument, and this foundational design choice has consequently structured the entire international cooperation architecture that has been built upon it for over two decades. A FFP approach does not necessarily require the negotiation of new treaties – a politically improbable undertaking given the current geopolitical environment – but it does demand a binding reinterpretation of existing obligations that centres human dignity and gender equality as primary values rather than as supplementary concerns (CFFP, 2020). Concretely, this means strengthening the

binding character of the victim protection provisions of the Palermo Protocol and the EU Anti-Trafficking Directive, extending protection unconditionally to all identified victims regardless of their cooperation with criminal proceedings, and incorporating gender equality-impact assessments into the monitoring of state compliance by treaty bodies and special rapporteurs. The second reform area concerns the resource architecture of international cooperation. The analysis of EU funding patterns in Chapter IV showed that resources flow disproportionately toward criminal-financial investigation and enforcement capacity while long-term structural work on redistributive prevention remains chronically underfunded and institutionally marginal. A FFP approach demands that international cooperation budgets allocate resources primarily to interventions that address the structural conditions of vulnerability, including the expansion of safe and legal migration pathways, the strengthening of labour protections in sectors where trafficking is concentrated, the development of victim support systems that are not transactional, and the funding of survivor-led organisations and participatory policy processes. It demands, moreover, that states and international organisations be required to present that those funds have produced measurable improvements in the protection of trafficked and at-risk individuals across the full spectrum of gender, migration status, and exploitation type (CFFP, 2020). The third and most structurally significant reform area concerns the development of policy coherence mechanisms across the domains that shape the structural conditions of trafficking. As argued above, trafficking cannot be addressed through anti-trafficking policy alone as its conditions are produced by the intersection of different policy areas that are entirely disconnected from anti-trafficking governance. A FFP approach would require states and international organisations to develop binding cross-domain gender impact assessment mechanisms through which major policy decisions in these areas are evaluated for their effects on the structural conditions that produce vulnerability to trafficking before those decisions are implemented. Trade agreements that intensify labour exploitation in source countries, migration policies that produce or expand undocumented worker populations, development aid decisions that cut support to the economic and social infrastructure of communities from which trafficking victims are disproportionately drawn; all of these must be subject to gendered trafficking impact assessments conducted on the basis of independent feminist analysis, not governmental self-evaluation. Yes, this is a demanding institutional requirement, and one that challenges the sovereign discretion of states in ways that will generate significant political resistance, but it is the logical institutional expression of the structural argument

that this thesis has developed: that trafficking is entrenched in the political economy of globalisation so in order to address it the economic and ideological structures that make human exploitation rational and profitable have to be confronted and defied.

The reforms outlined above, taken together, would represent a significant and genuinely transformative advance on the governance model that currently exists. Unconditional victim protection, intersectional identification, survivor participation, reformed international legal instruments, reoriented resource allocation, cross-domain policy coherence – none of these is a utopian demand. Each is, in principle, achievable within the existing framework of international institutions and state commitments. And FFP, as a governance framework, provides the most coherent normative foundation for pursuing all of them simultaneously rather than in isolated and uncoordinated fragments. And yet, intellectual honesty requires acknowledging the distance between the framework outlined above and the political conditions under which contemporary international cooperation on trafficking is actually conducted, leading to a set of new issues. The states most capable of driving reform in the international cooperation architecture, those with the economic and institutional resources to reorient international instruments, are also those with the strongest material interest in maintaining the migration regimes and labour market structures dependent on the availability of precarious and exploitable workers. A genuine FFP approach would require these states to accept constraints on their sovereign discretion over migration and labour policy that are fundamentally at odds with domestic political priorities shaped by anti-immigration sentiment, labour market deregulation, and the economic interests of industries that depend on cheap migrant labour. The political will required to override these interests does not emerge from institutional design alone; it requires the sustained political pressure of feminist movements, survivor networks, labour organisations, and civil society actors capable of holding states accountable for the gap between their international commitments and their domestic practices.

This is the deepest insight that the feminist political economy framework, developed across Parts I and II of this thesis, delivers: trafficking is not an anomaly within the global economic order but one of its most rational expressions. It condenses within a single practice the central contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, revealing that the market's promise of choice is sustained by the unacknowledged coercion of others, where gender is the primary mechanism through which this coercion is organised and rendered invisible within governance frameworks that claim to address it.

This very obstacle leads back the structural critique that has been central to this thesis. FFP, even in its most ambitious and consistently applied form, still operates within the framework of the international state system and the global capitalist economy that produces the conditions of trafficking. It can reshape the normative premises and institutional architecture of international cooperation; it can redistribute resources and restructure accountability mechanisms; it can demand policy coherence across domains and insist on the centrality of gender equality to foreign policy. But it cannot, by itself, dismantle the global inequalities of wealth and power that make certain bodies available for exploitation, or challenge the patriarchal social structures that devalue feminised labour and normalise the commodification of women's bodies and sexualities. What FFP can do however, and what makes it an indispensable component of any serious reform agenda, is reorient the international cooperation architecture within which structural change must be pursued. By placing gender equality at the centre of foreign policy, demanding accountability to gendered outcomes, insisting on policy coherence across domains, and challenging the state-centric assumptions that have organised international cooperation around the protection of borders and not the protection of people, FFP creates the institutional and normative conditions where structural prevention can become politically possible. So while it may not resolve – and cannot resolve – the structural contradictions of neoliberal globalisation and patriarchal governance that depend on the exploitation of feminised, racialised, and disposable labour, it refuses to accept those contradictions as fixed parameters within which governance must operate, and in doing so, it opens the political space so that more fundamental transformation can be demanded and pursued.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the gendered dimension of human trafficking as the central analytical lens through which trafficking must be understood if governance responses are ever to confront its real causes. What has emerged across these five chapters is an argument that is simultaneously diagnostic and normative: diagnostic in the account of why existing governance fails, and normative in the insistence that a different response is extremely necessary.

The thesis began, in Chapter I, by establishing that human trafficking is irreducibly both transnational and gendered and that these features build from each other. The networks through which trafficking operates, the political economy that sustains it, and the legal frameworks that claim to address it are all organised around gendered assumptions about who deserves protection and who can be exploited with impunity. The Palermo Protocol's definition of trafficking, while significant as a foundational international legal achievement, was shown to encode a particular and limiting understanding of the problem; one that privileges criminal actors and coercive acts over the structural conditions that make exploitation possible and profitable.

Chapter I's political economy analysis deepened this argument by situating trafficking within the logic of global capitalism with its vertical chain of profit that connects recruiters, transporters, corrupt officials, employers, and consumers across the global trafficking economy – all of these were shown to mirror the enlarged dynamics of capitalist accumulation through dispossession, with women's bodies constituting what Shelley (2010) calls the perfect commodity: simultaneously portable, renewable, and endlessly exploitable. The feminisation and racialisation of migration of women's labour and the neoliberal restructuring that has dismantled collective labour protections while expanding precarious employment were all identified as structural conditions that sustain trafficking's profitability, showing that trafficking is one of capitalism's most rational and efficient expressions.

Chapter II turned to the theoretical frameworks through which trafficking has been analysed within international relations, and found them, with important exceptions, inadequate to the task. Realism's state-centric conception of security and Liberalism's focus on formal legal and institutional structures were both shown to obscure the gendered

dimensions of power that produce vulnerability to trafficking. Feminist IR theory, by contrast, provided the analytical tools necessary to make those dimensions visible, exposing how trafficking is constituted as a form of structural violence rooted in gendered institutions and labour markets, and how intersectionality shapes the differential vulnerability of populations across lines of gender, class, race, migration status, and sexual orientation. The human security framework offered a critical complement to the feminist IR perspective, repositioning trafficking as a challenge to the security of individuals instead of states, and revealing the paradox at the heart of European anti-trafficking governance, a region that is institutionally stable but socially uneven, in which the expansion of internal mobility has been accompanied by the intensification of external exclusion in ways that systematically increase the vulnerability of the populations most exposed to exploitation.

The analysis of securitisation in Chapter II's third section demonstrated that the governance of migration has been transformed into a domain of surveillance, restriction, and enforcement in which trafficking is positioned alongside irregular migration as a threat to public order and not as a violation of individual rights. The chapter's concluding section asked who benefits from trafficking systems and answered that question by disaggregating the chain of beneficiaries across traffickers, employers, industries, consumers, and states, none of whom bear formal criminal liability for the exploitation that their economic relationships sustain. This was one of the thesis's most challenging analytical moves, and the one most essential to its central claim that trafficking is not a problem located in criminal others at the margins of the global economy, but a structural feature embedded within its normal operation.

Part II moved from diagnosis to governance, examining the international and regional institutional architecture through which anti-trafficking responses are coordinated and the extent to which that architecture is capable of producing gender-sensitive outcomes. Chapter III demonstrated that the governance of trafficking is organized not through a unified regime but through a fragmented and stratified institutional field in which multiple actors participate in the production and enforcement of anti-trafficking norms from partially incompatible normative starting points. The Palermo Protocol's 4Ps framework was shown to have produced a governance model in which prosecution dominates, protection is conditional, prevention is marginal, and partnerships are shaped by funding dependency. The analysis of NGOs revealed that civil society actors, however

indispensable in translating norms into practice and advocating for survivors, have undergone a transformation from politically feminist-led advocacy rooted in structural critique to a more institutionalised and professionalised form of intervention constrained by donor requirements and governance integration. The section on anti-trafficking policy governance identified selectivity as the defining feature of existing governance and located that selectivity as an institutional design failure.

By applying this framework comparatively Germany and the Netherlands, Chapter IV found that despite their apparently different governance models – one enforcement-driven, one regulatory and progressive –, both systems ultimately generate uneven patterns of recognition and protection reliant on gendered outcomes through different mechanisms. Germany's criminal law framework produces an epistemic narrowing that equates trafficking with what can be prosecuted, excluding complex experiences of exploitation and imposing gendered expectations of victimhood performance that systematically disadvantage women who exercise any degree of agency. The Dutch regulatory model, organised around the legalisation of prostitution and formalised through the B8 residence permit scheme, generates its own forms of conditionality and exclusion through carceral protectionism – the fusion of welfare-oriented protection with coercive, punitive, and surveillance-based state practices that tie protection to prosecution and position victims as evidentiary resources instead of rights-bearing individuals that have just underwent a profoundly traumatic experience. The comparative analysis concluded that anti-trafficking governance within the European context is characterised by structural constraints that transcend specific policy models as they are rooted in the interaction between legal frameworks, economic systems, migration regimes, and gendered norms across the region.

Part III turned from diagnosis to the question of what different governance would require. Chapter V, section 5.1 argued that the design of genuine victim-centred and gender-sensitive policies, demand four interconnected reforms: the decoupling of protection from prosecution through unconditional support; the replacement of ideal victim identification frameworks with intersectional approaches that recognise the full diversity of trafficking experiences across gender, migration status, and exploitation type; the meaningful incorporation of survivor knowledge into policy design as an epistemic necessity; and the extension of support beyond the immediate post-rescue period to address the long-term structural conditions of vulnerability. Section 5.2 argued that these domestic reforms

cannot function effectively within an international cooperation architecture that is itself constituted around priorities that are incompatible with gender-sensitive governance. As such, the Feminist Foreign Policy was introduced as the most coherent normative framework for reconstituting that architecture, demanding accountability to gendered outcomes, reorienting resource allocation toward structural prevention, and insisting on cross-domain policy coherence that evaluates trade, migration, development, and security policy for their gendered trafficking implications.

Altogether, this thesis makes a claim that extends beyond the specific governance failures it has documented. The international order, as this thesis has analysed it, is organised around a set of structural asymmetries that produce and reproduce the conditions of vulnerability prominent to trafficking between capital and labour, between mobility and immobility, between formal and informal economies and, most fundamentally, between genders. This is why the thesis has insisted, at every stage of its analysis, that trafficking cannot be reduced to a problem of criminal actors or insufficient international cooperation. The most sophisticated anti-trafficking legal framework, the most gender-sensitive identification system, the most feminist foreign policy – none of these can, by itself, dismantle the global inequalities of wealth and power that make certain individuals available for exploitation, or challenge the patriarchal social structures that devalue feminised labour and normalize the commodification of women's bodies. These structures are the terrain on which the political struggle for gender justice must ultimately be waged, and anti-trafficking governance, at its best, can create the conditions within which that struggle becomes more politically possible. What the gendered dimension of trafficking ultimately reveals, then, is that gender is not a variable to be added to the analysis of international politics but a constitutive dimension of that politics. Feminist IR theory has been making this argument for decades and, through this thesis, I attempted to demonstrate its force over the specific and concrete case of human trafficking. The argument is not that gender explains everything about trafficking, but that gender is the mechanism through which these other dimensions of inequality are organised.

This thesis has operated within constraints that honest scholarship requires acknowledging. My analysis is based primarily on secondary sources such as academic literature, institutional reports, policy documents, and legal instruments, instead of primary empirical research involving interviews with trafficking survivors, frontline practitioners, or policymakers. This means that while the structural analysis is grounded

in an extensive body of existing research, the lived experiential dimension of trafficking – referring to the specific ways in which survivors navigate governance systems, make decisions about disclosure, experience identification and protection processes, and understand their own situations – is filtered through sources that are themselves shaped by the normative assumptions this thesis has spent considerable effort critiquing. A fully adequate feminist analysis of trafficking governance would incorporate survivor voices not only as illustrative evidence but as a constitutive dimension of the research methodology itself; an aspiration that lies beyond the scope of what this thesis has been able to achieve but that future research in this area should treat as a methodological priority.

The comparative range of the thesis is also purposely selective. Germany and the Netherlands were chosen as case studies because they represent distinct governance logics within the EU context and because the scholarly literature on both is sufficiently developed to support the kind of detailed institutional analysis that this work undertakes. But they are wealthy, institutionally developed destination countries in Western Europe, a context that, however analytically revealing, captures only one very specific dimension of the global trafficking phenomenon. The experiences of source countries, transit countries, and destination countries in the Global South involve structural dynamics, governance challenges, and survivor experiences that differ significantly from the European context and that a more comprehensive comparative analysis would need to incorporate. Future research should extend this comparative framework to non-European contexts including, in particular, the Greater Mekong sub-region, West Africa, and Latin America, where trafficking patterns and governance responses involve different configurations of the structural dynamics this thesis has identified.

The women, men, children, and gender non-conforming individuals who are trafficked across and within national borders are not statistics or evidentiary resources. They are people whose dignity has been violated, whose autonomy has been destroyed, and whose suffering is produced not by the random cruelty of criminal actors but by the systematic operation of economic, political, and social structures that render certain lives more exploitable and disposable than others. This thesis has argued that understanding those structures is the necessary precondition for any governance response that is serious about addressing trafficking instead of merely managing it.

My argument is not optimistic in any easy sense. The structural contradictions that sustain trafficking are politically protected and economically rational within the existing neoliberal global order. Governance reform, however ambitious and however feminist in its orientation, cannot dissolve those contradictions by itself. What it can do is create conditions, through unconditional protection, intersectional recognition, survivor participation, reformed international cooperation, and cross-domain policy coherence, within which the political struggle for structural transformation becomes more achievable. To insist on the gendered dimension of human trafficking is, ultimately, to insist on the gendered dimension of the international order itself; the normalisation that we live with ease inside an order that is organised around the exploitation of those rendered most vulnerable by gender, race, class, and migration status, needs to urgently be contested. That contestation begins, and must continue, in scholarship that refuses the consolations of procedural compliance and rhetorical commitment, and holds governance accountable to the lives it claims to protect.

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