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Safe Haven or Blind Spot? Understanding Spain's Human Trafficking Data

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Abstract

Although Spain is one of the European Union's (EU) top destination countries for immigration, it reports one of the lowest numbers of identified human trafficking victims. This study therefore aims to explain this low number by analyzing Spain's victim identification mechanisms, specifically focusing on the roles of the healthcare sector, law enforcement, and the media. The findings align with insights from both Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory and Framing Theory. Healthcare professionals face structural constraints, including limited time and a lack of training, resulting in them relying on standardized routines when treating patients. This therefore significantly hinders their ability to identify trafficking victims. Additionally, only law enforcement officials have the authority to formally identify victims, resulting in a police-centric identification system in Spain. The law enforcement officials face several limitations in their work, resulting in their discretionary power reinforcing systemic bias in the identification of human trafficking victims. This bias tends to prioritize female victims of sex trafficking, neglecting other forms of trafficking and other types of victims. Lastly, the Spanish media contributes to the limited public awareness of human trafficking, by predominantly focusing on sex trafficking, simplifying trafficking stories, and confusing human trafficking with migrant smuggling. This study emphasizes the need for structural reforms that shift away from the police-centric identification system and prioritize training. Addressing these issues can improve the identification of trafficking victims, both in Spain and other EU Member States.

Introduction

While the slave trade was officially eliminated during the 19th century, modern forms of slavery persist today (Geshinde, 2011). Some statistics suggest that the number of people in slavery today exceeds the number of slaves made back in the 1800s: it is very likely that more individuals are a victim of human trafficking today than during the trans-atlantic slave trade (Geshinde, 2011). Human trafficking has been defined by the United Nations as

“The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring 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.” (United Nations, 2000).

The forms of exploitation include sexual or labor exploitation, practices similar to slavery, servitude, or forced removal of organs (Geshinde, 2011). It has been estimated that around 49.6 million people are victims of human trafficking today (International Labour Organization, 2022). 71 percent of these trafficking victims are women and girls, and an estimated 25 percent of the victims are below the age of eighteen (Stop The Traffik, n.d.).

Previous studies have elaborately investigated the link between migration and human trafficking: countries with higher rates of immigration tend to have higher trafficking rates (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2011; Avdan, 2012; Yousaf, 2018). This is because international movement of individuals is a key enabling condition for human trafficking (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2011). Migrants are considered to be more vulnerable to trafficking, especially when they are reliant on third-party facilitators to gain access to the country of destination (Avdan, 2012; Yousaf, 2018). Several pull factors, such as expectations of better income, living conditions and employment opportunities, incentivize individuals to take the risk to migrate. As a result, criminal networks and human traffickers develop ample opportunities - such as false job descriptions - to exploit these factors, making desperate migrants fall prey to their deception (Avdan, 2012; Hernandez & Rudolph, 2011). Upon arrival, the traffickers coerce victims into exploitation. Countries which have dense and well established migratory flows tend to have higher rates of human trafficking, since the certainty of knowing where migrants come from and are headed to

makes the recruitment and exploitation of victims easier (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2011). Traffickers take advantage of existing migrant routes, as it increases their chances of finding new potential victims.

In the European Union (EU), the top five countries with the largest total number of immigrants in 2022 were Germany (2.1 million), Spain (1.3 million), France (0.4 million), Italy (0.4 million), and the Netherlands (0.3 million) (Eurostat, 2024). With the exception of Spain, all of these countries also reported the largest total number of registered trafficking victims in the same year (Eurostat, 2024). France registered a total of 3838 victims for example, and Italy a total of 2903. Interestingly, Spain was one of the countries with the lowest human trafficking rates, along with Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Slovenia. In 2022, Spain identified around 235 victims of trafficking, which only accounted for 2.3 percent of the total number of registered victims in the EU (Eurostat, 2024).

Taking into account both the statistics on immigration and human trafficking, Spain emerges as a statistical outlier. Since an important component of human trafficking is the (international) movement of individuals, the fact that Spain has the second-largest immigration rates within the EU can lead to the assumption that the country's human trafficking rates would be relatively higher than other EU countries. Especially considering the knowledge that the other EU countries with the highest rates of immigration - Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands - simultaneously report the highest rates of human trafficking as well. This contradiction therefore presents a research puzzle: although high immigration rates typically lead to high human trafficking rates, Spain defies this pattern (Gustafsson & Hagström, 2017). Therefore, the research question guiding this paper is: "Why does Spain, despite being a key destination for migrants, identify so few trafficking victims?". Although it has been assumed that there is a significant portion of unidentified victims of human trafficking, due to for example the limited capacity of healthcare workers to identify victims, the current literature has not yet empirically investigated the reasons for why Spain's trafficking victim identification rates are particularly low compared to their immigration rates. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute to filling this current research gap through the qualitative analysis of factors that may contribute to this underidentification. In doing so, this study contributes to the existing literature by explaining why Spain is a statistical outlier in this context. Academically, this study contributes to underexplored debates behind the

underidentification of trafficking victims, helping to improve empirical and theoretical understandings of victim identification mechanisms.

Human trafficking is not only an internationally recognized criminal act, but also a human rights violation with significant health and socioeconomic implications (Smartt, 2003). The consequences of human trafficking can be grave and detrimental on both the micro- and macro-level. It harms the victims' wellbeing, increasing their vulnerability while decreasing their opportunities to acquire human capital in the form of education and skills (Jones et al., 2007). Moreover, human trafficking strengthens organized crime in the country which compromises the overall security of society as a whole and undermines the rule of law. Therefore, it is crucial that our understanding of human trafficking is deepened, and our knowledge is improved. By using Spain as a case-study while analyzing the country's victim identification mechanisms, the general understanding of human trafficking - particularly on the identification processes of potential victims - can be enhanced: both governments and civil society can utilize these findings and apply them to their specific context. Solving this research puzzle is essential in improving the anti-trafficking approach of the EU as a whole: this research can be used to push for reforms, either in Spain's identification and reporting system, or in the anti-trafficking policies of other EU member states. The remainder of this paper includes a literature review, theoretical framework, and a discussion of this study's methodology, followed by the results of the analyses. This paper will end with a conclusion.

Literature review

Several studies emphasize that human trafficking continues to be an underreported crime (Jones et al., 2007; Cho, 2014). Due to its complex and hidden nature, human trafficking data is of poor quality and a high number of victims continues to remain 'invisible' (Cho, 2014). This issue of underreporting is a problem globally, since the nature of human trafficking is both criminal and secretive, making it difficult for both countries of origin and of destination to identify potential trafficking victims (Jones et al., 2007). In Spain, the ombudsman has emphasized how a lack of reliable data on the true scope of human trafficking remains a problem (Defensor del Pueblo de España, 2015). It is expected that the number of existing victims in Spain is up to five times higher than the number of identified and registered victims (Villacampa, Gómez, & Torres, 2023). In order to explain this severe underidentification of trafficking victims in Spain, this study draws on

two conceptual frameworks: Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory and Framing Theory. These frameworks help explain why some forms of trafficking continue to be underdetected, and how communicative channels - such as news media and journalistic outlets - might also contribute to this underreporting.

According to Michael Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats are public service workers who interact with citizens directly, such as healthcare workers and law enforcement officials (Lipsky, 1969). These professionals play a crucial role in the implementation of policies, since they work on the frontline of public administration. They experience significant discretion in performing their job duties, since they interact with citizens constantly. Lipsky (1969) argues that when these frontline professionals experience a high workload under time pressure, they rely on this personal discretion and their own routines in the performance of their job. These routines are simplified ways of interacting with the citizens, while relying on ‘mental shortcuts’ - in the form of personal biases and stereotypes - in their decision-making processes (Lipsky, 1969). The simplified routines are a coping strategy, allowing the professionals to work with clients in a standardized and emotionally detached way (Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2014). However, these standardized routines can affect the quality of their work - negatively impacting the services provided to the clients (Tummers et al., 2014). Moreover, by treating every client the same way, the complexity of individual cases is undermined and overlooked. Therefore, training street-level bureaucrats is crucial in order to improve their decision-making and situation awareness, while reducing their reliance on standardized routines (Poos, Van den Bosch, & Janssen, 2017). Encouraging these professionals to become more reflective and to critically assess their decision-making processes during these training sessions is essential, in order for them to improve their awareness of more complex cases.

This theory is particularly relevant in the healthcare sector, where the ‘frontline workers’ are continuously in direct contact with citizens and are expected to perform high-quality services under time pressure. In the context of human trafficking, if clear guidelines are lacking, or if the professionals lack the proper resources to identify victims, these standardized routines can affect victim identification. The healthcare sector plays an essential role in identifying victims of human trafficking: it has been estimated that 68 to 88 percent of trafficked persons have been in contact with at least one healthcare professional while they were exploited (Lee, Geynisman-Tan, Hofer, Anderson, Caravan, & Titchen, 2021). This could have occurred in for example emergency

departments, or women's health clinics (Exeni, McAmis, Mirabella, McCarthy, Cama, Fogarasi, & Thomas, 2022). Particularly women who are victims of sex trafficking are likely to seek out gynaecology and obstetrics services, as miscarriages and unwanted pregnancies are the main causes for victims to seek out healthcare (Ruiz-Gonzalez, Roman, Benayas-Perez, Rodriguez-Arrastia, Ropero-Padilla, Ruiz-Gonzalez, & Sanchez-Labraca, 2021). These moments of contact are crucial, as they may be one of the only times in which a trafficking victim can speak to a trusted professional privately, creating a unique opportunity for the identification of and intervention in cases of human trafficking (Lee et al, 2021; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022). However, many victims may not be recognized, due to fear or shame the victim experiences, or due to inexperience and lack of knowledge and awareness by the healthcare professionals. Especially if a victim is not recognizable at first sight, because it does not fit the 'stereotypical' description of a trafficking victim, they are very unlikely to get detected (Camak, 2022). Several studies have therefore emphasized the importance of effective training models, improving the knowledge of all healthcare providers in identifying and helping (potential) victims of human trafficking (Lee et al, 2021; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022).

It has been argued that a lack of training in the healthcare sector leads to an underreporting of trafficking victims (Ruiz-Gonzalez et al., 2021; Villacampa et al., 2023). A study conducted among Spanish midwives emphasized the challenges these healthcare professionals experience in identifying and caring for trafficking victims - they feel poorly equipped due to a lack of professional training and knowledge about systems or tools of intervention (Ruiz-Gonzalez et al., 2021). This lack of knowledge "leads to missing a unique opportunity to intervene in the cycle of exploitation and improve the health of victims" (Ruiz-Gonzalez et al., 2021, p.2147). Moreover, without the proper training in place, the healthcare professionals rely more heavily on standardized routines, which can limit their sensitivity to potential trafficking cases.

Additionally, in Spain, the identification of trafficking victims is primarily the responsibility of law enforcement, meaning that only these professionals are equipped and authorized to identify and register them. Thus, healthcare professionals not only lack the appropriate training to identify victims, they also do not have the authorized power to register them, which could potentially explain why there is a gap between the number of estimated victims and the number of registered ones (Villacampa et al., 2023). Therefore, based on the existing literature, one potential explanation for the low number of identified victims in Spain is the limited

capacity of healthcare professionals to identify and register them. The first subquestion is thus as follows:

Q1: What role does the lack of training and institutional authority among healthcare professionals play in the identification of human trafficking victims in Spain?

While healthcare professionals face constraints regarding training and legal authority, law enforcement officials mainly face challenges rooted in discretionary bias, which can also be explained through the lens of Street-Level Bureaucracy. Since law enforcement officials hold the primary authority to identify victims of trafficking, they play a crucial role in the detection process in Spain. Police officers in particular are frequently the first ones to interact with victims, and are more likely to come into contact with them during their regular job duties (Stickle, Kulig, Creel, Meyer, Maynard, & Jeanes, 2022). However, when faced with complex or unfamiliar situations, the police officers tend to rely on ‘mental shortcuts’ to make decisions efficiently, particularly when they have time pressure or limited information (Lipsky, 1969; Poos et al., 2017). These biases are based on stereotypes, their personal intuition, or previous experiences. However, “in some situations biases can have dangerous consequences, especially when the safety of others depend on [their] judgment and decision-making” (Poos et al., 2017, p.101-102).

Existing literature discusses a categorization bias regarding human trafficking: sex trafficking has been prioritized over other forms of trafficking, such as for the purpose of labor exploitation (Villacampa et al., 2023). This is a result of the fact that historically, sex trafficking was one of the first forms of trafficking to be officially recognized, leading to the development of biased institutions and strategies to combat it. This bias is still prevalent today: studies conducted in for example the United States show how most efforts to combat human trafficking focus on women’s sex trafficking, following an exclusionary narrative which focuses on stereotypical portrayals of trafficking victims as powerless, underaged women (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Pennybacker, 2021). This perception of human trafficking prevents the local police agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders from investigating a broader range of human trafficking cases, resulting in a limited identification of trafficking victims. Particularly labor trafficking has been under-detected and underrepresented in official statistics (Pennybacker, 2021).

This bias is not unique to the United States; in Spain, human trafficking gained legislative attention over two decades ago (Villacampa et al., 2023). The main focus of the Spanish state has been on sexual exploitation, particularly of female victims. The Intelligence Center for Counter-terrorism and Organized Crime - the main body in Spain tasked with quantifying the victims of human trafficking - only started collecting data on other forms of trafficking in 2015 (Villacampa et al., 2023). By contrast, the Netherlands has established their first Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children in 2000, gathering data on different types of trafficking and drafting policy recommendations to combat human trafficking in all of its forms (Nationaal Rapporteur Mensenhandel en Seksueel Geweld Tegen Kinderen, n.d.). Additionally, Italy created the *Osservatorio Tratta* in 2005, with the objective of collecting data and monitoring all forms of trafficking - including for the purpose of sexual and labor exploitation (Ogrodnik, 2010).

Spain's delayed inclusive data quantification can therefore be an essential factor which contributes to the underidentification of trafficking victims in Spain - its relatively late development of inclusive data collection systems is a reflection of a broader, institutional bias regarding human trafficking, resulting in a prioritization of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. In its report of June 2023, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) criticized Spain's low number of investigations on trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation, and urged the authorities to improve the detection of possible victims, particularly in the agricultural sector (Council of Europe, 2023). As street-level bureaucrats, law enforcement officials exercise discretion in identifying trafficking victims. However, if this discretion is exercised using stereotypes shaped by institutional history and dominant narratives, sex trafficking cases can be prioritized over other forms of trafficking. Therefore, the second subquestion is:

Q2: What role does categorization bias within Spanish law enforcement play in the identification of human trafficking victims in Spain?

In addition to law enforcement officials and healthcare service providers, the literature also discusses the role of the public in reporting human trafficking victims (Morris & Desmond, 2022). Citizens can play a crucial role in human trafficking cases, if capable of recognizing the signs of

trafficking, since they can provide assistance to the police by reporting tips to the local authorities (Stickle et al., 2022). However, in order for citizens to “detect and report (...) trafficking, (...) they have to know what they are looking for and they have to be confident enough to report what they see to law enforcement” (Morris & Desmond, 2022, p.67).

The public continues to rely on news reports as their main source of information on crime and human trafficking. The media play a key role in shaping public opinion, and constructing the public’s images of reality. Framing Theory helps explain the influence of the media on the public understanding of human trafficking, and ultimately on the public reporting signs of trafficking to the police. Framing Theory suggests that the media focuses the audience’s attention on certain events, thereby influencing the way these events are perceived and understood (Arowolo, 2017). By presenting news in a certain frame, ideas about these events are organized and stories are linked together, eventually “building up a narrative over time and across political space” (Arowolo, 2017, p.3). Therefore, the media play a fundamental role in raising awareness on human trafficking and decreasing the invisibility of trafficking victims (Cabrera-Rodríguez & Antolínez-Merchán, 2022). Since human trafficking is a crime of great complexity which continues to evolve, the media plays a crucial role in keeping the public informed and to help them better understand how the crime works and how to identify victims (United States Department of State, 2017). Limited exposure to this topic can have a limiting effect on the cases of human trafficking the public is able to recognize, contributing to their underreporting (Morris & Desmond, 2022).

A study conducted by Cabrera-Rodríguez and Antolínez-Merchán (2022), argues that the scarce coverage given to human trafficking in the Spanish media contributes to the underreporting of victims. Journalists face several constraints in investigating human trafficking stories, such as limited time and experience, and details or sources for a story are challenging to obtain. Moreover, there is a lack of specialization in the media, meaning that there is not a specific department in charge of human trafficking (Cabrera-Rodríguez & Antolínez-Merchán, 2022). By contrast, countries such as Germany, Italy and France all have dedicated national media investigative units, resulting in proactive investigations and continuous reporting (CORRECTIV, n.d.; Mediapart, n.d.; Sigrid Rausing Trust, n.d.).

Additionally, a study conducted by Rodríguez-López (2018) argues that human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation has been overrepresented in the media - thereby taking away the attention for other forms of trafficking. This is a result of a dominant frame presented in the

media, in which women are framed as passive and vulnerable individuals in need of protection (Rodríguez-López, 2018). This then shapes the way the public perceives human trafficking victims, stereotyping them as exclusively women and children, while having limited awareness of or sympathy for victims who do not fit this narrative. As explained in this study:

“Sex trafficking effectively grabs media attention because most victims tend to be women and children, which perfectly fits audiences’ perceptions of victimisation.” (Rodríguez-López, 2018, p.5).

As a result, “the majority of the public still holds incorrect beliefs about trafficking, based on stereotypes, showing that the construction of an “ideal victim” has survived since its creation in the early twentieth century until today.” (Rodríguez-López, 2018, p.24).

The scarce coverage of human trafficking stories in the media, along with its dominant focus on sex trafficking, could be a third potential explanation for Spain’s low number of identified victims, since it contributes to limited awareness and understanding among the public. Therefore, the third subquestion is:

Q3: What role does public perception, shaped by media reporting, play in the identification of human trafficking victims in Spain?

The subquestions developed in this section will serve as the foundation for this study’s methodology and will guide the remainder of this paper.

Theoretical framework

Based on the several factors discussed in the literature review, the following theoretical framework has been developed:

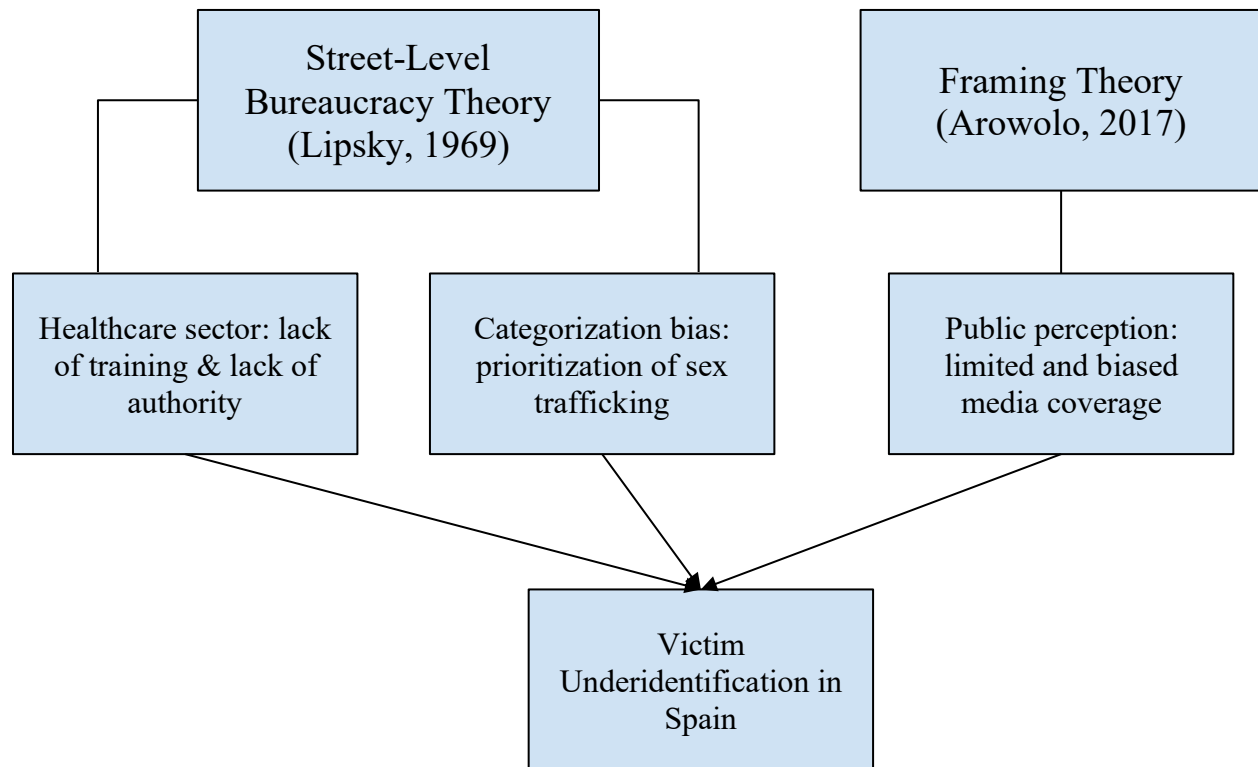


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory as its conceptual framework, emphasizing how limited resources and high work- and time pressure can contribute to the underidentification of trafficking victims in several ways (Lipsky, 1969). As noted in the literature review, the frontline workers rely on personal biases, stereotypes, and standardized routines in the performance of their job duties. Combined with a lack of training and authority for the healthcare professionals, this is expected to contribute to the number of undetected cases of human trafficking. Regarding the law enforcement sector, mental shortcuts and biases can lead to the exclusion of cases which do not fit the dominant stereotype, thereby resulting in a prioritization of victims of sex trafficking over other forms of trafficking.

To further understand the significance of stereotypes in victim identification, Framing Theory is used as a complementary framework (Arowolo, 2017). The way media and communicative channels construct narratives about societal issues, in this case human trafficking, affect how the public perceives the problem. This is therefore expected to affect citizens' role in victim identification, as both the quantity and quality of human trafficking news impact how well-informed the general public is, which may shape how they recognize and report suspected cases. This framework is thus a visual representation of what is expected to contribute to the low victim identification rates in Spain, integrating these theoretical perspectives. In the following section, the methodology to investigate these theoretical assumptions will be discussed.

Methodology

This section will outline the research design used to answer the research question, elaborating on the case selection, data collection methods, sampling technique, data analysis, and the ethical considerations that were taken into account.

This study took on a qualitative, exploratory approach in order to address the research puzzle of Spain's low human trafficking victim identification rates. Qualitative methods have been selected to address this study, since they allow "us to understand the nature, strengths, and interactions of variables." (Black, 1994, p.425). Qualitative methods are often used with the objective of providing rich descriptions of certain phenomena, or explanations of complex realities and relationships (Sofaer, 1999). Moreover, they make in-depth and multi-dimensional explorations possible, which is why qualitative methods are well-suited in order to explore the systemic and institutional factors that may contribute to Spain's low victim identification rates.

Case selection

This study presents a qualitative case study of Spain's human trafficking identification mechanisms, focusing on the roles of healthcare, law enforcement, and the media. Spain has been selected for this case study, since Spain's situation seems to be contradictory to previous studies exploring the link between migration and human trafficking (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2011; Avdan, 2012; Cho, 2014; Yousaf, 2018). An essential element of human trafficking to occur is the international movement of individuals, since the majority of victims of human trafficking only become a victim once they migrate to another country voluntarily (Cho, 2014). Since immigrants

oftentimes are not granted the same protection and rights as citizens in the host countries, they are significantly more vulnerable to exploitation (Jones et al., 2007). Therefore, if a country has well-established migrant and refugee flows, this country is more likely to have higher rates of trafficking (Hernandez & Rudolph, 2011).

However, while Spain has one of Europe's highest immigration numbers, its numbers on identified trafficking victims are one of the lowest. In 2022, Spain identified around 235 victims of trafficking, accounting for 2.3 percent of the total number of registered victims in the EU (Eurostat, 2024). Compared to the other top destination countries in the EU - Italy, Germany, France and the Netherlands - who also report the highest human trafficking rates, Spain clearly defies this pattern.

Spain is both a destination and transit country for victims of human trafficking: those who do not stay in Spain end up relocating to for example France or the United Kingdom (Migration and Home Affairs, n.d.). The majority of the country's trafficking networks are Romanian, South American, Nigerian and Chinese, and these networks adopt a plurality of strategies to recruit new victims. These strategies range from the 'lover boy' method, where the recruiters develop relationships with the victim and convince them to travel to Spain for them, to false job offers - oftentimes using online technologies such as the internet and social media (Migration and Home Affairs, n.d.). Out of the victims identified by the Spanish authorities, 56 percent were women, and 44 percent were men (Ministerio Del Interior, 2024). In both cases, the majority of victims were Colombian, followed by Romanian, Nigerian, Chinese and Venezuelan (Migration and Home Affairs, n.d.). Sexual exploitation has remained the most prevalent form of exploitation in which victims were identified, and within this form, around 90 percent of the identified victims were women (Migration and Home Affairs, n.d.).

The regional variation in Spain is quite high, with Andalusia reporting the highest number of identified trafficking victims in 2023 (129), followed by the region of Valencia (82) and Castille-La Mancha (36) (Statista, 2025). By contrast, several regions - such as Extremadura and Ceuta reported zero identified victims. However, as noted earlier, due to the criminal and secretive nature of human trafficking, the number of identified victims is expected to be significantly lower than the number of estimated victims of trafficking (Cho, 2014; Defensor del Pueblo de España, 2015). Thus, in order to understand why Spain has a high number of expected, yet underreported victims, the country's institutional structure and identification mechanisms on human trafficking,

specifically in the healthcare- and law enforcement sector and in the Spanish media, have been analyzed through the conduction of interviews and document analysis. This will be elaborated on below.

Interviews

Primary data has been collected with the use of semi-structured, elite interviews. Professionals working in the anti-trafficking field have been invited to participate in an online interview, via Zoom. The objective of these interviews was to explore the insights of experts working in the field of anti-trafficking, who had direct experience either in research on trafficking, supporting trafficking victims, or collaborating with stakeholders on anti-trafficking measures. These interviews led to a deeper understanding of their perspectives on the roles of the healthcare sector, law enforcement officials, and the media in identifying trafficking victims in Spain.

Interviews were deemed an appropriate data collection method, since the participants were able to share their own insights and experiences, while clarifying their different perspectives in their own use of words, rather than using terms or categories imposed on them (Sofaer, 1999). The interviews allowed for an authentic representation of the participants' experiences, since they were able to speak freely and openly about each theme (Shepherd, Parida, Williams, & Wincent, 2022).

A total of six interviews have been conducted: all interviews took place in between May and July of 2025. The interviews were semi-structured, through the use of a tailored interview guide which contained open-ended questions. The interview guide can be found in Annex I. Each interview lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. Regarding the sampling, this research made use of a nonprobability, purposive sampling technique (Babbie, 2015). The organizations of which the participants were invited for an interview were selected based on their usefulness and representativeness: these organizations all had valuable and significant experience working in the anti-trafficking field in Spain. Additionally, experts were selected based on their working experience or research specialization regarding human trafficking. An overview of the respondents can be found in table 1. The strategy deployed to reach out to the respondents was two-fold: potential participants were either contacted via a general email address which was posted on the organization's official website, or approached directly through LinkedIn. Using both formal and informal strategies maximized the chance of response from different professionals, and the use of LinkedIn allowed for direct contact with professionals in the anti-trafficking field.

Table 1: Overview respondents		
Respondent ID	Pseudonym name	Current role/organization
#1	Ana	Employee at an NGO working with asylum seekers, migrants and human trafficking victims
#2	María	Employee at an NGO working with women who are victims of violence - including gender-based violence and human trafficking
#3	Sofía	International consultant for several international organizations - specializing in human rights and human trafficking
#4	Elena	Researcher in human trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation - specifically in the agricultural sector
#5	Lucía	Employee at an NGO advocating for social justice - including for victims of human trafficking
#6	Clara	Employee at an NGO working with vulnerable women working in prostitution, victims of sexual exploitation, and human trafficking victims

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcribed interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis, in order to identify patterns and themes (Babbie, 2015). To conduct this analysis, the transcripts were coded based on a preliminary codebook. This codebook consisted of codes that were expected to be mentioned in line with previous literature, based on the theoretical framework. After the first round of coding, open coding by adding new codes inductively to capture themes which were not included in the codebook. After all the transcripts were coded, the codes were grouped into broader categories, allowing for a systematic analysis of the role of the healthcare sector, law enforcement officials, and the media in Spain's victim identification processes.

Document analysis

To complement the primary data collected through the interviews, this study also made use of document analysis. Document analysis has been selected as a second data collection method, since it allows for a systematic reviewing and evaluation of relevant material which can contribute to

new insights, or corroborate evidence from the interviews (Bowen, 2009). Documents as a secondary data source increase the credibility and depth of the findings of the interviews and reduce the impact of potential biases (Bowen, 2009).

Documents were selected based on their relevance to the institutional and public mechanisms on human trafficking victim identification in Spain - specifically within the three themes identified in the literature review: healthcare, law enforcement and the media. A purposive sampling strategy was applied, based on selection criteria regarding their usefulness and relevance: the documents have been published by relevant and reputable organizations in the field of human trafficking or by scientific experts in the human trafficking field. A total of 10 documents have been analyzed: an overview of these documents can be found in table 2. The units of analysis were policy documents, reports, and academic papers. One limitation to note is only documents available in English were included; due to language barriers Spanish documents were excluded from this analysis.

Table 2: Overview documents				
Document ID	Title	Source	Year	Relevance to Study
#1	Country Profile: Spain	Migration and Home Affairs	n.d.	Summarizes Spain's legal and policy measures against human trafficking
#2	Data Culture in Human Trafficking: What do we know and how we tell it	UNICEF Spain & Comillas Pontifical University	2022	Analyzes human trafficking data in Spain
#3	Evaluation Report Spain	GRETA	2023	Evaluates Spain's anti-trafficking measures and victim identification efforts
#4	Framework Protocol for Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking	Government of Spain, Ministerio de Igualdad	2011	Outlines Spain's official procedures for identifying victims of trafficking

Table 2: Overview documents				
#5	Invisibilised human rights: Trafficking in human beings in the media in Spain	Cabrera-Rodríguez, E., & Antolínez-Merchán, P.	2022	Analyzes the framing of human trafficking in the Spanish media
#6	Nursing students' perceptions of identifying and managing sex trafficking cases: A focus group study	Ropero-Padilla, C., et al.	2021	Offers insights into the Spanish healthcare sector regarding their awareness of human trafficking and their ability to identify potential victims
#7	OSCE welcomes Spain's anti-trafficking efforts, urges a comprehensive law and better victim identification and protection	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)	2025	Evaluates Spain's anti-trafficking efforts
#8	Progress Report on Spain's National Implementation of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration 2018-2022	Government of Spain / United Nations Network on Migration	2020	Provides an overview of Spain's migration policies and practices, including efforts regarding the identification and protection of human trafficking victims
#9	Toolkit to Combat Trafficking in Persons – Tool 9.16: The Role of the Media in Preventing Trafficking	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	2008	Provides guidelines for media professionals on reporting and awareness-raising to prevent trafficking
#10	Trafficking in Persons Report: Spain	U.S. Department of State	2024	Evaluates Spain's anti-trafficking measures and victim identification efforts

These documents were coded and analyzed using the same processes as for the interviews: thematic analysis was conducted based on a preliminary codebook and inductive coding based on emergent themes.

Ethics

Given the sensitive nature of human trafficking and its impact on large groups of vulnerable individuals, special attention to ethical issues was required. This study received ethical approval from the Institut Barcelona d'Estudis Internacionals Ethics Committee prior to the start of the data collection process. The ethical approval form can be found in Appendix II. In order to prevent the possible arising of ethical dilemmas, and to maintain the highest standard of ethical conduct, the following measures have been undertaken:

For the interview process, all participants in the interview were asked to sign an informed consent form, which ensured they were fully informed on the purpose of this research, and guaranteed their confidentiality. This informed consent form also contained information regarding the participants' rights, including that they had the right to withdraw fully from participation if needed. All quotes given in this paper use a pseudonym name, to ensure full anonymity and to prevent readers from being able to trace the results back to certain individuals. Additionally, the names of the organizations the participants are an employee of also remain confidential, as requested by some of the participants. The interviews were recorded with the participants' explicit permission - these recordings have not been shared with anyone and will be deleted within one year of the study's completion.

In conducting this study, the decision to interview professionals in the field rather than victims of human trafficking is also based on ethical reasoning. Victims of human trafficking make up an exceptionally vulnerable group of individuals who have experienced traumatic circumstances. Therefore, an interview discussing Spain's victim identification mechanisms could potentially lead to re-traumatization, negatively affecting their well-being and thus violating ethical research standards (Duong, 2015). On the contrary, conducting interviews with professionals working in the field of human trafficking is expected to retrieve sufficient insights to answer the research question, without placing a burden on individuals who experienced human trafficking themselves.

Although pre-existing documents generally lead to fewer ethical concerns compared to other qualitative methods, certain ethical decisions were still made regarding the selection of these documents (Morgan, 2022). Documents were only selected for document analysis if they were intended for public use.

Validity and reliability

Several steps have been undertaken in order to ensure both the validity and reliability of these research methods. Triangulation - the use of multiple data sources - is achieved as this research uses both primary (interviews) and secondary (documents) data. This methodological triangulation enhanced the credibility, validity and depth of this study's findings. Statements made during the interviews with the experts were compared with findings from documents and reports to identify possible patterns, correspondence or contradictions. Additionally, both the participants and the documents come from different organizations, ensuring that a broad and diversified range of perspectives is included.

With the use of semi-structured interviews, guaranteed through the creation of an interview guide, the data of the interviews have been collected consistently (Babbie, 2015). As for the document analysis specifically, clear criteria have been established by which these documents will be selected, which ensures a structured search strategy. All data has been coded systematically and consistently, which is guaranteed with the use of the coding software ATLAS.ti. Once the data retrieved from the interviews and observations had been coded and analyzed, the results and patterns that emerged during the coding processes were shared with the participants, a process called member checking, in order for them to confirm and validate that the data have been interpreted correctly.

Lastly, while conducting this research, the researcher's own biases and assumptions have been critically reflected on in order to prevent them from influencing both the data collection process and the data analysis (Babbie, 2015). These biases can be based on the researcher's background and perceptions. However, through both member checking and continuous conversations with the thesis supervisors, these prejudices and assumptions were prevented from affecting the research process.

Results

Victim detection in the Spanish healthcare sector

As argued in previous studies, seeking out healthcare services provides a unique opportunity for trafficked victims to speak to a trusted professional privately, enabling the healthcare service providers to detect signs of trafficking and to intervene (Lee et al, 2021; Exeni McAmis et al., 2022). During the interviews, most of the respondents agreed that healthcare professionals frequently encounter potential victims amongst their patients. However, although “these people may have contact more than anyone else with potential victims (...) there is a big underdetection in that sector” (Clara). This was assigned partially due to a lack of training on detecting the indicators of human trafficking:

“I think they might be encountering potential victims quite a lot, but the problem is that they don't know how to identify this situation. Obviously, usually access to the healthcare system happens quite often, I mean even if you are a victim of trafficking, you have a big health problem you will be taken to the hospital (...). But I feel like these professionals don't have the tools to identify it or to see this” (Ana).

“In my experience health professionals, they don't know how to identify victims of human trafficking and they don't know the indicators (...). They don't have a specific training in this topic” (Lucía).

This perception aligns with a study conducted in Spain, in which nursing students were asked to assess a female sex trafficking victim (Ropero-Padilla, Rodríguez-Arrastia, Molina-Torres, Márquez-Hernández, Gutiérrez-Puertas, Aguilera-Manrique, Rodríguez-García, & Roman, 2021). This study did not only highlight the positive effect of training on improving the care provided to sex trafficking victims, it also pointed out how these students did not receive this training throughout their education: one possible explanation for the lack of knowledge may be the scarcity of specific content within the nursing training curriculum. As many participants pointed out, they previously had not received such specific training (Ropero-Padilla et al., 2021, p. 1546).

Moreover, although the *Ministerio de Igualdad* (Ministry of Equality) mentions in their Framework Protocol for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking how detections of victims that occur “within a service in the field of health, care or social support” must be notified to the law enforcement agencies, it is nowhere mentioned how these service providers are equipped to recognize the indicators of human trafficking (Ministerio de Igualdad, 2011, p.5). This is noteworthy, since the document acknowledges the possibility of healthcare professionals encountering potential trafficking victims, yet does not discuss concrete actions to ensure the professionals are trained to recognize them.

This lack of training plays a crucial role in the underidentification of victims. Without the proper training, healthcare professionals are not equipped with the tools to recognize signs of trafficking, but they are also not aware of the scope of this crime and the important role they could play in identifying potential victims. Although healthcare providers did receive training on detecting other crimes, such as gender-based violence, it is essential that specific training is devoted to this human trafficking given its complexity. As one respondent explained:

“If you know what you’re looking for, you can see it. If you’re not looking for it, you won’t find it. And in general what we see is there is no specific knowledge, we have an idea of what trafficking is, but we don’t think it’s close to us, so it’s difficult to identify it”. (Clara).

However, a lack of training is not the only root cause to the underidentification of trafficked victims in the healthcare sector. Several respondents pointed out structural limitations within the Spanish healthcare system which further prevent detection, time constraints being the most dominant one:

“It is true that doctors are very tired and they have a lot of patients, they maybe don’t have time to focus on other things if they see patients all the time, like every seven minutes or so...” (Ana).

The healthcare professionals face immense work pressure due to the high number of patients requesting their services - resulting in quick and efficient appointments which at times only last five minutes. Due to this busy work schedule, the doctors “don’t have enough time to go deeper in

some conversations” and are unable to properly assess the situation or broader context their patients face (Ana). Additionally, it is challenging to build rapport with the patients who may be human trafficking victims, since “they have increasingly mobile lives with visits here, visits there, so it is very difficult to build rapport and the trust for them to speak up” (Clara). Although several respondents pointed out that healthcare professionals are more likely to recognize signs of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, detection remains incidental since “they can only assess the sexual aggression, but they don’t have the time or resources to investigate what happened” (María). In addition, language barriers further strengthen communication challenges. Although at times translation services might be available, “a lot of doctors or health professionals don’t know it exists or don’t think they should use them” (Ana).

These findings thus strongly align with Lipsky’s (1969) Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory. The healthcare professionals are front-line workers who work under high time pressure and have limited resources, which in turn makes them rely on simplified routines (Lipsky, 1969; Tummers et al., 2014). As a result, especially combined with a lack of specialized training on human trafficking, potential victims are overlooked.

Regarding the lack of institutional authority in the healthcare sector, several respondents confirmed that only the law enforcement officials have the formal authority to identify victims. This did not seem to be a prominent issue, since “a healthcare provider cannot be charged with the responsibility of identifying a victim; they should be doing their work” (Elena). Instead, when asked about the most urgent changes needed in the healthcare sector to improve trafficking victim identification, all respondents agreed that training is crucial:

“To improve detection among these healthcare professionals, I would say they need to be trained. They need to be trained in order to at least have in mind that these kinds of situations can be detected. They are key actors in order to detect these kinds of signs; they are not sufficiently trained or aware about this reality” (María).

Another respondent also emphasized the need for more awareness amongst healthcare professionals: “They need to see it is something that we are all involved in, they have to see there is a real need to train on this issue where they happen to intervene in cases of having a potential victim in front of them” (Ana). By enhancing the healthcare professionals’ awareness of human

trafficking and their capability in recognizing its signs, the sector's responsiveness is strengthened, more cases can be referred to the authorities, and ultimately, detection of potential victims can be improved.

Categorization bias within Spanish law enforcement

All respondents agreed that trafficking victims for the purpose of sexual exploitation are identified the most by law enforcement officials. The Evaluation Report published by GRETA in 2023 also confirms this:

“While the attention of the Spanish authorities is focused on women and girls who are victims of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation, much less is done to detect and identify victims of other forms of exploitation, in particular labour exploitation” (GRETA, 2023, p.52).

Different reasons as to why were discussed in the interviews, such as that sex trafficking is the most recognizable form of human trafficking, and that police officers were predominantly trained to identify victims in this context. Several respondents also pointed out that Spain lacks a centralized, independent body for victim identification. Since Spain solely relies on the police to identify victims, no formal National Referral Mechanism (NRM) has been established. As a result, there is no independent entity who develops “a comprehensive view of what human trafficking is, independently of the purpose, (...) so what we have had for the last fifteen years is kind of a leadership taken by the ministry, who has focused on sexual exploitation. The other ministries have not been involved and they have not prioritized other sides of human trafficking” (María). As a result, sex trafficking has been prioritized at the policy level:

“Every plan, every document from the administration, they have always been focused on women and girls as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. Not even for women and girls in general. It's always women, girls, and sexual exploitation. So if we don't give resources to other kinds of victims, other kinds of trafficking, it's very difficult to work towards other forms besides women victims of sexual exploitation” (Ana).

This can therefore also partially explain why Spain's anti-trafficking efforts have mainly been aimed at combating sex trafficking. Another consequence of the country's lack of an NRM is that "the identification is under the responsibility of the police forces - of specialized groups on human trafficking" (Elena). As stated by the *Ministerio de Igualdad*:

"The identification of victims of human trafficking shall be performed by police units with specific training in the prevention and combating of trafficking and victim identification and support." (Ministerio de Igualdad, 2011, p.6).

However, this police-centric identification system has structural implications for Spain's identification rates. Respondents pointed out how law enforcement officials tend to follow a narrative of human trafficking which is based on stereotypes - resulting in them not adopting an integral approach to all kinds of victims. These stereotypes include gendered assumptions:

"They have this stereotype and view of what a victim is and they cannot understand men being a victim of this kind of crime." (Lucía).

"Usually the people that need to be safe are women who are the most vulnerable and fragile people on the planet. And those are the ones who are being sexually exploited." (Ana).

Additionally, several respondents pointed out that although law enforcement officials are better equipped at identifying female victims of sex trafficking, this is mainly limited to women in prostitution:

"It's always very obvious when it's sexual exploitation in the context of prostitution, but maybe we have victims that are a victim that is exploited by a person, like sexual abuse and sexual exploitation just by the person who trafficked her. So these kinds of things are more difficult to be seen by the police because it goes a little bit away from the imaginary of what a victim is." (Ana).

The UNICEF Spanish Committee confirms this:

“Both the Intelligence Centre against Terrorism and Organised Crime (CITCO) statistics and the Prosecutor’s Office Report state that, in the case of sexual exploitation, the detection and identification of victims has been carried out in contexts of prostitution.” (Castaño Reyero et al., 2022, p.12).

Although sexual exploitation has been the main purpose of human trafficking which has been identified in Spain, the respondents highlighted law enforcement’s increased efforts in recognizing victims who have been trafficked for labor exploitation.

“We can see that when we look at the numbers: we see a high number of victims identified for sexual exploitation, instead of any other purposes. But in the last maybe four years, three-four years, they have started to focus on labor exploitation. If we compare numbers, we can see that the numbers have significantly increased.” (María).

“It has shifted a bit - we have heard for the past five to six years people telling us that we're focusing too much on sexual exploitation, and by people at expert groups like, for example, in the GRETA evaluation, and they told us we needed to expand. So there has been a shift in favoring victims of labor exploitation.” (Clara).

Several documents confirm these increased efforts, such as a progress report published by the United Nations Network on Migration (UNNM) in 2022:

“The Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, in cooperation with the other relevant authorities and bodies, is helping to increase and improve investigations into trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation, which presents specific problems.” (UNNM, 2022, p.37).

The Evaluation Report published by GRETA in 2023 also acknowledges this:

“Since the adoption of the National Action Plan against THB and the National Action Plan against Forced Labour in 2021, Spain has, for the first time, specific roadmaps to address this form of trafficking.” (GRETA, 2023, p.41).

However, challenges in identifying victims of labor trafficking remain - it is especially difficult for law enforcement officials to detect signs of trafficking in certain sectors:

“It is more clear when they identify big groups of foreign people in the agricultural sector, it is again it is something that we have the picture of in our head, but there is there are other forms of exploitation or, um, I don’t know, a person or trafficked person in a in restaurant or in a supermarket where it is more difficult for the police officers to see and recognize the signs of trafficking.” (Ana).

Particularly when attempting to identify trafficking victims in sectors where labor exploitation is to a certain extent normalized, difficulties arise:

“In areas like domestic work, the agricultural sector, construction, hospitality, tourism - those are all areas of the labor market where people normalize working informality (...) so there is a less moral reproach against it because some sort of exploitation in certain sectors is normalized. So to look at a situation where workers are exploited and who are there because they have been trafficked is a little more difficult.” (Elena).

One respondent noted that one potential reason for the limited detection of labor trafficking cases is a lack of political will to combat it:

“There is no interest in detecting cases of labor exploitation, because there is a lot of money and interest in that. If we can have workers who work for nothing, or very little money, why should we change that?” (María).

This also corresponds with GRETA’s observations:

“Numerous interlocutors met by GRETA lamented the lack of political will to address trafficking in human beings for the purpose of labour exploitation given the importance of agriculture and other labour-intensive sectors for the Spanish economy.” (GRETA, 2023, p.44).

Whether a result of political incentives or not, law enforcement face several obstacles in identifying labor trafficking victims. One of the main obstacles is the fact that the Spanish criminal code lacks a formal definition of labor exploitation. Human trafficking for the purpose of labor exploitation has been criminalized, but there is no standalone offense of labor exploitation in itself - “the criminalization of the offence of forced labour in Spain is still pending” (Castaño Reyero et al., 2022, p.14). Spain not having defined labor exploitation clearly in their criminal code complicates victim identification and prosecution, since “it leads the Spanish law enforcement to say, we cannot identify victims of labor exploitation, because we don’t have a crime in this sense” (Lucía). As a result, many labor trafficking victims fail to get recognized and formally identified, “as the main goal of law enforcement is to investigate the crime, they are not interested in investigating forced labor exploitation, because it is not a crime. (...) And so they say “okay, I have to formally identify these victims, but I will not receive anything from them - I will not receive information useful for any investigation” (Elena).

Another structural limitation within Spanish law enforcement is the conflicting role officials have when identifying victims of human trafficking. The special law enforcement units working on human trafficking are the same units working on migrant smuggling, which complicates distinguishing trafficked victims from smuggled individuals. Balancing both tasks is difficult:

“If I am a police officer, and I’m going to be in charge of these smuggling networks, and at the same time I’m the person in charge of looking for victims of trafficking or care for victims of trafficking, I’m not seeing the victim - I’m seeing the crime.” (Ana).

“Law enforcement is specialized in investigating crimes and protecting the borders, (...) but we cannot think about how to protect and the victim and our borders.” (Lucía).

Due to Spain's police-centric identification system, the fact that these officials tend to link victim recognition closely to criminal proceedings significantly impacts their ability to formally identify trafficking victims. Most law enforcement officials tend to criminalize all forms of migration, predominantly focusing on undocumented migrants and smugglers. As a result, individuals risk being labeled and treated as criminals or irregular migrants, without being recognized as victims. This conflict of interests also affects victim identification for the purpose of forced criminality. Although several respondents mentioned that trafficking for purposes other than sexual and labor exploitation are severely underdetected, particularly recognizing victims of forced criminality poses challenges for law enforcement:

“We know they are very difficult to identify, because the same people who are meant to identify them are the ones who prosecute them for the crimes they committed. So it is very hard for law enforcement to switch the point of view, and see a perpetrator as a victim.”
(Lucía).

This double role thus complicates victim identification efforts, and makes it challenging to balance seeing individuals as both perpetrators and victims. As a result, “observers reported authorities inappropriately penalized victims solely for unlawful acts, including immigration offenses, committed as a direct result of being trafficked.” (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

An additional barrier relating to this double role is that law enforcement officials require the victims to provide information which can contribute to the police's investigation. They tend to prioritize their investigations over the formal identification of victims - and therefore only formally identify victims if they can provide the police with sufficient information on what happened. As María explained:

“This is a big obstacle in order to identify more victims. Most of them don't have information, or not enough information, in order to be identified. This is a big issue (...) because they [the police] have this double role. They have the role of identifying the victim, but they also have the role of investigating the facts.”

This was both confirmed by GRETA and the U.S. Department of State:

“Law enforcement authorities continue to require a high threshold of proof to identify a person as a victim of trafficking in human beings and, in practice, the identification is made conditional on the victim’s collaboration with the investigation or judicial proceedings. (...) identification of victims is an administrative act that must be independent of the victims’ statement during the proceedings.” (GRETA, 2023, p.52).

“Victims identified by NGOs or other entities outside of law enforcement were not included in national statistics if victims did not wish to speak with police.” (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Since formal victim identification is conditional on a victim’s cooperation in investigations and criminal proceedings, many victims are not formally assisted or identified by Spanish law enforcement.

One prominent issue which was not discussed in the interviews, but brought forward in several of the documents which were analyzed, is the underidentification of child victims. As stated by the Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE):

“Special Representative Johnstone noted low identification of child victims, and encouraged increased attention to child trafficking risks and proactive identification of minor victims across all forms of trafficking.” (OSCE, 2025).

The U.S. Department of State made a similar observation:

“Officials frequently classified cases of child trafficking under other crimes, lacked awareness regarding types of labor trafficking, and focused on organized crime over individual traffickers, resulting in the identification of few child victims.” (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Even though the global number of child victims of trafficking has tripled in recent years, the data from Spain does not reflect this reality (Castaño Reyero et al., 2022). Since 2018, the number of

identified child victims has decreased. However, “62% of women trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation were initiated into prostitution when they were children.” (Castaño Reyero et al., 2022, p.16). Since these conducts are rarely classified as human trafficking, these child victims do not receive the protection necessary in this context, and will not be included in the official statistics on human trafficking (Castaño Reyero et al., 2022).

When asked which improvements were most urgently needed in law enforcement, the respondents again emphasized training:

“They need to be trained to understand that human trafficking is more than sexual exploitation. Even among sexual exploitation, they only see prostitution, but there is more - pornography, sexual servitude, etc.” (María).

Although “training and refresher courses for members of police units in charge of the fight against trafficking in human beings are provided on an annual basis”, training specifically targeted at improving the law enforcement’s integral approach to all kinds of victims could be beneficial in enhancing their identification rates (UNNM, 2022, p.36).

To tackle some of the most pressing limitations within law enforcement, several respondents suggested structural reforms to reduce the conflicting interests police officers currently have:

“Maybe we should have special anti-trafficking units who are focusing on the victims. Not focused on the prosecution of the networks, not focusing on illegal migration, not focusing on smuggling. (...) The police have to be more victim-centered and not only [focused] on the criminal investigation” (Ana).

Additionally, to improve victim identification, several respondents wanted to move away from the police-centric system currently in place.

“The most important improvement would be to change the authority that does this identification. We need a multi agency team, like psychologists, different ministries, the Labor Ministry, the Foreign Affairs Ministry (...). We need these multi agency systems to

detect signs, to identify and protect, and to do all of this separately from reporting the crime” (Lucía).

“We have been advocating for years to have a more diverse identification team (...) to not condition everything to the police” (Clara).

GRETA’s evaluation report corresponds with the suggested improvements mentioned above, both regarding the limited focus on sex trafficking, and the police-centric identification system:

“GRETA notes that the above-mentioned figures of identified victims do not reflect the real scale of the phenomenon of human trafficking in Spain, due to the absence of a comprehensive approach to detecting all forms of human trafficking, as well as because the identification of victims remains under the responsibility of the law enforcement authorities and continues to be linked to the criminal proceedings” (GRETA, 2023, p.9).

The U.S. Department of State made a similar recommendation:

“Allow formal victim identification by and referral from entities other than law enforcement, including by labor inspectors, asylum case workers, health care professionals, and social workers, and NGOs.” (U.S. Department of State, 2024).

Moreover, GRETA has urged the Spanish authorities to “put in place and operationalise a NRM” (p.6), and to “examine the possibility of establishing an independent National Rapporteur or designating another independent mechanism for monitoring the antitrafficking activities of state institutions” (p.11). This same recommendation was made by the OSCE when the Special Representative visited Spain:

“She (...) recommended introducing a formal National Referral Mechanism (...) [which] would allow for more effective victim identification beyond law enforcement and comprehensive assistance for all victims, independent of their co-operation with criminal justice processes” (OSCE, 2025).

Public perception and the Spanish media

When asked about the general public's perception of human trafficking in Spain, several respondents agreed that there is limited public awareness of the crime, including its scope and the signs for victim identification:

“Before I started working in this field I had no real awareness of what trafficking was and what victims went through, and how high the numbers were.” (Clara).

“They don't know how to recognize signs and they don't know what to do and if they suspect that someone is a victim of human trafficking. It is not part of the public conversation.” (Lucía).

If citizens are aware of human trafficking, this awareness is mainly of exploitation of foreign women in the context of prostitution:

“We imagine mostly women who are forced into prostitution, and women who have travelled, so it's an immigrant. We are thinking about people who are strictly under control. We don't think about how many other scenarios we have when we talk about human trafficking. It doesn't only have to be with criminal organizations, it doesn't only have to do with sexual exploitation, it doesn't only have to do with foreign people. It's really difficult to make them understand that, people don't really think that this can happen.” (María).

“So here in Spain, when you talk about human trafficking, everyone is talking about prostitution, so everyone in the prostitution context is a victim of human trafficking, but then, no one out of this context is a victim of human trafficking, but because they don't know what a victim of human trafficking actually is.” (Lucía).

The role of the media in shaping this public perception was viewed negatively by the respondents - attributing the limited public awareness to the media only sharing superficial headlines, or using

confusing terminology. The media tend to confuse human trafficking with human smuggling, for example:

“They are confusing and combining human trafficking with smuggling, and maybe you see something about a case of human trafficking and when you read it on the news, then you realize that they are not talking about human trafficking and they are talking about a human smuggling case.” (María).

This aligns with observations of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), as published in their Toolkit to combat trafficking in persons:

“Journalists and media outlets are not adequately aware of the trafficking phenomenon or do not have sufficient understanding of the dimensions of the problem. As a result, some media coverage confuses the issue with others, such as migrant smuggling.” (UNODC, 2008, p.513).

Several respondents criticized the media for sharing merely superficial headlines, instead of conducting proper investigations on the full story:

“It's so superficial, what they're reporting. You know, like, “six traffickers convicted and they're all women that are migrants.” (...) I was like, what's the story behind that? (...) It's meaningless reporting that.” (Sofía).

“What I see is that the media reacts to investigations, or they react when sentences are public - they are not proactive. They just show the result of an investigation, or the result of a sentence, which has an impact, but they are not trying to understand what happened. What are the causes, how did it happen, and why? I think they should have more interest and try to show why these kinds of situations happen.” (María).

A research article published in 2022 analyzed the coverage of human trafficking in the Spanish media (Cabrera-Rodríguez & Antolínez-Merchán, 2022). The main findings align with what respondents expressed in the interviews regarding this superficialness:

“The news reports show police raids or the dismantling of networks for trafficking and smuggling women for sexual exploitation, addressing the specific event, “exaggeratedly prioritising the criminological, police and judicial approach, and those associated with rescue and revictimisation”, detached from the causes and context that give rise to it, as a social problem.” (Cabrera-Rodríguez & Antolínez-Merchán, 2022, p.107).

Additionally, the media tend to highlight one dominant narrative, mainly discussing human trafficking in the context of prostitution, while neglecting other forms of trafficking:

“Most of the time we think of the stereotype of trafficking, speaking of the media, like, women in chains, and behind the bars, like these media campaigns...” (Sofía).

“Whenever we try to talk about the victims, sometimes people focus too much on the victims, or on women who are in prostitution right? And not on the other side.” (Clara).

This aligns with Cabrera-Rodríguez and Antolínez-Merchán’s findings:

“With regard to the focus of the news, human trafficking for sexual exploitation continues to dominate media coverage, which displaces or renders invisible other forms of trafficking.” (Cabrera-Rodríguez & Antolínez-Merchán, 2022, p.106).

As a result, citizens can be left confused, or develop stereotypical views of what human trafficking is:

“If the media is not using the terms correctly, it can create even more confusion for the citizens and for the general public.” (Elena).

“It doesn’t give space to think about other kinds of scenarios. We are all the time thinking about the same images when we think about victims of human trafficking, we always think about transnational human trafficking, combining human trafficking with human smuggling, thinking they are the same. But we don’t think about other cases, for example Spanish people who have been caught in Spain.” (María).

These misconceptions not only limit awareness and understanding, but they also reduce the opportunity of victim identification by citizens who may internalize these stereotypical narratives. The explanation provided for the limited quality of human trafficking news is a combination of inadequate resources, work overload for the journalist, and a lack of specialized training on this topic. As Cabrera-Rodríguez and Antolínez-Merchán explain:

“The scarcity of resources, the need to obtain information quickly, the journalist’s training, accessibility, etc., are elements that lead to an excessive use of institutional sources, which, in this case, are those derived from the State Security Forces and Corps.” (Cabrera-Rodríguez & Antolínez-Merchán, 2022, p.107).

These institutional sources report on events, such as police raids, but fail to go in depth on the bigger context of the issue, thereby contributing to the superficialness of the media. These findings thus align closely with Framing Theory, as the way the public perceives human trafficking has heavily been shaped by the communication of specific frames regarding this issue (Arowolo, 2017). The general public has developed stereotypical views regarding human trafficking, mainly considering foreign female victims of sexual exploitation. As a result, other types of trafficking and other types of victims are marginalized, which may limit the identification of individuals who do not fit the dominant frame.

When asked specifically about the role the media can have in helping citizens identify victims, respondents gave mixed answers. Several respondents pointed out that due to the media not reporting human trafficking cases properly, the general public is left confused and wrongly informed - therefore not sufficiently educated on recognizing the signs of trafficking:

“I think it helps us to know something is happening, but I still don’t think general society feels confident to help in the fight against human trafficking. We know that it’s something that is happening, but I don’t have the tools or I don’t see that I have to have tools to help if I see something.” (Ana).

However, several respondents were cautious of involving the public in victim identification, questioning whether the media should educate the public on recognizing signs:

“I question citizens’ engagements in general as a strategy. I’m not saying citizens should never get involved, but you’re putting people at risk when you do.” (Sofia).

“I also think it’s dangerous to ask the public to identify these kinds of situations. Because they are very risky. (...) Sometimes these victims have a very complicated situation that cannot be solved by simply taking them out. (...) So I think citizens’ participation, the general public participating in this kind of detection is very risky.” (Clara).

Instead of expecting citizens to help the police identify victims of trafficking, two respondents suggested focusing the education on the demand side of the services which leads to these individuals being trafficked and exploited, since “we tend to focus less on the consumption; who is buying the services?” (Clara). Like one respondent explained:

“I think we have to be aware that trafficking is everywhere around us. I can see prostitution, like that is the most obvious thing, but where are you buying your clothes from? Where are you buying your fruit from? Like how my daily activities, or how I interact with the world, can make persons more vulnerable to trafficking? (...) So maybe our role is not that of identifying, but not contributing to the exploitation of people.” (Ana).

Thus, although the literature argues how increased media coverage and awareness of human trafficking can be beneficial for victim identification, the respondents highlighted the risks empowering untrained citizens may pose for victims. Therefore, an alternative solution may emerge by shifting the responsibility from victim detection to conscious consumption.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate why Spain's number of identified trafficking victims is considerably low, despite Spain being one of the top destination countries for immigration within the EU. Having conducted qualitative research in the form of interviews and document analysis, Spain's victim identification mechanisms have been analyzed thoroughly, specifically in the context of the health sector, law enforcement, and the media.

Regarding the healthcare sector, it can be concluded that human trafficking victims are severely underdetected by healthcare professionals. This is a result of both structural constraints, such as continuous time pressure and language barriers, as well as a lack of training that the professionals receive on recognizing signs of trafficking. The challenges that arose in both the primary and secondary data align closely with Lipsky's Street-Level Bureaucracy theory (1969). Since the 'street-level bureaucrats' - in this context, the healthcare professionals - operate under conditions of limited resources and high demand for their services, they exercise a high level of discretion in their work to perform their job duties as efficiently as possible. By relying on standardized and efficient routines, their ability to properly assess their patients and potentially identify trafficking victims is severely constrained. Interestingly, the lack of institutional authority that healthcare professionals experience in formally identifying victims was not highlighted as a significant barrier to victim identification - rather, the lack of resources and training available to the healthcare professionals were indicated as the areas most crucially in need of improvement, in order to equip them to refer potential trafficking cases to the authorities.

As for the structural limitations within the law enforcement sector, the absence of a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) strengthens the police-centric identification system in place, preventing other actors from formally identifying trafficking victims. Even though the respondents did not highlight healthcare professionals as actors who need this institutional authority, the involvement of other actors such as labor inspectors, NGOs, and social workers would be beneficial to increase Spain's victim identification rates.

Currently, only law enforcement officials have the formal authority to identify victims of human trafficking, yet this sector continues to face significant structural challenges that complicate their identification efforts. The findings from Q2 align closely with Street-Level Bureaucracy theory (Lipsky, 1969). These findings highlight how law enforcement officials tend to rely on stereotypes and simplifications in performing their job duties, resulting in them directing their

identification efforts on women in the prostitution sector, overlooking other forms of exploitation and other types of victims. An additional factor leading to the prioritization of sex trafficking cases over labor trafficking ones is that forced labor is not criminalized and labor exploitation is not legally defined in Spain, limiting law enforcement officials in the identification and prosecution of labor trafficking cases. As stated in a report by the UNICEF Spanish Committee:

“The mere criminalisation of the crime of trafficking is not sufficient to put an end to the phenomenon. To do so, it is necessary to criminalise other offences related to human trafficking, such as slavery, servitude, forced labour, forced marriage, forced prostitution and sexual assault, among others.” (Castaño Reyero, Barrio Lema, Díez Velasco, Maffei Pacheco, & Olaguibel Echevarría-Torres, 2022, p.14).

Moreover, since the officers are expected to combine different demanding tasks - such as protecting borders and investigating crimes - this can create a conflict of interest, resulting in the criminalization of potential trafficking victims and the prioritization of prosecution over protection. Thus, these findings show that discretionary power, shaped by structural limitations and institutional gaps, reinforces systemic bias in the identification of human trafficking victims.

Although both the primary and secondary data show incremental progress and improvements regarding the identification of trafficking victims for the purpose of labor exploitation, there is a need for structural reforms: implementing multi-agency identification teams, training to combat existing biases based on outdated stereotypes, and potentially specialized anti-trafficking units that prioritize protection over prosecution.

Lastly, the Spanish general public seems to have limited awareness about human trafficking - including its scope, complexity, and signs to recognize potential victims. The dominant knowledge of human trafficking is on foreign female victims who were trafficked for prostitution, which - in line with Framing Theory - can be attributed to the dominant frames communicated by the Spanish media. The media mainly prioritized stories of sex trafficking, excluding the diversity of other forms of trafficking and victims which do not match the stereotype. Moreover, the media have been criticized for confusing trafficking with migrant smuggling, leading to misinformation and misrepresentation, and for merely reporting events instead of investigating the broader context in depth. The stories often leave out the root causes of human

trafficking for example, merely reporting on a specific event without connecting it to the broader picture. As a result, the general public has a simplified and incomplete view of human trafficking, is undereducated on its complexity and its different forms, and is not equipped to recognize its signs in potential victims.

Contrary to previous literature, the respondents did not encourage the general public to participate in victim identification, as they were cautious of the risks associated with unequipped individuals trying to intervene. Thus, although it can be concluded that the Spanish public is not actively involved in victim identification due to their limited knowledge and awareness of the problem, this is not necessarily an area of improvement. The Spanish media can however still play an important role in raising awareness and educating the public on human trafficking by encouraging the public to reduce their demand for exploitative services in various sectors, and to encourage ethical consumption.

In summary, this study finds that the underidentification of trafficking victims in Spain is a result of a combination of structural limitations and societal stereotypes and biases. Addressing these issues requires structural reforms that prioritize training, shifting away from the police-centric identification system, and improving the legal frameworks, particularly regarding forced labor. Moreover, more research is needed regarding the identification of child victims in Spain, and why Spain's data on child trafficking victims specifically does not reflect the global trends (Castaño Reyero et al., 2022). Additionally, further research on involving the general public in victim identification - either in Spain or elsewhere - could be useful to identify safe and ethical ways to engage the public.

While this study contributes to a broader understanding of the challenges with trafficking victim identification in Spain, several limitations must be acknowledged. The limited sample size of six interviews may limit the generalizability of the findings nationwide, not fully capturing Spain's diversity in anti-trafficking efforts. Moreover, the document analysis relied on reports which were publicly available and written in English, excluding possible developments, perspectives, and data that were not captured in these specific documents.

Despite these limitations, this paper is a meaningful contribution to a broader understanding of why Spain experiences a large gap between estimated and formally identified victims of human trafficking. By discussing the structural constraints in both the healthcare and law enforcement sectors, as well as the Spanish media, attention is drawn to areas where structural

reforms are necessary. The findings of this study contribute therefore to the academic debate on victim identification, while also providing concrete evidence to support policy change.

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Annex I: Interview guide

Theme 1: healthcare professionals

- In your experience, how often do healthcare professionals encounter potential trafficking victims in Spain? And what is your professional opinion on how these encounters are handled?
- How would you describe the current level of training healthcare providers receive on identifying and supporting trafficking victims?
- Are there specific barriers you've observed that prevent healthcare professionals from reporting or referring to trafficking cases?
- What improvements or changes do you think are most urgently needed in this area?

Theme 2: categorization bias

- Based on your experience, which forms of trafficking are most commonly identified and prioritized by Spanish law enforcement? Why?
- Do you believe other forms of trafficking (such as labor exploitation) are sufficiently recognized or investigated?
- What improvements or changes do you think are most urgently needed to help law enforcement broaden their identification efforts?

Theme 3: public perception & media reporting

- In your opinion, how well-informed is the general public about the signs and scope of human trafficking?
- What do you think of the quality and frequency of human trafficking news?
- How visible do you think human trafficking is in the Spanish media today? Do you think it helps citizens in victim identification?
- How can the media or public awareness efforts be improved to help victim identification?
- Is there anything I haven't asked you which you think is important to mention?

Annex II: IBEI ethical approval form



MA Thesis Proposal Ethical Review Form

Student Information

Full name: Anjuli Pool

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Program of Study: Erasmus Mundus Program in Public Policy

Research Overview

Tentative Thesis Title: "Safe Haven or Blind Spot? Understanding Spain's Human Trafficking Data"

Research Question(s): Why are the reported human trafficking rates in Spain one of the lowest in the EU, despite having the second-biggest immigration rates?

Research Objectives: Understand Spain's relatively low human trafficking rates and trafficking victims identification processes

Methodology (including research design, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques): Qualitative case study focusing on the role of healthcare, law enforcement, and media. Primary data collected through expert interviews, and secondary data collected through content analysis.

- Interviews: semi-structured with an interview guide.
 - Participants include employees of NGOs working in the human trafficking field in Spain.
 - The interviews will last in between 30-60 minutes.
 - The interviews will be recorded and transcribed (upon consent) and will be coded to highlight the roles of healthcare, law enforcement and media.
 - Analysis: thematic analysis
- Document analysis: analysis of policy documents, institutional reports, training manuals, media coverage, and NGO publications
 - Goal: explore structural and institutional patterns that relate to human trafficking victim identification in Spain
 - Analysis: thematic and frame analysis – to discover patterns and establish media narratives

Ethical Considerations:**1. Does your research involve human participants? Yes.**

Human participants will be asked to participate in an interview, which will last up to 60 minutes.

2. Does your research involve collecting, using, or disclosing sensitive data or information? (Yes/No)

Not necessarily – the objective of the interviews is to understand the role of healthcare, law enforcement and media in victim identification of Spain. I want to explore the experts' insights and experiences on this, and I want to ask them to share their perceptions on these roles.

3. Does your research involve vulnerable populations? No.**4. Is there a potential for physical, psychological, or emotional harm to the research participants? No.****5. Are there any additional ethical considerations specific to your field (e.g., International Security or International Development)? No.****Informed Consent and Data Protection:**

1. Explain how you will obtain informed consent from the research participants (if applicable): Prior to the interview I will send them the informed consent form, asking them to sign it and send it back to me.
2. Describe the measures you will take to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants and their data: all answers will remain anonymous – I will make sure the data collected will not be able to be traced back to the participants. If I use quotes in my final paper I will use pseudonyms. The real names of the participants will not be shared with anyone, neither will the recordings or transcripts of the interviews.

Declaration:

I declare that the information provided in this form is accurate and complete to the best of my knowledge. I understand that providing false or misleading information may result in the rejection of my thesis proposal or other disciplinary actions. If any ethical considerations arise during the course of my research, I commit to informing my supervisor and the IBEI ethics coordinator immediately.

Student Signature: _____

Date: 15/05/2025

Please submit this completed form to **Tutku Ayhan (tayhan@ibei.org)** for further review by the IBEI ethics coordinator.

This section is to be completed after review only
Thank you for your application. We have completed the review process and can offer a favorable opinion, contingent upon the supervisor’s continued guidance in the research and development of interview questions, as well as the student’s use of the provided informed consent form during participant recruitment. Name of reviewer: Tutku Ayhan Date: 20 May 2025