

“Inhumane”: Quantitative textual analysis of a qualitative survey on gender violence among victims of international human trafficking

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1. Introduction

Researchers often employ focus groups to gauge more information and insight on the phenomena they are studying (CDC, 2024). The qualitative interviews coming from this kind of research offer personal perceptions and experiences from stakeholders, thus providing breeding ground for novel interpretations of results that come from solely quantitative analyses. While usually either audiovisual records or their transcripts are employed to evaluate what is discussed during a focus group, in the last few years, several computational techniques, including machine learning and generative pre-trained transformers (GPTs), have helped develop quantitative analysis methods that process massive textual datasets (Nielbo et al, 2024). Text mining has been used to examine and find key themes in group interviews' transcripts to give objectivity to their analysis and natural language processing (NLP) techniques are used to first gather information on common themes, as well as to inform on the feelings risen from the text via more advanced sentiment analysis tools (i.e., Payton et al., 2018).

In this context, the aim of this work is to examine the transcript of a focus group about gender violence among victims of international human trafficking, using two text mining techniques. The focus group involved six key stakeholders working in the third sector with expertise on the matter – either by working with victims of gender violence, or by working with victims of human trafficking, or both – as well as a moderator. The stakeholders work in the province of Palermo (Italy) and refer to their experiences in this specific territory.

2. Human Trafficking and Gender-Based Violence

Human trafficking has been defined by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in the Palermo Protocol as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit” (UN, 2000). Violence and fraudulent promises of education and job opportunities are used to force or lure possible victims (UNODC, 2024).

No region in the world is exempt from this phenomenon, and people of all sexes and ages have been found to fall victims of this crime. The most significant transregional flow – i.e., from one region of the world to another, in contrast to domestic trafficking that happens within a certain region – concerns African people (UNODC, 2022). Moreover, 68% of trafficked individuals are moved by either governance-type crime groups or business-like crime groups: indeed, these kinds of organizations are able to traffic more people than individual traffickers can, as well as to retain them for longer periods of time, likely due to the extent of the violence used to coerce them (UNODC, 2022).

The detection of cases of human trafficking more often than not happens because of proactive

actions of the victims who manage to exit exploitation and thus self-report to the authorities: 41% of cases arise from victims' actions while only 9% emerge from other institutions such as hospitals, schools or NGOs (UNODC, 2022). Self-reporting can, however, be hindered by the perceptions of the victims themselves. Trafficked individuals struggle with identifying themselves as such due to psychological mechanisms such as denial or repression, inability to see themselves as victims, as well as lack of knowledge of their rights and the perception that their exploitation is happening because of their irregular migration status (Bloch and McKay, 2013; Van Meeteren and Hiah, 2020).

The exploitation of victims of human trafficking, thus, assumes several forms: in 2020, 38.8% of the detected cases were victims of forced labor and 38.7% were involved with sexual exploitation (UNODC, 2022). Women and girls constitute 60% of all detected victims. This statistic is followed by what can be found in case summaries: women are three times more likely to experience violence than men¹, which includes both physical and sexual violence (UNODC, 2022).

The venues in which this exploitation happens also matter. In the court case summaries for human trafficking in 2012-2022, 11% of victims were reported to work in the streets, while 18% were employed in apartments supplied by traffickers and 19% in brothels (UNODC, 2022).

Given this premise, the existence of a connection between human trafficking, gender-based violence (GBV) and sex work is clear. Sex work is defined as the supply of sexual encounters in exchange of money. Although many scholars debate on whether sex work is the result of women's exploitation or an act of sexual freedom, it has been recognized that there is a structural component to the exploitation and violence experienced by sex workers, with migrants, people living in poverty and women of color more likely to be abused than their white middle-to-upper class counterparts (Connelly, 2016). Even policies and laws decriminalizing prostitution still exclude migrants from their protection. For example, the Prostitution Reform Act issued in New Zealand in 2003 – that aimed to eliminate all laws against consensual sex work, as well as to improve workers' conditions by protecting them from exploitation and by promoting their well-being, health and safety – excluded migrants because it considered them as “seasonal workers” (Armstrong and Abel, 2020).

The three components of GBV – power, privilege and positionality² – are also shared with human trafficking. Power is exercised through violence by traffickers to force people into sex work; privilege and positionality determine the relationship between trafficker and trafficked (Ali and Rogers, 2023).

3. The focus group: the transcript and methods of analysis

The focus group whose transcript was analyzed in this study involved seven people: one moderator and six key stakeholders. The stakeholders included two experts in migration studies and agents in the third sector in the province of Palermo (Italy): two of them work within an association that provides psycho-social assistance to migrants to promote human rights and to fight GBV amongst victims of sex trafficking; another one works in an association whose aim is to contrast all GBV, and intimate partner violence in particular; the last participant in the focus group is a lawyer who works in an association that offers legal help to migrants.

The information sought during the interviews included: the victims' background, both in terms

¹ Court case summaries report that 31% of men have not experienced violence during their trafficking, whereas 79% of women are reported to have experienced extreme or explicit physical violence or threats and psychological violence (UNODC, 2022).

² In the literature on GBV power is defined as the ability to control whether an individual gets access to resources and opportunities as well as the ability to prevent another individual to make their own decisions. Privilege is due to the position of individuals in hypothetical hierarchies and it's strictly related to positionality, which refers to the placement within relationships themselves (Ali and Rogers, 2023).

socio-demographic characteristics and migration history; whether migrant victims of GBV had peculiar characteristics with respect to Italian victims; the profile of traffickers and perpetrators; what compels victims to report the abuse.

The record of the conversation was transcribed so that the textual analysis could be performed. It was kept in Italian to maintain the original language and vernacular used during the focus group. The text ended up being made of 341 entries (i.e., number of times the conversation shifted from one person to another) for a total of 13,266 words.

Prior to the analysis, the text was processed as following: numbers, common and uncommon stopwords, punctuation and extra spaces were removed; then it was transformed to find the stem of the words. After pre-processing, an exploratory wordcloud was created to check for the most common words in the text. Later a sentiment analysis was conducted. In this case, Saif Mohammad’s NRC Emotion lexicon was used (Mohammad and Turney, 2013). This lexicon associates a list of words with eight basic emotions – anger, fear, anticipation, trust, surprise, sadness, joy, and disgust – and whether the overall sentiment is positive or negative. The choice for this particular lexicon was due to its availability in Italian.

The text was then evaluated qualitatively in conjunction with the quantitative results to gauge more information about human trafficking from the perspective of operators in the third sector.

The textual data used in this work was examined using R version 4.3.2 (R Core Team, 2023), and the packages tm version 0.7-13 (Feinerer and Hornik, 2024), wordcloud version 2.6 (Fellows, 2018), and syuzhet version 1.0.7 (Jockers, 2015).

4. Results

After the pre-processing of the transcript of the record of the focus group, a first exploratory wordcloud³ was created (see Fig. 1). This graph offers a preview of the key concepts connected to the experiences lived by the victims of human trafficking. Here are some of the themes arisen:

- Violence and abuse: words such as *violenza*, *carnefici*, *disumane*, *vittima*, *agghiacciante* (i.e., violence, perpetrator, inhumane, victim, harrowing) highlight what victims of human trafficking live through;
- Women and minors: *donna*, *bambini*, *scuola* (i.e., woman, children, school) point to the peculiar vulnerability of these groups;
- Trafficking and exploitation: *attività*, *denunce*, *rete*, *problema*, *sessuale*, *clienti*, *strada*, *manager*, *sistemica*, *complesso* (i.e., activity, criminal report, network, problem, sexual, clients, street, manager, systemic, complex) all refer to the criminal nature of human trafficking and to the different forms of exploitation victims are subject to;
- Origin and destination: words like *ghanesi*, *cultura*, *mediare*, *italiano*, *nazionalità* (i.e., Ghanaian, culture, mediate, Italian, nationality) indicate how human trafficking is tied to migration flows and culture.

³ The wordcloud in Fig. 1 is in Italian because it is the language of the text.

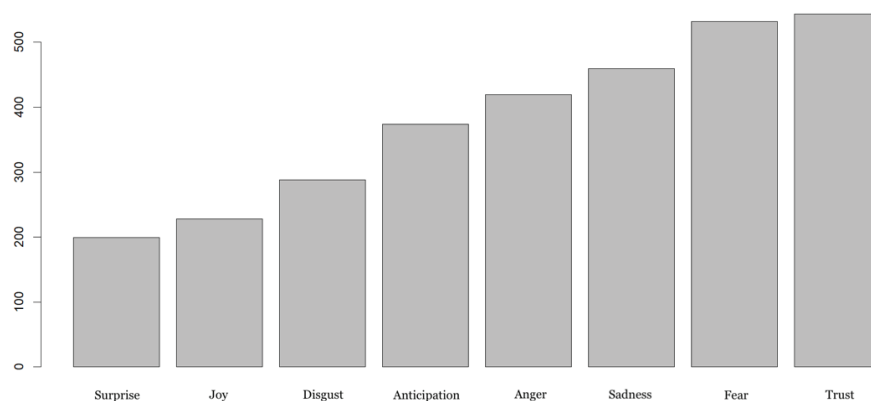
Fig 1 Wordcloud of the transcript of a focus group record



As for the results of the sentiment analysis (see Fig 2), they show a significant prevalence of negative emotions, such as sadness, fear, anger and disgust. This reflects the gravity of what victims of human trafficking experience, often including abuse, exploitation and physical and psychological violence.

The fact that trust is the most common sentiment is imputable to two mechanisms, one opposite the other. On the one hand, trust refers to the deception and tricks used to lure victims into trafficking, which leads them to the loss of autonomy and agency; on the other hand, trust is the foundation of the rapport between operators and victims seeking a way out.

Fig 2 Sentiment Analysis Results



5. Discussion

The results of the quantitative analysis – i.e. the main themes arisen from the common words in the text, in conjunction with the leading questions asked to the members of the focus group – were then used as guidelines to support the qualitative text analysis. Thus, several pieces of information on human trafficking were gathered:

- *Victims' background.* Words in the text (translated): nationality, culture, culturally, educat*, school, minors, woman, Ghanaian, country
 - Socio-demographic characteristics: human trafficking victims are usually from poor and remote villages, mostly presenting a low educational level. Even when trying to get out, education and independence – essential to be free of the exploitation – are rarely sought after. General distrust between different communities – heightened when people of different genders are present – hinders the possibility for women to even learn the language spoken in

- the place they live in.
- Migration background: while most victims of human trafficking in the province of Palermo do have a migration history, significative differences are found between ethnicities. Ghanaians, contrary to their Nigerian counterparts, are rarely involved in illicit activities. Most activities involving solicitation are, however, managed by criminal organizations while the “workers” are from Nigeria, Côte d’Ivoire, and Sri Lanka.
- *Peculiar characteristics of GBV among migrant women.* Words in the text (translated): network, victim, trafficking, children, school, perpetrators, inhumane, systemic, perceptions. The victims of human trafficking discussed in the focus group share a history of migration, which further increases their vulnerability to exploitation by criminal organizations. These crime groups present a highly organized and hierarchical structure, particularly evident when it comes to the Nigerian mob, which presents a pyramid configuration from chiefs to sex workers, managed by group leaders that also control contact with clients. This organization is a parastatal system, which offers services, assistance and aid – mainly monetarily. The systemic violence as well as women’s exploitation in the street become harrowing experiences that cause the loss of identity in victims.
- *Asking for help.* Words in the text (translated): resignation, violence, normal, trust, police report, mediation, complex, relationships, sexual. It is usually a mixture of factors that pushes women into asking for help, such as experience of abuse and violence, precarious health conditions, economic and social difficulties, a need for legal support and social protection. “Normal” is quite often used in the text: it sometimes happens that because of cultural reasons, and because of the victims’ lower educational level, they lack awareness about their rights and cognizance about the nature of what they are going through. The very first moment they try to ask for help, the aid relationship might fail: on the one hand, these people come from a complex system, made of abuse and exploitation, so they do not report traffickers (mostly because of fear); on the other hand, because they are already asking for help, building trust with the operators is crucial. But building trust could be hindered both by linguistic and cultural barriers. While the therapeutic value of narration is often employed to assist in case of intimate partner violence, this tool cannot always be used for victims of human trafficking because of the complexity and gravity of the abuse. However, long-term aid measures that focus on the autonomy of people trying to get out, such as job orientation (that also offers psychological and economic independence), can counter the forced subordination to traffickers.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this work was to use quantitative text analysis tools to evaluate the record’s transcript of a focus group on GBV among victims of sex trafficking. This analysis highlighted how these victims mainly come from low socio-economic environments, heavily characterized by poverty, low education and multi-problematic families. In these contexts, migration is sought after for better living conditions and opportunities. Here it is easy that traffickers often affiliated with highly organized crime groups exploit these disadvantages in their favor.

The focus group showed how human trafficking is a systemic phenomenon, powered by less than effective migration laws and lack of care from statal institutions. Indeed, even though the conversation was centered around a criminal act, the lack of mentions to “police”, “institutions” and “justice” – even though a lawyer was part of the group – really stands out. The only time institutions were mentioned at all was to highlight how very little interested in the phenomenon institutions are.

Using advanced methodologies such as text mining lends a hand into understanding and outlining underlying dynamics to complex phenomena discussed in focus groups. Visualizing texts through

wordclouds and sentiment analysis tools allows for a clearer interpretation of results.

This work, of course, does not lack limitations. The analysis is mainly exploratory and does not deal with more complex text analysis techniques that also study the relationship between words or methods that show how the tone shifts during the whole conversation. These methods could, however, represent a possibility of further development. Moreover, the focus group could be replicated, thus involving operators working in other provinces and members of governmental institutions to also gather their insights on the dynamics of human trafficking.

Zealand

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