

THE PROTECTION AND REHABILITATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING VICTIMS IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL VULNERABILITY: THE CASE OF MARAJÓ ISLAND

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ABSTRACT: This research examines the concept of human trafficking and the measures taken to combat it. It emphasizes the importance of promoting prevention, protection, and punishment in order to achieve a lasting impact in the fight against human trafficking. The study also underscores the need for rehabilitation measures for those who have suffered violence within trafficking networks, highlighting the role of programs and projects that support the social reintegration of survivors. Through the analysis of the context of Marajó Island, the research demonstrates the persistence of these violations in contemporary society, with particular attention to the sexual exploitation of women and children. The findings reinforce the need to raise awareness and improve access to information for all members of society.

Keywords: Human Trafficking. Sexual Exploitation. Victim Protection. Rehabilitation. Marajó Island.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Victims of human trafficking are often confined not only physically but also psychologically, trapped in a continuous cycle of abuse and exploitation. This study examines this reality, identifying the complexities and challenges involved in combating human trafficking, with particular attention to the role of protection and reintegration strategies for victims.

Although the lack of visibility and discussion around this issue remains a crucial factor, nations worldwide have joined efforts to develop treaties and agreements to protect and rehabilitate these vulnerable individuals. According to the United Nations (UN), human trafficking involves:

"The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability, or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation" (UNITED NATIONS, 2000).

One important context examined in this study is exploitation reported on Marajó Island, where geographic distance from urban centers and unequal access to public services may contribute to social vulnerability. Limited access to information and awareness of civil rights may increase some individuals' vulnerability to different forms of exploitation, which, according to previous research, may also occur within family or community contexts (VIEIRA, 2011; MORAES, 2011; NUNES; FILARD, 2024).

Therefore, this study seeks not only to expose this concerning situation, but also to highlight existing protection strategies and ensure rehabilitation for those whose lives have been most deeply affected.

2. HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Sexual exploitation, particularly of women and children, is a complex issue associated with a combination of social, economic, cultural, and gender-related factors that may contribute to increased vulnerability to this form of trafficking (GOMES; SANI, 2023).

Undeniably, gender inequality is one of the factors discussed in relation to vulnerability to sexual exploitation. In many societies, women continue to experience discrimination and remain subject to gender-based inequality, facing barriers to equal opportunities and rights. Consequently, these inequalities may contribute to economic and social marginalization and may increase vulnerability to different forms of exploitation (AGÊNCIA SENADO, 2023).

Anna Carolina da Conceição Aureliano (AGÊNCIA SENADO, 2023), a specialist in International Relations, contextualizes and defines the issue:

"It is a crime with a gender perspective. Socially constructed, culturally accepted, and historically reproduced gender inequalities are definitively reflected in the context of human trafficking, making it one of the worst forms of gender-based violence," concludes the specialist.

Another significant factor in this discussion is the lack of education and opportunities available to these individuals. Difficulties in accessing education and employment opportunities may constitute contextual factors associated with increased social vulnerability (VIEIRA, 2011; FAPESPA, 2024).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: INSIGHTS FROM PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Before presenting the case study on Marajó Island, it is important to consider the findings of previous research on this topic. Three main themes from the existing literature guide this paper: the intersection of culture and vulnerability on the island, the impact of stigma on victims once their cases become public, and the crucial role of rehabilitation.

3.1. Studies Written About Marajó Itself

Some researchers have conducted field research in Marajó to study this problem. Vieira (2011), in a master's thesis in Education at the Federal University of Pará, interviewed students at a riverside school about how they understood the sexual exploitation happening on the "balsas" (ferries that connect Marajó's towns) and how it affected their schooling. Her findings showed that young people on the island already had their own ways of describing the exploitation before any government program arrived to formally identify or address it.

More recently, Nunes and Filard (2024) examined the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents on Marajó Island, discussing the relationship between the protection network and the exploitation network. Their study also highlights the importance of understanding the

social context surrounding these cases and avoiding interpretations that attribute responsibility for exploitation to children and adolescents themselves (NUNES; FILARD, 2024).

At the same time, Moraes (2011) conducted an ethnography of a riverine community in the Marajó region, describing everyday life, work, and social organization in a community whose realities may be underreported in external sources because of limited access to the region and difficulties in collecting information (MORAES, 2011).

3.2. Why Victims Get Stigmatized Instead of Protected

A second recurring finding concerns what happens to victims once a case becomes public. Venson and Pedro (2014) show that Brazilian discourse about trafficking has long been built around an image of the victim as helpless and passive, which may not adequately reflect the different circumstances through which exploitation occurs.

Blanchette and Silva (2018) studied Brazilian representations of human trafficking and demonstrated how representations surrounding trafficking may contribute to the stigmatization of groups already experiencing social vulnerability. This is directly relevant to the stigmatization problem discussed later in this paper.

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3.3. Why Rehabilitation Cannot Be an Afterthought

García-Vázquez and Meneses-Falcón (2024), in a systematic review, examined the impact of human trafficking on sexual, social, physical, and psychological health and highlighted the importance of social health to the well-being of trafficking victims (GARCÍA-VÁZQUEZ; MENESES-FALCÓN, 2024).

Therefore, rehabilitation should be considered an important component of victim protection rather than only as a later stage following the end of exploitation.

4. CASE STUDY – MARAJÓ ISLAND

Case Study Methodology: This case study was developed through qualitative bibliographical and documentary research into the political, environmental, and socioeconomic context of Marajó Island, seeking to understand the recurring factors associated with human trafficking and the obstacles to implementing effective measures to combat the exploitation of vulnerable groups living on the island.

Sources were selected for their direct relevance to human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and social vulnerability in the Marajó region, using search terms such as "tráfico de pessoas," "exploração sexual," "Ilha de Marajó," "vulnerabilidade social," and their equivalents. Inclusion was prioritized for sources with identifiable academic or institutional authorship, current publication dates, and direct thematic relevance to the study; sources lacking clear authorship or institutional affiliation, or addressing unrelated subjects, were excluded from the analysis.

The research consulted academic repositories and databases including SciELO and the institutional repository of the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), as well as official channels such as the Brazilian federal government's portal (gov.br), the Agência Senado news service, and publications of the United Nations and the World Tourism Organization.

Peer-reviewed articles and official or institutional documents served as the primary basis for conceptual and theoretical claims. Journalistic sources were consulted mainly to document specific, verifiable events rather than as the primary basis for theoretical arguments.

The material gathered, spanning publications from 1995 to 2024, was analyzed qualitatively. Recurring themes (namely vulnerability, stigma, and rehabilitation) were identified through their repeated presence across the sources consulted, and were used to

4.1. Context and Challenges

Located in northern Brazil, in the State of Pará, Marajó Island is the largest fluvial and maritime island in the world, surrounded by water on all sides. It is also an ecologically significant ecosystem of importance for the Amazon region (MORIM, 2014).

The region has been the subject of academic and governmental discussions concerning situations of social vulnerability and the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (NUNES; FILARD, 2024). However, these issues should not be understood as characteristics of the population as a whole, but rather as specific social problems identified within the region.

Accordingly, the popular term "sex tourism" should be understood within the broader discussion of commercial sexual exploitation associated with tourism. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 1995) describes sex tourism as travel involving the structures and networks of the tourism sector with the purpose of facilitating commercial sexual relations

between tourists and residents of the destination. From an economic perspective, socioeconomic difficulties may intersect with situations in which individuals experience increased vulnerability to exploitation. However, socioeconomic difficulties should not be interpreted as a direct cause of sexual exploitation. Rather, such conditions may constitute contextual factors associated with particular situations of vulnerability (GOMES; SANI, 2023).

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the historical and social context of the archipelago. Difficulties related to infrastructure and access to public services are relevant dimensions when examining social vulnerability in the region. These conditions, however, should be understood as contextual factors rather than as direct explanations for the occurrence of sexual exploitation or human trafficking (FAPESPA, 2024).

5. REHABILITATION OF VICTIMS

5.1. The Problem of Victim Stigmatization

“Stigmatization” is defined as the act of negatively marking something or someone. This attribution of characteristics associated with social disadvantage results in discrimination and the marginalization of countless individuals, making them more susceptible to violations of their most fundamental personal rights (BLANCHETTE; SILVA, 2018).

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The stigma associated with trafficking may interfere with the recognition of individuals as victims and may affect their access to protection and support. For this reason, approaches to trafficking should prioritize protection and avoid narratives that place responsibility for exploitation on the victim (BLANCHETTE; SILVA, 2018).

Also, the trauma experienced by victims of human trafficking may affect their social relationships and sense of security. Recent systematic research has identified social, psychological, physical, and sexual consequences associated with trafficking, reinforcing the importance of comprehensive support after exploitation (GARCÍA-VÁZQUEZ; MENESES-FALCÓN, 2024).

Furthermore, the interruption of education and professional activities during the period of exploitation may affect victims' future opportunities, meaning that rehabilitation and social reintegration require attention not only to immediate protection but also to education and

employment (VIEIRA, 2011), as well as health and social support (GARCÍA-VÁZQUEZ; MENESES-FALCÓN, 2024).

5.2. Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration Initiatives

It is widely recognized that exposure to human trafficking can result in significant health consequences, affecting not only physical health but also mental and social health (GARCÍA-VÁZQUEZ; MENESES-FALCÓN, 2024). From this perspective, it is important to emphasize the role of psychological and social support in the rehabilitation process of these individuals after the traumatic experience.

Recent research has identified psychological, physical, sexual, and social consequences among trafficking survivors. However, the extent and nature of these consequences may vary according to individual circumstances, forms of exploitation, and access to support services (GARCÍA-VÁZQUEZ; MENESES-FALCÓN, 2024). Given this context, the need for measures aimed at proposing rehabilitation and social reintegration initiatives for victims who have suffered any form of trafficking becomes evident.

In Brazil, government initiatives also play an important role in prevention and protection. In the Marajó region, the Federal Highway Police's Projeto Mapear represents an example of institutional action directed toward identifying and monitoring locations considered vulnerable to sexual exploitation of children and adolescents (POLÍCIA RODOVIÁRIA FEDERAL, 2024).

6. CONCLUSION

It is therefore concluded that Human Trafficking is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, composed of a variety of forms of exploitation.

When addressing victims' rights globally, the United Nations (UN) provides an important international framework, along with its protocols and other international instruments on the protection of victims of trafficking (UNITED NATIONS, 2000).

The search for better living conditions and survival may increase vulnerability in certain circumstances. Marajó Island represents an important case for examining how social and economic conditions, access to public services, geographic characteristics, and other

contextual factors may intersect with situations involving sexual exploitation (VIEIRA, 2011; MORAES, 2011; NUNES; FILARD, 2024).

However, these circumstances should not be interpreted as direct or deterministic causes of exploitation. Instead, they should be understood as factors that may contribute to specific contexts of vulnerability, alongside other social, family, institutional, and individual circumstances.

The trauma experienced within trafficking networks is a significant issue that places rehabilitation at the center of the challenge. When analyzing the circumstances of victims after trafficking, there is an important need to implement actions that promote a safe and supportive environment in which victims can recover physically, emotionally, and psychologically (GARCÍA-VÁZQUEZ; MENESES-FALCÓN, 2024).

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