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Sexual Exploitation: Professionals' and Stakeholders' Perceptions of Prevention, Assistance, and Protection for Victims in Portugal

Marlene Matos ^{1,*} , Jacinta Sousa ¹ , Sónia Caridade ¹  and Isabel Dias ²

¹ Psychology Research Center (CIPsi), School of Psychology, University of Minho, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal; jacintamarlene@hotmail.com (J.S.); scaridade@psi.uminho.pt (S.C.)

² Institute of Sociology of the University of Porto, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Porto, 4150-564 Porto, Portugal; mdias@letras.up.pt

* Correspondence: mmatos@psi.uminho.pt

Abstract: Sexual exploitation is a pervasive issue affecting individuals globally, characterized by the abuse of vulnerability, power, or trust for sexual purposes. This study aims to explore the perceptions of professionals and stakeholders in Portugal regarding the prevention, assistance, and protection of victims of sexual exploitation. Employing a qualitative research approach, four online focus groups were conducted with 20 participants from various professional backgrounds. The results highlight a comprehensive understanding of sexual exploitation among participants, who emphasized the coercion and exploitation of vulnerabilities as central elements. Significant barriers to addressing sexual exploitation were reported, including underreporting, societal indifference, and the impact of new technologies. Participants called for enhanced training for professionals across sectors, increased societal awareness, and stronger legal and policy frameworks. The study concludes with recommendations for elevating sexual exploitation as a governmental priority, improving professional training, and fostering international cooperation to combat this complex issue effectively.



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1. Introduction

Sexual exploitation is a devastatingly pervasive issue that affects individuals and societies globally. This phenomenon encompasses any form of abuse (actual or attempted) of a position of vulnerability, power, or trust of another person for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, obtaining financial, social, or political benefits (United Nations Secretary-General's Bulletin 2003). It can manifest in various forms, including commercial sexual exploitation of children, forced prostitution, sexual abuse, trafficking in human beings, and violence against women and girls in armed conflicts (European Institute for Gender Equality [EIGE] 2016).

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), between 2020 and 2022, 38.7% of the victims of Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) were trafficked for sexual exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2022). However, this statistic may underestimate the true prevalence of sexual exploitation (e.g., Cunha et al. 2022), as the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of public places commonly used for such activities. Consequently, this crime may have been driven to less visible and less safe locations, making it more difficult to identify victims of sexual exploitation (United Nations

Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2022). Other sources indicate that a total of 6.3 million people are in situations of forced commercial sexual exploitation on any given day, with approximately 27% of these victims being children (International Labour Organization et al. 2022). In Portugal, official reports indicate that trafficking for sexual exploitation is the third most confirmed form of exploitation, $\approx 2\%$ (Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings 2024). Between 2008 and 2019, 134 victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation were confirmed by competent authorities (Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings 2020b).

Gender is a critical determining factor in sexual exploitation. Nearly four out of every five of those trapped in forced commercial sexual exploitation are girls or women (International Labour Organization et al. 2022). Almost two-thirds of detected victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are women, and another 27% are girls (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2022). In Portugal, 98% of all confirmed victims of THB for sexual exploitation are female (Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings 2020b). Thus, sexual exploitation is integrally linked to gender-based violence (e.g., Pandeia et al. 2019), disproportionately affecting women and girls.

It is, therefore, evident that this form of exploitation often targets vulnerable populations, predominantly women, but also children and/or marginalized groups (Burke et al. 2020). Research indicates that individuals from marginalized communities, such as ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees, are particularly susceptible to sexual exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2020) as they often lack essential social and legal protections, making them prime targets for traffickers and abusers. The heightened vulnerability of these populations is then exacerbated by factors such as poverty, lack of education, social inequality, and displacement due to conflict or natural disasters (e.g., The Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons 2017).

The junction of these forms of social stratification (i.e., gender, socio-economic status, migration status, etc.), power relations, and experiences create unique and compounded experiences of oppression and inequity (Hankivsky 2014; Robinson 2016), with perpetrators taking advantage of these dynamics, leveraging power imbalances to coerce or manipulate victims into exploitative situations (Oram et al. 2012).

The later impact of this phenomenon on victims is profound and multifaceted, affecting physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Physically, victims often endure severe injuries, sexually transmitted infections, and long-term health problems (Ottisova et al. 2016; Portuguese Victim Support Association 2020). Psychologically, the trauma associated with sexual exploitation can lead to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health issues (Ottisova et al. 2016; Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights 2021). Socially, victims frequently face stigmatization, social isolation, and significant challenges in reintegrating into their communities (Dahal et al. 2015; Joshi et al. 2013).

Nonetheless, beyond the immediate suffering of victims, sexual exploitation has broader social and economic consequences (e.g., Reed et al. 2018). It undermines social cohesion, perpetuates gender inequality, and hampers economic development. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime highlights that combating sexual exploitation requires a comprehensive approach, addressing both the supply and demand sides of the problem (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2020).

Effective policies and practices are, therefore, critical to addressing the complex and multifaceted nature of sexual exploitation. Prevention and awareness are fundamental axes to reduce the risk of sexual exploitation and/or its early identification and, therefore, play a central role in the management of this phenomenon and its psychosocial consequences (Inter-Agency Standing Committee 2019; Samarasinghe and Burton 2007).

Understanding the perceptions of those responsible for policymaking and/or enforcement can be crucial to identifying gaps in the current policies and practices, pointing to areas that require additional resources or alternative approaches. The insights and experiences of professionals and stakeholders can significantly enhance the overall response to sexual exploitation, fostering a more coordinated and comprehensive approach to the phenomenon (European Commission 2021).

Present Study

The present study seeks to understand how professionals and stakeholders combating crimes related to violence in the context of sexual exploitation perceive this phenomenon. The research questions posed were as follows: How do combat professionals and stakeholders define sexual exploitation? How do they perceive the evolution and prevalence of the phenomenon? Which characteristics do they most associate with aggressors and victims of sexual exploitation? What policies exist in Portugal to prevent/combat sexual exploitation and assist/protect their victims? Are Portuguese professionals equipped to attend to this phenomenon?

The aim is to gain insights into and familiarity with the essential issues related to sexual exploitation, laying the groundwork for the development of nuanced and practical strategies to combat this issue in Portugal. By comprehensively understanding the perspectives of law enforcement professionals and stakeholders, tailored practices can be designed to address better the unique challenges faced by victims of sexual exploitation in the country.

2. Methods

2.1. Participant Recruitment

Invitations were extended via email to entities actively involved in combating crimes related to violence in the context of sexual exploitation, such as (a) the Attorney General's Office (PGR), (b) the Magistracy Superior Council (CSM), (c) Criminal Police Bodies (i.e., Public Security Police (PSP); Judiciary Police (PJ); Republican National Guard (GNR); Foreigners and Borders Service (SEF)); (d) Bar Association (OA); and (e) Victim Service Offices in the Department of Investigation and Prosecution (GAV-DIAP).

In 2023, the communication period spanned from April 18th to May 12th, resulting in 26 invitations sent and 21 accepted (institutional adherence rate of 81%).

The demographic distribution included 17 participants (out of the 21 that accepted the invitation), with 76% ($n = 13$) identifying as women and 24% ($n = 4$) as men, aged between 33 and 67 years ($M = 49.88$, $DP = 11.66$).

2.2. Procedures

In alignment with the study's objectives, a qualitative research approach was selected, employing focus groups to delve into the multifaceted phenomenon of sexual exploitation. This methodology was chosen for its ability to integrate diverse perspectives, fostering a comprehensive understanding of the subject (Braun and Clarke 2019).

A semi-structured focus group script was crafted to semi-guide the discussions towards the study's objectives. The script covered a range of key topics associated with sexual exploitation, such as (a) conceptual delimitation, (b) characterization of aggressors and victims, (c) evolution and prevalence of sexual exploitation, (d) intervention policies in Portugal, and (e) training and supervision of professionals. This comprehensive script ensured a systematic exploration of various dimensions related to sexual exploitation, providing rich insights from multiple angles.

Before the commencement of the study, ethical approval was obtained from the Social and Human Sciences Sub-Commission of the Ethics Committee at the University of Minho (CEICSH 059/2023).

Four online focus groups (cf. Table 1) were conducted using the Zoom platform, providing participants with a secure and collaborative virtual environment.

Table 1. Focus group composition.

Focus Group	Facilitators	Participants	Area
1	2 moderators of the research team	P1	Attorney General's Office Representative
		P2	Attorney General's Office Representative
		P3	Magistracy Superior Council Representative
		P4	Magistracy Superior Council Representative
		P5	Magistracy Superior Council Representative
2	2 moderators of the research team	P6	Public Security Police Representative
		P7	Public Security Police Representative
		P8	Judiciary Police Representative
		P9	Judiciary Police Representative
		P10	Republican National Guard Representative
3	2 moderators of the research team	P11	Bar Association Representative
		P12	Bar Association Representative
		P13	Judiciary Police Representative
		P14	Attorney General's Office Representative
4	2 moderators of the research team	P15	Victim Service Offices in the Department of Investigation and Prosecution Representative
		P16	Victim Service Offices in the Department of Investigation and Prosecution Representative
		P17	Victim Service Offices in the Department of Investigation and Prosecution Representative

Each focus group session was moderated by two research team members and had an average duration of 120 min, cumulatively generating approximately 8 h of comprehensive conversation.

All focus group sessions were audio-visually recorded to ensure the accurate capture of the discussions. Subsequently, verbatim transcriptions were conducted to maintain the integrity of the data.

All participants involved in the focus groups provided informed consent before participating in the study. This process involved clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedures (such as audio-visual recording), and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without repercussions.

2.3. Data Analysis Strategy

Following the framework proposed by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#), thematic analysis was performed on the transcribed data. The NVivo 11 software was utilized to organize and analyze qualitative data systematically. An initial coding grid based on the topics of the focus group script was used to guide the initial coding that, with the familiarization of the data, was refined as inductive codes emerged. To ensure the validity of the thematic analysis,

two researchers independently coded an initial sample of the data, resolving discrepancies through discussion to achieve consensus. This method allowed for comprehensively exploring themes and patterns within the participants' narratives.

3. Results

3.1. Conceptual Delimitation

The conceptual delimitation of the phenomenon of sexual exploitation, as articulated by the professionals engaged in combating crimes associated with it, was multifaceted and nuanced. The participants converged on a definition that encapsulates various dimensions of coerced and involuntary involvement in sexual activities.

The central tenet of sexual exploitation, as elucidated by participants, involves the coercion of individuals into engaging in sexual activities or providing services against their will in exchange for compensation. It was described as a situation where individuals are forced or obligated to participate in sexual acts irrespective of their desires or awareness of being exploited (*"Sexual exploitation is when the person in the background is providing obligated sexual services, is being forced to have sexual acts. Deep down, that's it, when the person does not want to or isn't aware that they're being exploited for that purpose"*—P2).

A blatant disregard for personal autonomy underscores the exploitation, as individuals are instrumentalized for profit through their bodies (*"Any situation in which the human being is being used and objectified to make a profit in an activity that uses his body sexually to obtain that profit, will always be a situation of sexual exploitation"*—P11).

The second dimension of sexual exploitation, referred to by participants, focuses on the involvement and utilization of a person's body in sexual acts, leveraging their vulnerabilities, dependencies, or existing power imbalances. It encompasses any form of using the body in sexual acts through the exploitation of vulnerabilities, situations of dependence, or inequalities of power (*"It is any form of use of the body in a sexual act of another, through the exploitation of any vulnerability, situation of dependence or inequality of power"*—P2). This includes instances where victims are enticed with promises of a better life, grooming, or when they find themselves in situations of heightened vulnerability (*"A victim of sexual exploitation is someone who has been enticed, who has been encouraged and then this grooming may have been with promises of a better life and we know that it is usually, always people who are in a situation of greater vulnerability"*—P16).

Despite the clear conceptualization provided by the participants, they acknowledged the inherent challenges in objectively delimiting the concept of sexual exploitation. The absence of a specific legal framework in Portugal contributes to this difficulty, making it a complex task to establish clear boundaries (*"I think the concept is hard to delimit in a very objective way"*—P7; *"We don't have a legal framework for what should be considered sexual exploitation"*—P1).

The broad nature of the concept, covering those who are most unprotected, adds to the complexity of its definition (*"And then the delimitation is greater, it includes those who are more unprotected, isn't it? The concept is and must be as broad as possible"*—P3).

The participants underscored the expansive scope of sexual exploitation, recognizing its involvement in various crimes and phenomena. This includes Trafficking in Human Beings (THB), pimping, sexual abuse of minors, sexual harassment, grooming of minors for sexual purposes, assisting illegal immigration, online sexual exploitation, pornography, coercion, offenses against physical integrity, kidnapping, and threats (*"When I am asked what types of crime can be framed, I essentially identify trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation and assisting illegal immigration"*—P2; *"Crimes committed in an organized or group way, as we have the itinerant networks that have plagued in terms of sexual exploitation all over Europe, trafficking in human beings (...), but also crimes against freedom and sexual self-determination"*—

P6; *“The sexual abuse of minors, the grooming of minors for sexual purposes, the pornography of minors and sexual harassment are offences that are associated with sexual exploitation”—P13*). It is reflected that the multifaceted nature of sexual exploitation requires a comprehensive approach to address interconnected issues (*“I think sexual exploitation is comprehensive in the sense that we can frame it, in criminal political law, as a crime of priority investigation and linked to various types of crime”—P7*).

In the absence of a specific legal framework in Portugal, the participants advocated for the use of international and national legal instruments to delineate the concept of sexual exploitation. Examples included the Lanzarote Convention, Palermo Protocol, Warsaw Convention (*“Using international conventions, the Lanzarote Convention, the Palermo Protocol, the Warsaw Convention and other international texts, what the United Nations tells us, in short, organizations and texts that should frame our Western thinking when dealing with these matters”—P14*), and the Portuguese Penal Code (*“The best starting point is from the legislative instruments that we have foreseen. . . And as well as our penal code. If we do not start from what the legislative instruments provide, we cannot say what facts we see”—P5*).

Drawing inspiration from the legislative examples of other countries, such as Spain, was deemed a best practice in providing clarity to the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of sexual exploitation (*“It is essential to mention the example of our neighbor Spain, which has perfect legislation in this area, both in substantive terms and in adjective terms and defines the concept of sexual exploitation well”—P4*).

3.2. Evolution and Prevalence of Sexual Exploitation

The participants collectively described the extent of sexual exploitation as a largely unknown and devalued reality, characterized by underreporting and the transformation of crime typification during court proceedings (*“There is a clear underreporting of this phenomenon”—P11*; *“And that still doesn’t reflect the whole reality, because there are going to be victims who are confirmed and that, in the context of prosecution or trial, the crime becomes another”—P8*). The phenomenon is often shrouded in what participants referred to as “black figures” (*“It’s black figures”—P7*).

The participants highlighted societal indifference and a lack of attention towards sexual exploitation, attributing this to the involvement of individuals from other nationalities (*“As it involves a lot of foreign nationalities, it seems that people fall a little short, they look at the side, it’s not ours, it’s not from here, it’s foreign, and this situation ends up being excused a little bit”—P8*). This cultural tendency to look away and dismiss the issue contributes to the scarcity of identified victims, creating a niche of secrecy and societal ignorance (*“It’s a niche, it seems like it’s a very hidden thing and not many people know, and little is said, and it’s all very secret. . . Because this is very ingrained and it’s a bit cultural to look away if it doesn’t bother us, we’re not going to mess around”—P9*).

Participants pointed out failures in community prevention and awareness efforts, both in terms of society recognizing signs of risk and professionals identifying and naming the phenomenon. The lack of awareness and difficulty in naming these situations contribute to the challenges in remembering victims of sexual exploitation (*“One of the problems is poor prevention and awareness. At the level of mental health, particularly in child mental health, both in education, by not being able to name this type of phenomenon, to recognize and signal, opportunities are lost for the recognition of these people as victims of crime”—P15*).

The participants noted that the increasing use of new technologies, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has heightened the challenges in identifying victims. The online dimension of sexual exploitation provides anonymity to aggressors and amplifies economic gains (*“What goes on, on the Internet, is a world without end, isn’t it? It’s challenging to detect because often the criminal police agencies don’t even know where that content is being displayed”—*

P12; *“From the moment COVID came, that is, the obligation for people to stay in their homes, it created a niche market here, that is, an opportunity that was soon seized, which reduces the risk of being detected, because they use digital networks and are not so susceptible to surveillance but also increases the profits of this activity. Because on the street, in the farmhouse, a young woman, in this case speaking of women, is seen by those who pass. Still, on the Internet, the content is widely available, which can increase the demand and, consequently, the dividends resulting from this activity”*—P6).

In response to the challenges posed by new technologies, participants emphasized the importance of Portugal adopting the European Union’s proposal for online monitoring services. This strategy aims to regulate operators, prevent online sexual abuse of minors, and establish a monitoring center to mitigate the prevalence of this phenomenon in the digital realm (*“The European Union, during the pandemic... it is preparing a strategy to prevent the sexual abuse of children online and it is going to create a monitoring center”*—P17).

3.3. Characterization of Aggressors and Victims

The participants acknowledged the heterogeneity in the profile of sexual exploitation aggressors, encompassing both men and women, with a potentially higher prevalence of men (*“Both men as well as women. More men, perhaps”*—P9). These aggressors, often hailing from diverse professions, may have varying degrees of familiarity with the victims, ranging from known to unknown individuals (*“I’ve also seen them from various professions. There were taxi drivers and lawyers who said they were bosses. Therefore, the profile of the aggressor is very varied”*—P6; *“I think there’s a lot of this whimsical idea that sexual exploiters are always people that the victims don’t know, which doesn’t always happen. Sometimes the exploiters are people close or familiar to the victims”*—P11).

The psychological profiles of aggressors were described as diverse, encompassing occasional and relapsing behaviors, with some displaying psychiatric disorders such as paraphilias (*“There are even some offenders who have serious mental health conditions, such as paraphilias or others”*—P17).

In contrast, the profile of victims was described as more homogeneous, predominantly comprising women, with all participants collectively characterizing sexual exploitation as a gender-based crime (*“Yes, I think it’s (a gender crime). I consider that sexual exploitation mainly affects women and girls”*—P14). Despite the predominance of female victims, the participants reflect that this predominance does not exclude cases of male victims spanning various age groups (*“Mostly women, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t also male victims or boys”*—P15).

The participants also emphasized a prevalence of foreign nationalities among victims, mainly from Brazil, African countries, and Eastern Europe (*“Brazilian women... but also from other North African countries. So, there are also a lot of Africans”*—P7; *“Now there are more victims from Eastern Europe, who are not part of the European Union”*—P5), while highlighting the substantial number of victims of Portuguese nationality as well (*“There is a higher incidence here on the part of foreign nationality, but we also cannot neglect the number of victims of Portuguese nationality”*—P17).

Participants identified public roads, brothels, and massage parlors as the most common areas where sexual exploitation is prevalent (*“If we go on the nationals, on the national roads, we find prostitutes on the street, victims of sexual exploitation”*—P6; *“Working in bars or masseuses”*—P13).

The vulnerabilities of victims, as indicated by the participants, often manifest through a combination of several factors, including (i) foreign nationality (i.e., the victims are more vulnerable because they do not master the language and do not know the territory, nor the services, and support available); *“Particularly those foreign women who are on the street and don’t speak Portuguese, don’t master our language... they don’t know the territory...”*

they don't know the social responses that exist. . ."—P6); (ii) precarious financial and housing situation (*"Vulnerability in financial terms, housing"*—P10); (iii) dependence on psychoactive substances (*"Another severe problem is drugs. This is another problem of sexual exploitation. Many women prostitute themselves because they are dependent, and men too. Because they need to find a way to bankroll, to subsidize their addiction, they are people with addictive diseases"*—P11); (iv) history of childhood victimization (*"We find in prostitution, many victims, or many survivors, precisely from experiences of very early sexual abuse"*—P16); and (v) disability condition (*"Disabilities from the intellectual point of view or even from the motor point of view. . ."*—P16).

These vulnerabilities contribute to victims being manipulated, controlled, and enticed into situations of sexual exploitation, providing a source of income crucial for their survival/life (*"By the need of money, monetary emancipation, having a form of income or an additional form of income"*—P10).

The difficulties victims face in reporting exploitation are exacerbated by a lack of knowledge about their rights and the limited availability of support services (*"They [the victims] don't know [their rights], and particularly those foreigners who don't know our language, how are they going to move in our country to meet those answers, to get the benefits, or to fill out an online document to apply, for example, for a family allowance, or another allowance"*—P6; *"These services are much less [compared to services available in other areas]"*—P12).

The participants underscored the need for strategies to enhance victims' awareness of their rights and available support services. Two proposed strategies included an online platform accessible at airports through discreet QR codes (*"There is an application from an organization directed at human trafficking that includes sexual exploitation and has Portuguese and English. I think this should be available at the airport, for example, by using QR codes so people can download the application when they arrive. It was a way to get to people, to be able to read that without arousing the attention of a controller or explorer, for example"*—P13) and the distribution of informational flyers in public bathrooms (*"We usually do that in the case of domestic violence, in the women's bathrooms, where she comes in there and discreetly sees all the information, no one sees what she is doing"*—P7).

3.4. Intervention Policies in Portugal

Regarding the political considerations and financial investments dedicated to preventing and combatting sexual exploitation in Portugal, participants grappled with articulating their perspectives on a complex and often marginalized issue.

A shared consensus emerged, suggesting that sexual exploitation has yet to attain the status of a governmental priority within Portugal's public policies. In contemplating the broader political landscape, participants candidly conveyed their awareness that initiatives related to combating sexual exploitation often find impetus when driven by external pressures, predominantly from the European Union, the Council of Europe, or other international organizations. The availability of financial resources, crucial for effective interventions, was noted to primarily materialize in response to global influence and funding rather than originating from domestic priorities within the state budget (*"Everything that is done in terms of public policies to combat sexual exploitation is usually when it comes from the European Union, the Council of Europe, some international organization, which puts pressure on Member States to develop public policies on this matter. And that's where we've achieved something because usually, foreign funding comes, because if it's just from here, from our state budget, that's almost null because they have other priorities, and that's not a priority with all the letters"*—P7).

The testimonies also shed light on existing directives in Portugal designed to prevent and combat violence within the context of sexual exploitation. Notably, there are mandatory telephone support services for victims and the obligation for entities to report relevant

information to the Public Prosecutor's Office. These directives, recognized as mandatory and already operational in Portugal, signify a step towards aligning with international standards and providing essential support structures for victims (*"In addition, the directives that exist are mandatory for Portugal, and I think that many of the preventive measures that are provided for in these directives, already apply in Portugal. I am talking, for example, about the telephone lines for victim support and the mandatory participation of some entities in the Public Prosecutor's Office; in short, there are several preventive measures"* (P3)).

3.5. Training and Supervision of Professionals

Evidencing a marked evolution and enhancement, participants affirmed a considerable shift in the quality of training and supervision within entities addressing sexual exploitation (*"Right now, I also think the training has evolved a lot"*—P14).

Despite this positive trajectory, participants unanimously advocated an intensified focus on initial, continuous, and specialized training within a multisectoral framework. This imperative arises from the recognition of professional evolution, compounded by the ever-changing dynamics inherent in human behavior and associated phenomena (*"But we need it [the training] to continue because the audience is always changing. Because the police officers today are in an area working, but then, after a while, they change, and it is necessary to train continuously..."*—P7).

A call for expansive training across diverse sectors is articulated, emphasizing the imperative for professionals in health, finance, public services, social action, and education to be equipped with the skills to identify and address instances of sexual exploitation (*"We would have to do training in all the areas where these victims go. From health, finances, public services, and everything else. The social action, the hospital or health center, at school. Look at that family, look at what is going on around them, how they are, make the diagnosis, and 'immediately' identify that they are within a network of sexual exploitation or another"*—P6).

Moreover, participants underscored the critical need for specialized training, particularly emphasizing the importance of both Criminal Police Bodies and the Magistracy receiving specialized training to combat sexual exploitation effectively (*"There is a lack of training of professionals who work in this area [Justice] at the level of knowledge they have about sexual exploitation and all the dynamics, especially there must be a specialization both at the level of the Criminal Police Bodies and at the level of the Magistracy"*—P15).

4. Discussion

This study set out to explore the perceptions of combat professionals and stakeholders regarding the phenomenon of sexual exploitation, examining their knowledge, practices, and the capacity of professionals to address this issue. Participants demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of sexual exploitation, emphasizing the exploitation of vulnerabilities and power imbalances. The study revealed significant barriers to addressing sexual exploitation, including underreporting, societal indifference, and the challenges posed by new technologies. The absence of a specific legal framework in Portugal was identified as a critical challenge, underscoring the need for more apparent legislative measures.

4.1. How Do Combat Professionals and Stakeholders Define Sexual Exploitation?

The conceptual delimitation of sexual exploitation, as articulated by professionals and stakeholders, aligns closely with the comprehensive definitions provided in the literature. Participants described sexual exploitation as involving coerced and involuntary participation in sexual activities, emphasizing the exploitation of vulnerabilities, dependencies, and power imbalances. This definition echoes that of the United Nations, which describes sexual exploitation as the abuse of a position of vulnerability, power, or trust for sexual

purposes, including financial, social, or political profit ([United Nations Secretary-General's Bulletin 2003](#)).

Building on this foundational understanding, the complexity of sexual exploitation is further underscored by its diverse manifestations, as highlighted by participants. Exploitation can occur through grooming, false promises of a better life, or leveraging socio-economic vulnerabilities, affecting individuals of various ages, genders, and backgrounds. The [European Institute for Gender Equality \[EIGE\] \(2016\)](#) notes that sexual exploitation encompasses a wide range of abuses, including forced prostitution, Trafficking in Human Beings (THB), and sexual abuse in different contexts, thereby illustrating the multifaceted nature of the issue.

This comprehensive view is essential for recognizing sexual exploitation as a significant human rights violation, as is consistent with international human rights frameworks. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) emphasize that the exploitation of individuals (for sexual purposes, in this scenario) constitutes a profound infringement on human dignity and autonomy ([United Nations 1948, 1979](#)). By framing sexual exploitation as both a criminal act and a broader social and human rights issue, we can better appreciate the depth of its impact.

However, the absence of a specific legal framework in Portugal to address sexual exploitation, as noted by participants, presents a significant challenge in combating these crimes effectively. This gap highlights the importance of utilizing existing international legal instruments, such as the Lanzarote Convention, the Palermo Protocol, and the Warsaw Convention, to guide national policies and practices ([Council of Europe 2007](#); [United Nations 2000](#)). These conventions provide comprehensive definitions and measures to combat sexual exploitation, offering a robust foundation for developing national legislation.

Learning from other jurisdictions with more defined legal frameworks can also be invaluable in addressing this legislative gap. For instance, Spain's Civil Code imposes stringent penalties on those who exploit individuals sexually through violence, intimidation, or deception, demonstrating a proactive approach to deterrence and victim protection ([Government of Spain 2010](#)).

Finally, the participants' comprehensive understanding of sexual exploitation, encompassing a wide range of crimes such as THB, pimping, sexual abuse of minors, and online sexual exploitation, highlights the interconnected nature of these offenses. The literature supports this view, indicating that these crimes often overlap and share familiar drivers, such as poverty, lack of education, and systemic gender inequalities ([Kelly 2002](#); [Zimmerman et al. 2003](#)). Addressing these root causes requires an integrated approach combining legal measures with social, economic, and educational interventions, ensuring a holistic and effective response to the multifaceted challenge of sexual exploitation.

4.2. How Do They Perceive the Evolution and Prevalence of the Phenomenon?

The participants emphasized the significant underreporting of sexual exploitation, which obscures the true extent of the phenomenon. This aligns with global findings that many victims may not report their exploitation due to fear, stigma, and mistrust in authorities ([Farley 2006](#); [Oram et al. 2012](#)).

Adding to the complexity, participants noted societal indifference towards sexual exploitation, mainly when it involves foreigners. This mirrors findings from other regions where societal biases and cultural tendencies contribute to a lack of attention and action ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \[UNODC\] 2020](#)). The dismissal of the issue due to the victims' foreign status contributes to this underreporting and invisibility of the crime.

This societal apathy creates a niche of secrecy and ignorance, where the exploitation of vulnerable individuals is perpetuated without sufficient public awareness or intervention.

The increasing use of new technologies has also significantly impacted the nature and detection of sexual exploitation. Participants emphasized how the anonymity provided by the internet has facilitated the exploitation of victims while making detection more difficult. This shift was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced many activities online. The [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \[UNODC\] \(2022\)](#) noted a decline in the detected trafficking of sexual exploitation during the pandemic, attributed to the closure of public venues and the shift to less visible and safer locations for traffickers, which is consistent with the experiences reported by the participants.

Reflecting on the digital aspect, the [Polaris Project \(2021\)](#) in the United States also observed an increase in trafficking situations reported on digital platforms during the pandemic, indicating traffickers' quick adaptation to societal changes. This underscores the necessity for robust online monitoring and regulation.

4.3. Which Characteristics Do They Most Associate with Aggressors and Victims of Sexual Exploitation?

The participants' characterization of aggressors and victims of sexual exploitation provides a nuanced understanding that aligns with Portuguese and international data, as well as the existing literature. This alignment underscores the robustness of their insights and highlights critical aspects necessary for effective interventions and policy formulations.

The heterogeneity in the profiles of sexual exploitation aggressors, as described by participants, is also documented in official statistics. In Portugal, data from the [Directorate-General for Justice Policy \(2022\)](#) indicate that the majority of those convicted of crimes related to sexual exploitation, including Trafficking in Human Beings (THB), pimping, and grooming of minors for sexual purposes, are male (87%). However, female aggressors are also present (13%).

On the other hand, victims of sexual exploitation are perceived to be predominantly female, which is in alignment with previous research (e.g., [Cunha et al. 2021, 2022](#)). Portuguese statistics reveal that almost all confirmed victims of THB for sexual exploitation are women (98%). A significant majority are adults (71%), with notable nationalities including Romanian (31%), Brazilian (23%), and Nigerian (21%) ([Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings 2020a, 2020b](#)). Internationally, this pattern is mirrored, with women comprising 91% of THB victims of sexual exploitation and adults accounting for 64% ([United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \[UNODC\] 2022](#)). These statistics align with the participants' observations, reinforcing the gendered nature of sexual exploitation and highlighting the vulnerability of specific nationalities.

Moreover, the vulnerabilities of victims, as outlined by the participants, are multifaceted and deeply rooted in socio-economic and cultural factors. The literature corroborates these findings, identifying factors like poverty, social exclusion, and discrimination as significant risk factors ([Nechita 2013](#); [Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights 2021](#); [Santos et al. 2008](#); [Shingal 2015](#)). For example, poverty and social exclusion increase susceptibility to exploitation due to limited employment and educational opportunities and restricted access to health services and social support. People experiencing these vulnerabilities often face systemic barriers and stigmatization, which significantly increase their risk of exploitation.

Moreover, the participants identified common areas of sexual exploitation, such as public roads, brothels, and massage parlors. These observations are supported by the literature, which indicates that street prostitution, prostitution in bars, and online platforms are prevalent sectors associated with sexual exploitation (e.g., [Cho et al. 2013](#); [Farley 2006](#)).

This consistency suggests that interventions need to be context-specific, addressing the unique challenges and dynamics present in each setting.

In addition, the psychological profiles of aggressors and the health impacts of sexual exploitation on victims are critical areas of concern. Parallel to participants' contributions, research indicates that some aggressors exhibit psychiatric disorders, which contribute to their exploitative behaviors (Seto 2008).

For victims, the consequences are severe and long-lasting, including trauma, depression, and a range of mental, physical, and sexual/reproductive health problems (Portuguese Victim Support Association 2020; Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights 2021; Oram et al. 2012; Hossain et al. 2010). Therefore, the need for comprehensive psychological support and health services for victims is paramount (Zimmerman et al. 2011).

However, participants highlighted significant barriers that victims face in reporting exploitation and accessing these support services, particularly among foreign nationals unfamiliar with local languages and systems. The literature emphasizes that a lack of awareness about rights and available services and limited access to these services exacerbates victims' situations (Santos et al. 2008). Hence, it is essential to outline strategies to mitigate these barriers effectively.

4.4. What Policies Exist in Portugal to Prevent/Combat Sexual Exploitation and Assist/Protect Their Victims?

Building on the need for enhanced digital surveillance, the analysis of intervention policies in Portugal aimed at preventing and combating sexual exploitation reveals a multifaceted and evolving landscape marked by both achievements and challenges. Despite implementing national plans and adhering to international directives, the issue remains marginalized in the broader context of public policy priorities.

Participants in the study underscored that sexual exploitation has yet to attain the status of a governmental priority in Portugal's public policies. This perspective aligns with findings by scholars such as Shelley (2010), who highlight that political will and prioritization are crucial for the successful implementation of anti-trafficking measures. The testimonies reveal that much of the impetus for policy action in Portugal arises from external pressures, particularly from the European Union, the Council of Europe, and other international organizations. This reliance on external funding and influence points to a systemic issue where other governmental priorities overshadow domestic commitment.

Portugal has made notable strides in aligning with international standards through the implementation of mandatory directives aimed at preventing and combating violence in the context of sexual exploitation. These include mandatory telephone support services for victims and the obligation for entities to report relevant information to the Public Prosecutor's Office.

In Portugal, the V National Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Human Beings (PAPCTSH; 2022–2025) builds on the recommendations from the Council of Europe and GRETA, with strategic objectives focused on raising awareness, enhancing victim support, and combating organized crime networks. These objectives reflect a comprehensive approach that addresses both prevention and intervention. However, implementing these strategies requires sustained political commitment and adequate funding, which, as noted by participants, often depends on external sources.

In 2024, the National Strategy for Victims' Rights—2024–2028 (ENDVC) was introduced to strengthen the protection and support of all victims of crime, including those affected by sexual exploitation. While this strategy is a significant advancement in establishing a coherent policy framework, its potential impact remains limited without concrete measures, funding, and monitoring mechanisms.

Despite these advancements, significant criticism remains regarding the protection and rights of sex workers. [Clemente \(2022\)](#) highlights the lack of protective measures for sex workers within existing policies, which often frame prostitution as victimization rather than a complex socio-economic issue. This perspective is supported by [Oliveira \(2017\)](#), who documents the historical shifts in Portugal's policies on prostitution, moving from regulation to criminalization and partial decriminalization. These shifts reflect broader socio-political changes but also contribute to current ambiguities and uncertainties in the legal framework.

The Project CAIM (Cooperation, Action, Research; World Vision) (2004–2008; [Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality 2004](#)) is an illustrative example of past efforts to address prostitution and trafficking. The project facilitated the creation of a National Referencing System and influenced legislative and policy measures. However, the contemporary legal stance, which does not formally recognize prostitution as an activity and penalizes pimping, continues to spark debate. The prevailing discourse among government agencies and NGOs often positions prostitution solely as victimization, neglecting the diverse realities of sex workers. This one-dimensional view can undermine efforts to provide comprehensive support and protection for all individuals involved in the sex industry ([Scoular 2015](#)).

4.5. Are Portuguese Professionals Equipped to Attend This Phenomenon?

In this effort to provide comprehensive support and protection to the victims, training and supervision of professionals dealing with sexual exploitation in Portugal is significantly essential. Participants' insights reveal a marked improvement in the quality of training provided to entities involved in combating sexual exploitation, indicating a growing recognition of the issue's gravity and the necessity for specialized knowledge and skills.

The evolution of training programs is evident, with participants highlighting substantial advancements in the training provided to professionals.

However, despite the positive developments, there remains a consensus on the need for continuous and specialized training within a multisectoral framework (i.e., professionals in health, finance, public services, social action, and education). The ever-changing dynamics of human behavior and the evolving nature of exploitation necessitate an ongoing commitment to professional development, vital for early detection and intervention, as victims may encounter various service providers who can play a crucial role in identifying signs of exploitation. This perspective aligns with findings from multiple studies, emphasizing the importance of continuous education in effectively addressing human trafficking and sexual exploitation (e.g., [Lee et al. 2021](#); [Nordstrom 2020](#)). As an example, the training manuals developed within the scope of the project "Improving systems of prevention, assistance, protection, and (re)integration for victims of sexual exploitation" represent an essential first step towards equipping professionals with the foundational knowledge and practical tools necessary to address this issue ([Matos et al. 2023a, 2023b, 2023c](#)).

Specialized training for law enforcement and judicial professionals is critical ([Matos et al. 2015](#)), as these individuals play a pivotal role in investigating and prosecuting cases of sexual exploitation. Practical training can enhance their understanding of the complexities involved, improve their ability to handle instances sensitively and increase the likelihood of successful prosecutions. Research supports that specialized training for law enforcement and judicial professionals leads to better outcomes in trafficking cases ([Gallagher and Holmes 2008](#)).

Moreover, the effectiveness of training programs must be regularly evaluated to ensure they meet the evolving needs of professionals and adequately address the complexities

of sexual exploitation. This requires a commitment to monitoring and assessing training outcomes and incorporating participant feedback to improve the programs continuously.

4.6. The Study's Limitations and Future Research

Despite the comprehensive insights gained from this study, some limitations should be acknowledged.

First, the study's sample size, though adequate for exploratory purposes, may not represent all combat professionals and stakeholders in Portugal. Additionally, the diversity of the sample, particularly in terms of gender, may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the data collected relied heavily on participant self-reporting, which could introduce bias. Participants might have presented themselves or their institutions in a more favorable light, potentially skewing the results. Third, while the qualitative approach provided in-depth insights, it also limited the ability to generalize findings. This study did not extensively collect or analyze quantitative data that could complement these findings. Lastly, while the study touched upon the role of new technologies in sexual exploitation, it did not delve deeply into the specific technological mechanisms and their implications, which could be a crucial area for further exploration.

Building on the findings and addressing the limitations of this study, future research could explore several key areas. Initially, future studies should aim for more extensive and diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Including a broader range of professionals and stakeholders could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue. Additionally, combining qualitative and quantitative methods could offer a more robust analysis. Quantitative data could validate and extend the qualitative findings, providing a fuller picture of the prevalence and nature of sexual exploitation. Furthermore, given the increasing role of technology in sexual exploitation, future research should investigate the specific ways in which perpetrators use technology and the implications for detection and prevention. Studies could examine the impact of social media, online platforms, and digital currencies in facilitating exploitation.

More detailed evaluations of training programs for professionals are also needed. Research should assess the effectiveness of different training approaches, identify best practices, and explore the long-term impact on professionals' abilities to combat sexual exploitation. Comparative studies analyzing the effectiveness of other legal frameworks and policies across various jurisdictions could provide valuable lessons. Understanding how different countries address sexual exploitation can inform better policymaking in Portugal.

Likewise, more research focusing on the experiences and needs of victims is essential. This should include exploring the barriers they face in accessing help, their recovery processes, and the effectiveness of support services. Victim narratives can provide critical insights into improving intervention strategies, and investigating societal attitudes towards sexual exploitation, especially regarding foreign victims, could help develop more effective awareness campaigns.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study has highlighted the critical need for a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to addressing sexual exploitation in Portugal. It reveals significant gaps in legal frameworks, societal awareness, and support services, emphasizing the complexity and multifaceted nature of the issue. The insights from combat professionals and stakeholders underscore the importance of understanding the diverse manifestations of sexual exploitation and the vulnerabilities of its victims. Additionally, the study underscores the barriers to effective intervention and the need for improved professional training and resources.

Hence, to advance the fight against sexual exploitation in Portugal, it is essential to elevate sexual exploitation as a governmental priority by securing sustained domestic funding and robust political support, ensuring long-term commitment. Transparency and accountability should be enhanced through the regular publication of evaluation reports, engaging this diverse stakeholder, including sex workers themselves.

Strengthening legal and policy frameworks is vital, including developing a specific legal framework in Portugal to comprehensively address sexual exploitation, informed by international conventions and successful practices from other jurisdictions.

Enhancing training and professional development involves implementing a sustained training strategy with initial and continuous education for professionals across sectors (i.e., health, finance, public services, social action, and education) and providing specialized training for law enforcement and judicial professionals to improve their ability to handle cases of sexual exploitation sensitively and effectively. Furthermore, fostering international cooperation and building strong domestic capacities are essential. This involves adhering to global standards while focusing on domestic commitment and promoting a culture of collaboration and knowledge-sharing among different sectors to enhance the overall response to sexual exploitation.

By addressing these key areas, Portugal can make significant strides in combating sexual exploitation and protecting the rights and dignity of its victims. A comprehensive approach that integrates legal measures, socio-economic interventions, and continuous professional development is essential for effectively addressing this complex and pervasive issue.

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