An Exploration of Transformation of Criminality and Human Exploitation within the Network Society

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The intensification of global information flows, utilization of information and rapid advancement of information communication technologies (ICTs) have boosted illegal exploitation and abuse of technology for criminal activities. Within the course of a decade, the trafficking of women has been more frequently reported as well as its fight became one of the priorities on the political agenda. Regardless of this escalating violation of women’s dignity, privacy, psychological and physiological well-being, the research on human trafficking has been excluded from the academic mainstream. The aim of this research is to elaborate on the phenomenon of human trafficking within a social theory framework. The research questions to be addressed in this study deal with the analyses of transformations in the structure of criminal organizations, the emergence of new forms of trafficking, and the likelihood of images of women to be implicated in their abuse.

I. Introduction: Relevance Of The Study, Hypothesis And Research Questions, Methodology

Human trafficking is a trans-national crime, a worldwide exploitation of human beings – bought, sold, and held against their will in sexual and domestic servitude. Leading international organizations studying the phenomenon of human trafficking report that the quantity of persons trafficked across national borders is constantly growing. Yet, statistical account on the exact number of victims of human trafficking are rather unreliable due to low accessibility of criminal data and a variety of methodological weaknesses, i.e. the calculation of reported and unreported victimization, and the inclusion of different forms of exploitation. Such international organizations as International Labor Or-

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ganization (ILO), International Organization of Migration (IOM), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), to name a few, provide diverse statistical estimates which can approximate numbers around 600,000 - 800,000 victims per year. The numerical discrepancies can be explained by the different aspects of human trafficking brought into focus depending on the mandate of the organization. ILO refers to human trafficking as a form of forced labor. According to the ILO report (2005), the global estimate of victims engaged in trafficking from 1995 to 2003 is as much as 2.45 million people trafficked internationally and domestically, where 43% are trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation purposes. UNODC traces major international trafficking routes with the emphasis on the analysis of criminal networks. Therefore, this organization does not provide any particular estimates of the victims of human trafficking, but focuses instead on proportions and dependencies between origin, transit, and destination countries. IOM reconsiders human trafficking from migration and human rights perspectives bringing in the account of victims of human trafficking during 1999 – 2005: as many as 7,711 people based on the evidence derived from IOM country reports compiled at representation offices in 26 countries.

The intensification of global information flows, utilization of information and rapid advancement of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have only increased the reported accounts of victims involved in human trafficking. ILO, IOM, UNODC all contain some mention of communication technologies being employed by traffickers who constantly modernize their operations in order to increase profits and optimize their invisibility to the arm of the law and international police. Indeed, ICTs present almost boundless opportunities for traffickers, as they provide interactive mechanisms of immediate communication – net to net, net to people, and people to people, taking on almost any aspect: politics, economy, entertainment, interpersonal communication and dating, etc. The wide diffusion of ICTs, trans-nationalization, decentralization, and poor regulation have led to the emergence of new forms of human exploitation and violation of human dignity and privacy. In addition to the tremendous personal damage suffered by individual victims of human trafficking, this global crime has brought deep societal repercussions, such as the transformation of criminal structures and activities, the transformation of forms of human trafficking – both practical (recruiting, advertising women) and cultural (reinforcing and normalizing attitudes towards women as sexual

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2 GAO, Human Trafficking: Better Data, Strategy, and Reporting Needed to Enhance U.S. Anti-trafficking Efforts Abroad, Report to the Chairman, Committee on the Judiciary and the Chairman, Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 2006, at p. 3
objects and commodities). This negative impact exerted by ICTs should not be overlooked.

The expectation of this study is to elaborate on the phenomenon of human trafficking within a social theory framework. The major social transformations related to human trafficking caused by information communication technologies will also be reconsidered. More precisely, the study explores the relationship between ICTs, primarily the Internet, criminal networks, and the abuse, sexual exploitation and trafficking of women in persons and in images. The main questions to be addressed in the research are the following:

Q1: What are the recent transformations in the structure of criminal organizations brought by ICTs?

Q2: What are the new forms of human trafficking?

Q3: How is trafficking in images likely to be implicated in the visual abuse of women?

Before a social scientist ventures to get involved into human trafficking research, he should be aware of the substantial methodological complexities in this field. The research on human trafficking requires an interdisciplinary approach within an array of different academic fields, i.e. political science, international relations, jurisprudence, criminology. It is also necessary a combination of different methodological approaches and methods. The research on human trafficking should employ a synthesis of concepts elaborated by different scholars and a dialogue of ideas and findings, as well as an exchange of data between IGOs, NGOs, and academy. Therefore, this study will follow the methodological design where a variety of concepts, theories, and numerical data are incorporated in order to arrive at meaningful and comprehensive conclusions. The study is designed as a qualitative research that mingle conceptual and empirical types of gathering. On the one hand, the study includes very strong conceptual components where writings and concepts related to the area of inquiry produced by other authors are juxtaposed and synthesized. The procedures for studying subjects and social dimensions are presented through an extensive and prolonged description of patterns or relationships of meaning and change. The empirical elements of the paper become obvious when the reader goes through the analysis of criminal organizations and ‘marriage agencies’, where such methods as coding, survey (secondary analysis), and content analysis are presented.

For the purpose of this paper, the expression human trafficking refers to trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation, sexual assault or abuse that involve the violation of human rights of women and children as the most vulnerable groups. This author acknowledges the phenomenon of human trafficking in men however, it is beyond the scope of this study.
Driven by the complexity, intricacy and the novelty of the chosen research questions, as well as the entire area of inquiry, this study will be divided into seven main sections. Section I elaborates the major concepts employed in the research. The terms human trafficking, criminal network, sexual exploitation, transnational offence, etc. will be defined. Section II presents a concise summary of the major theories explaining the social transformation processes caused by information communication technologies. This section is necessary as it builds the theoretical footing upon which the entire study is based. Section III focuses on transformations in the structure of criminal groups engaged in human trafficking. This section is important, as it elaborates on the evolution of criminal groups engaged in human trafficking whose activities are successfully optimized and secured from counter-trafficking effort by the means of enhanced information communication technologies. Section IV evaluates on the transformation of the new forms of human trafficking. The development of technologies made it possible to traffic not only human beings (physical trafficking) but also traffic visuals (trafficking in images). Both of these forms of trafficking equally exploit women and children and should be analyzed. Yet, trafficking in images more than ever enables criminal networks to escape and adjust to toughening legislatures by moving their businesses to other more favorable locations – the Internet. Section V presents a content analysis of ‘marriage agencies’ conducted in order to investigate linkages among trafficking in images for the purpose of sexual exploitation, new information technologies, and the transformation of social attitudes. The visual data generated in the analysis is expected to better measure the likelihood of these images to be implicated in the abuse of women. Section VI summarizes and synthesizes the findings of the paper, while Section VII evaluates on the methodological challenges and suggests a few alternative studies to be conducted in the future.

II. Key Definitions

As the phenomenon of human trafficking has emerged high on international, regional and national agendas as an issue of forced labor, sexual exploitation of women and children, numerous NGOs, governments and academia finally placed an emphasis on the study of trafficking in human beings, the demand-supply factors, and the geographical frontiers. A highly controversial debate over the topic and its societal implications has emerged, and numerous definitions of the concept of human trafficking have been formulated.

In the 1990s, the member-countries of the United Nations Organization reconvened within the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime. This conference reinforced the debate on human trafficking and led to one of the major documents in the field – Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Conventions against Transnational Organized Crime, which introduced the most widely recognized
definition of human trafficking. The protocol “provided a shared international framework for trafficking and defined the term in a way that was acceptable to a wide range of people, institutions and countries”.

Three constituent parts can be differentiated in the definition: (1) the criminal action (recruitment, transportation transfer, harboring or receipt of persons); (2) the means through which the acts are committed (threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of the victim); and (3) the goals of committed criminal acts (purpose of exploitation, which includes, at a minimum, exploiting the prostitution of others, other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or similar practices, and the removal of organs). The protocol has not ended the debate over the activities and processes that constitute trafficking in human beings. Yet, the UN definition has provided a firm common ground shared in policy making, international research, and NGO sector:

Human Trafficking shall mean “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”.

In the framework of this research, it is also important to develop a better understanding about what the term Information Communication Technology (ICT) implies. The European Commission designates ICT (or ICTs) as an umbrella term “which is currently used to denote a wide range of services, applications, and technologies, using various types of equipment and software, often running over telecom networks”. According to the European Commission, the importance of ICTs lies not so much in the technology itself, but in its ability to create greater access to information and communication in world populations. “The importance of ICTs is not the technology as such but its enabling function in access to knowledge, information and communications: increasingly important elements in today’s economic and social interaction”. Nevertheless, both the European Commission and UN reports neglect to include in the definition of ICT the

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possible negative implications of rapid technological advancement. The inestimable advantage of ICTs for criminal use is only fragmentary covered even by the UNODC.

Another concept fundamental for this study is a criminal group/organization. As defined in the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, an organized criminal group “shall mean a structured group of three or more persons, existing for a period of time and acting in concert with the aim of committing one or more serious crimes or offences established in accordance with this convention, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit”.

The development of ICTs and the advancement and better availability of global transportation technologies have led to the emergence of a new type of criminal activity. In the context of human trafficking research, a criminal activity would be approached as a transnational offence which implies a crime: “(a) committed in more than one State”; (b) committed in one State but a substantial part of its preparation, planning, direction or control takes place in another State; (c) committed in one State but involves an organized criminal group that engages in criminal activities in more than one State; (d) committed in one State but has substantial effects in another State.”

The concept of transnational offence most appropriately reflects the transformation of criminal networks in the new milieu which transcend national borders and require a global counter-effort.

Human trafficking is sometimes equated with the concept of sexual exploitation. Therefore, in the context of this research, the term commercial sexual exploitation is fundamental and shall mean “a practice by which a person achieves sexual gratification, financial gain or advancement through the abuse or exploitation of a person’s sexuality by abrogating that person’s human right to dignity, equality, autonomy, and physical and mental well-being; i.e. trafficking, prostitution, prostitution tourism, mail-order-bride trade, pornography, stripping, battering, incest, rape and sexual harassment”.

As the key concepts are clarified, the research proceeds to the next section where these concepts will be placed within the major theoretical foundations of modern societies.

III. Theoretical Foundations

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Although there exist a considerable dearth in substantive theoretical literature elaborating the phenomenon of human trafficking, some scholars have succeeded in coming up with several descriptions and explanations of the phenomenon in general terms.

When elaborating on the theoretical foundations for most of the studies related to social transformations and the analysis of human identity in modern societies, the theory developed by Manuel Castells would be the foremost. Manuel Castells is internationally recognized as a pioneer in the field of information societies who initiated the debate over the impact of new communication technologies on modern societies. This social scientist is convinced that the development and wide diffusion of ICTs have transformed the morphology of social structures into ‘a set of interconnected nodes’ or, in other words, a network society\(^{13}\) which has exerted a far-reaching influence on the most important social changes in the new milieu. The outcomes of the technological revolution transformed the social structure laying down the ground for the emergence of new economic activity, social organization, and social interaction. The shifts in human identity, the transformation of social interaction patterns in the modern society create the essential framework for understanding new forms of human trafficking and the advancement of structures of criminal networks, as well as the new means of communication between traffickers and their victims to be trapped in human trafficking through cyberspace.

Building upon the data from the UN Conference on Transnational Crime, Castells differentiates five types of criminal activities, i.e. weapons trafficking, drug trafficking, trafficking in nuclear materials, smuggling of illegal immigrants, trafficking in body parts, and, finally, trafficking in women and children.

Manuel Castells theory of the network society is taken as the major framework for the study and it explains the rationale and the essence of information communication technologies and the social shifts and repercussions to which they lead. Although the research conducted by Manuel Castells is comprehensive and well-grounded, it is limited to somewhat superficial descriptions of human trafficking. It also excludes such vital aspects of trafficking as trafficking in images.

Ulrich Beck’s theory of risk society is closely related to the issues discussed in this study. This social scientist defines the emerging risks in terms of ideal types in three crucial areas: (1) the ‘disenchantment of the disenchanter’ or the ‘civilization volcano’ (the demystification of scientific rationality and heavy criticism of advanced technology and technological progress); (2) the ‘individualization of social inequality’ (freeing up of traditional and institutional forms of control of fear and insecurity in the family, marriage, sexual roles, class consciousness); (3) the ‘unbounding of science and politics’ (risks related to the labor market and system of production, i.e. microelectronics, flexi-
bility of working times, forms of under-utilization of labor, decentralized salaried employment).  

The first group of risks are the most relevant to this research as Beck’s descriptions of the major uncontrollable influences of ICTs explain that along with the convenience of advanced communication technologies, ICTs have carried out many threats such as the violation of confidentiality or the use of ICTs for criminal activities that empower them with better velocity, flexibility, and higher payoffs.

Importantly, Beck argues that the development of modernity has led to “a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it itself has produced”. 13 This argument makes explicit the demand-supply logic of human trafficking. The sexual exploitation of women is only the result of the increased popularity, proliferation, and availability of such services which have been normalized in modern, liberal market societies.

Moreover, according to Beck, the emerging risks are supra-national. Beck theorizes the new kind of global risks which are characterized by: “de-localization – its causes and consequences are not limited to one geographical location or space, they are in principle omnipresent; incalculableness – its consequences are in principle incalculable; non-compensatibility – the security dream of first modernity was based on the scientific utopia of making the unsafe consequences and dangers of decisions ever more controllable; accidents could occur, as long as, and because, they were able to be compensated”. 16 According to this definition and characteristics of global risks, the phenomenon of human trafficking could be classified as a global risk hidden in the shadow of the black market located in both physical and virtual space (de-localization). The statistical evaluation of human trafficking is hardly possible as the data on unrecorded crimes are unfeasible (incalculableness). Human trafficking is hardly controllable due to its heterogeneity, challenging conceptualization, and disguised forms (non-compensatibility).

IV. Transformation Of Criminal Networks

Due to the fact that ICTs have evolved into a worldwide, publicly accessible series of interconnected networks that store and transmit information, they have become extensively employed in academia, businesses, government, as well as general public, altogether modernizing the speed and quality of exchanges and coordination of activities.

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“The fact that Internet is a global network presents various advantages, including also the possible use of the technology to better fight organized crime or to help the victims. However, it appears that the new technologies are principally misused. None of them are in and of themselves harmful, but they provide those who wish to harm or exploit women and ways of doing that.”

The growth of shadow economies and transnational criminal networks are facilitated by ICTs. These shadow economies represent themselves as the negative manifestations of globalization, and are increasingly beyond national and international control. It can be said that if the use of new technologies may not have increased the trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation of people, it has made the activities easier. I also introduced the new forms of trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Based on the research conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, it should be pointed out that due to rapid technological advancement, the very structure of the criminal organizations that deal with human trafficking is undergoing significant changes - from a hierarchical group into a more dispersed group of associates. UNODC surveyed 40 organized criminal groups. Ten of the surveyed groups have had trafficking in persons activities: eight of them dealt with human trafficking as well as other crimes, while two criminal groups were exclusively engaged in human trafficking business. Based on the coded survey two types of criminal structured were constructed [Image 1]. One type, standard hierarchical structure, was characteristic of criminal groups where: (1) strong internal lines of control and discipline; (2) single leadership coordination; (3) a strong social or ethnic identity were present. Another type, core structure would be appropriate for a criminal group with: (a) a limited number of individuals forming a relatively tight and structured core group; (b) surrounded by a loose network of ‘associates’ to maintain internal discipline; (c) groups are ‘strictly profit-oriented and opportunistic’.


There is currently limited information about how exactly traffickers misuse ICTs. However, the Council of Europe Group of Specialists has identified some of the likely ways in which ICTs might be attractive and advantageous for criminal use:20

- Eased and diffused access to the Internet;
- The price of the services is affordable;
- The users remain anonymous;
- The sale of pornography and other related material through the Internet is a lucrative trade which does not require major investment;
- The lack of appropriate legislation or policy to fight such a phenomenon.

Elaborating on the theses mentioned above, it should be further explained that ICTs allow more effective communication between traffickers. The variety of available technological means improved coordination among criminals and in their communication with potential victims. This makes criminal networks almost invisible and untraceable for law enforcement. “Criminals in general are using new communication technologies, such as mobile phones, to avoid police being able to trace phone calls. Mobile phone services often offer free or cheap phones for signing up for their services. Criminals use these phones for a weekend or a week then throw them away. Pre-paid phone cards enable anonymous use of land line telephone systems”.

Furthermore, ICTs invigorate traffickers with higher, faster, and secure profits. Trading, marketing and production of sexually explicit material have been “moved (...) into the home, where images can be scanned, produced, uploaded and downloaded in privacy

21 Council of Europe, Group of Specialists on the Impact of the Use of New Information Technologies on Trafficking in Human Beings for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation, at p. 24.
Traffickers are also likely to employ ICTs to communicate with their victims in order to improve recruiting. “There seems to be some evidence that traffickers use the Internet to recruit women from sending regions to traffic them to Western Europe. A report by the Denmark Police notes suspicious advertisements for nannies, waitresses and dancers on Web sites in Latvia and Lithuania. The traffickers used Internet sites to post job advertisements for jobs in Western Europe just as they do in magazines and newspapers”.23

In addition, traffickers can use the Internet for advertising purposes. “Pimps (...) use the web to advertise the availability of women and children to be used in the making of pornography. Pimps also use web sites to advertise their brothels or escort services directly to men. These sites are often used to attract foreign businessmen or tourists”.24

Summing up, trafficking in human beings for the purpose of sexual exploitation requires a lot of communication and coordination. ICTs facilitate recruiting, planning, and transferring of victims. Criminal groups have largely integrated ICTs, particularly the Internet, into their activities. This step has opened new markets for human trafficking, having transformed the forms of human trafficking to be further elucidated in the next section.

V. Transformation Of The Forms Of Human Trafficking For The Purpose Of Sexual Exploitation

There are some obvious links between physical trafficking in women and dissemination of their images, so to say, traditional and non-traditional forms of trafficking. Recent studies on human trafficking have proved that virtual images may be as detrimental to real people as the physical forms of trafficking. Visual trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation only seems to exist exclusively virtually, without physical embodiment. Virtual trafficking is a very real, material existent network that connects images and people. As it has already been mentioned, trafficking in images is becoming easier and more profitable. Moreover, it incorporates forms of exploitation and is closely connected to human trafficking. “Most people (...) assume all women in pornography are consenting, even when the women are visibly injured. If a woman protests after a pho-

22 Council of Europe, Group of Specialists on the Impact of the Use of New Information Technologies on Trafficking in Human Beings for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation, at p. 22.
tograph has been taken or a video made, people assume she consented at the time, but now is embarrassed by other people seeing it. Or they blame the victim and say she should not have been so naive as to allow such photographs to be taken in the first place.”

The Council of Europe’s Groups of Specialists argues that in the case of child pornography the use of a “real child is not even necessary when the broadcasting [of] images or virtual images is sufficient to constitute child pornography (...) the victim is denoted by the image of the person thus depicted.”

The case study brought in the Council of Europe’s Groups of Specialists report confirms that trafficking in images is crucial to the understanding of trafficking patterns and to any project aimed to minimize trafficking in human beings. The case was elucidated in May 2001 in an interview with Omer Poirier, the U.S. Attorney in Honolulu, Hawaii.

In 2000, a case of smuggling/trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation was uncovered in (...) which Japanese women were brought into Honolulu to do live performances on the Internet for the audiences in Japan. Due to more restrictive laws concerning pornography in Japan, the men decided to operate their website from Hawaii and broadcast the live shows back to Japan. The Japanese men in Hawaii placed ads in Japan for “nude models.” Upon their arrival in Hawaii, the women were used to make pornography and perform live Internet sex shows (...). The men used wireless keyboards for live sex chat with the men at a rate of $1/minute.

Another example of trafficking in images connected with physical sexual exploitation of women is reported by Kathleen Maltzahn, the Founding Director of a leading Australian counter-trafficking NGO project called Respect, who has worked in trafficking research since 1992 in both Australia and the Philippines. She refers to Merab Kambam, director of the Movement of Community Action for the Prevention & Protection of Young People Against Poverty, Destitution, Diseases & Exploitation (MAPODE) legally registered in Zambia (1997) and in Uganda (1998) (MAPODE) who uncovered that “In Zambia, in December 1999, a 34 year old Australian male national was arrested (...) at the Zimbabwean border allegedly trafficking five 14-15 year old girls to Australia. He had along with him a suitcase of pornographic photos and videos he had taken of the girls, which he had also transmitted to his counterparts in Australia via the Internet using his

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25 Council of Europe, Group of Specialists on the Impact of the Use of New Information Technologies on Trafficking in Human Beings for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation, at p. 48.
26 Council of Europe, Group of Specialists on the Impact of the Use of New Information Technologies on Trafficking in Human Beings for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation, at p. 9.
27 Council of Europe, Group of Specialists on the Impact of the Use of New Information Technologies on Trafficking in Human Beings for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation, at p. 28.
high tech computer. The police found that with his computer he had created a website and a pornographic magazine on the girls”.  

 Trafficking in images is making privacy even more vulnerable to violation. Almost everyone is defenseless. Tiny video cameras can be hidden everywhere - in a changing room, a bathroom, toilets, etc; women engaged in very private activities can be recorded and then taken advantage of. Hughes suggests that anyone can be a trafficker enabled to “share and sell images and videos on the Internet”. She cites an example from New Zealand reported by Reuters. “David Overend, 36, admitted to nine charges of using a miniature video camera to film up the skirts of women. A pin-hole camera was concealed in his shoe with a wire running up his pant leg enabled him to view and video tape thousands of women and girls at public events. He traded the images and videos around the world over the Internet. In his emails he claimed to have filmed up the skirts of 2,000 to 4,000 girls and women since 1995”. 

 Hughes also affirms that “some men (…) have become desensitized by other types of pornography and are seeking new forms of power, violation and stimulation” easily realized by the means of ICTs. The next section is an attempt to come up with a likely explanation why older forms of sexually explicit material are becoming obsolete, while more eroticized, better available and easier affordable sexual products are becoming a social norm rooted in most societal areas.

VI. Transformation Of Attitudes: Sexualization And Commodification Of Women

Without a doubt, ‘mail-order-bride agencies’ have recently emerged as one of the outcomes of crucial social transformations and rapid technological advancement. This section examines the role of these agencies in trafficking in images in order to investigate the linkages among trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, new info-


30 Hughes, Donna, Pimps and Predators on the Internet Globalizing the Sexual Exploitation of Women and Children, at p. 18.

31 Mail-order-bride agency means operating on-line recruiting networks where pictures, body measurements and descriptions of advertised women are provided. The terms ‘mail-order-bride agency’ and ‘marriage agency’ are used interchangeably.

ion technologies, and the transformation of social attitudes. More precisely, the aim of this section is to analyze the visual content of ‘mail-order-bride’ websites, determine the specificities of this visual information, and reconsider the likelihood that these images are implicated in the abuse of women. The conclusions are based on the content analysis method which includes a sample of 100 images retrieved from 7 ‘mail-order-bride’ websites purposefully. The purposeful sampling was expected to display the major tendencies and affinities. Generalization was not initially anticipated in this study. The coding scheme allowed classifying the images in terms of the degree of sexual explicitness. This measure is taken as an indicator of potential abuse of women. Based on the coding scheme, six final categories of images that cut across a variety of ‘mail-order-bride agencies’ were constructed. The six categories make up a continuum that enables a construction of a simple grading scheme, offering a more differential and consistent approach in categorization. The results suggest that five categories out of six incorporate a certain degree of erotic content. Table 1 presents the typology of the images in the sample:

Table 1. Typology of ‘Mail-order-bride’ Images

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description of picture qualities/indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>INDICATIVE</td>
<td>Non-erotic and non-sexual pictures from their commercial sources or family albums; Usually portrait shots.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>INDICATIVE POSING</td>
<td>Non-erotic and non-sexual pictures showing women posing as if they were advertised. Usually full-length photographs in underwear, swimming costumes, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>NUDIST</td>
<td>Pictures of posing naked or semi-naked women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>EROTIC</td>
<td>Surreptitiously taken photographs of women showing their underwear; varying degrees of nakedness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>EROTIC POSING</td>
<td>Deliberately posed pictures of women fully, partially clothed or naked in sexualized or provocative poses (where the amount, context and organization suggest sexual interest).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI.</td>
<td>EXPLICIT EROTIC POSING/ACTIVITY</td>
<td>Emphasizing genital areas where the women is either naked, partially or clothed. Images might also involve masturbation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As soon as the categorization was complete, the further step was to illustrate the frequency counts, i.e. the allocation of the images in the sample [Table 2].
Table 2. Numerical Representation of Images in the Sample and Access Policy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Numerical Representation of Images in the Sample (%)</th>
<th>Access Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>INDICATIVE</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>free access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>NUDIST</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>partially requires paid access paid services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>EROTIC</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>paid services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>EROTIC POSING</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>paid services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>EXPLICIT EROTIC POSING</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>paid services</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 suggests that there is a certain coherence of the content of images posted on the ‘marriage agency’ websites. The more sexually explicit the images, the higher financial revenues they have. Furthermore, although 65% of the sample comprises indicative images with a very weak erotic message, the other 35% include nudist and explicitly eroticized material that serves as an indicator of the high proportions (frequency) of explicitly sexual images.

Although the sample size was rather small and the categories constructed were not always mutually exclusive (depending on the interpretation), these deficiencies do not distort the major conclusions that can be driven based on the findings. Therefore, the classification of images, the frequency counts, and the description of the access policy are synthesized to build a ground for essential theoretical considerations.

First of all, the results of the content analysis reinforce Calstells’ theory of the network society. The findings suggest that the Internet, being primarily a linguistic medium, appears to be an important visual medium where high-quality images are posted, transferred and exchanged. It is also the medium generating high economic revenues which profit the producers of information.

Secondly, the results of the content analysis are more likely to support the advocacy literature. Similarly to Donna Hughes, it is argued that ‘marriage agencies’ facilitate the sexual exploitation of women because they enable people to easily buy, sell and exchange millions of eroticized images and videos of women. The findings presented in the study confirm that the visual profiles of ‘mail-order-bride’ images are extremely sexualized. The content analysis of the ‘marriage agency’ websites indicates that many of them engage in practices that sexually exploit women by offering tours for foreign
men and escort services. The sexualization of ‘marriage agencies’, particularly in its visual aspect, brings about crucial social shifts in the expression of sexuality and is closely connected with another theoretical construct derived from feminism - sexual objectification of women. Women are depicted as sexual objects; their sexual attributes and physical attractiveness de-emphasize the existence of women as a human being. Women are presented as easily accessible, compliant and compliant with exceptional exterior qualities but not necessarily outstanding educational, professional skills or matrimonial capacities as a mother and a house-wife. Women become alienated from their present, past or future. What matters is the image - the main source of meaning, relevance and choice.

The process of sexual objectification of women is strongly connected to the process of consumption, where a woman becomes a subject of commodification also mentioned in the advocacy literature. The findings of this research pointed out that most of the ‘mail-order-bride agencies’ depend on the fees paid by the customers. Women are merchandised and advertised to men who can evaluate, rate, and discard women. Men pick out women from on-line picture catalogues where they can designate the descriptive parameters of the woman they want: maximum and minimum age, height, weight, the size of her bust, waist and hips, general interests, and geographical location. It becomes obvious that women are placed in a position of subordination in relationship to, so to say, ‘consumers-husbands’.

Moreover, the owners of ‘marriage agencies’ have to follow the rules of the free market - a defining characterization of current neo-liberalism. The growth of ‘mail-order-bride’ industry on the Internet has also increased the competition for quality new catalogues of women. Fierce competition among ‘mail-order-bride’ websites has pushed the owners of the industry to advertise and present more and more extreme and attention-grabbing material. Therefore, the likely prediction is that the content of ‘mail-order-bride agencies’ would become more and more sexualized.

VII. Summary: Synopsis Of Major Findings

The Internet has evolved over the past 30 years from a military tool for scientific research and coordination to a commercially-oriented communication network. Although the Internet has been mostly accepted as an ‘omnipotent’ tool of communication, the consequences of the impact of the Internet as well as other ICTs are rather unpredictable. The capacity of the Internet to store and transmit vast amounts of information within an unregulated market to an uncontrolled audience is too multi-faceted to be easily grasped. Social scientists need to be cautious when assessing the impact of ICTs on society, not because human trafficking is new, but rather because the distribution of human trafficking via computer networks causes important transformations in the struc-
ture of criminal networks and criminal activities, as well as paves the way to the emergence of the new forms of sexual exploitation and human abuse.

Apart from that, there is a need for a rigorous re-conceptualization of the term human trafficking in order to determine whether this concept involves physical movement exclusively (trafficking in human beings), or whether the issue of trafficking in images is pertinent too. This research proved that there is a close interrelationship between trafficking in human beings and trafficking images as the both forms have baneful social repercussions. Consequently, there is a challenge to the UN definition of human trafficking as it totally omits the significance of the disguised forms of trafficking.

Although there has been rather successful global effort to raise the awareness of general public about the danger of human trafficking, this crime has not been exterminated. The neglect of the visual aspect of human trafficking, i.e. trafficking in images, might explain why there is still substantive growth in the sexual exploitation of women and why there is still an enormous public demand for pornography and prostitution. This is a misleading approach to counter-trafficking.

Information communication technologies only facilitate human trafficking by fostering a different type of violence that effects social attitudes and normalizes practices previously used to be unacceptable. Trafficking in women is gradually becoming accepted as a social norm. Representation of women in pornography, sex-tourism and marriage sites all work to compound acceptance of violence against women and the treatment of women as commodities.

These transformations are inevitable. Consequently, a re-consideration of human rights and legislations is crucial in the global human rights crisis that is only being escalated by the wide use of new information and communication technologies.

VIII. Postscript: Challenges Of Methodological Decisions; Suggestions For Further Research

On the one hand, the overall relevance of the research is very high as this study transcends the boundaries of different disciplines. Due to its multidisciplinary and the wide practical application, this particular research might be relevant to a very heterogeneous audience - i.e. academe, governmental officials, businesses, as well as general public.

On the other hand, because this is a pioneering study on human trafficking, there was an abundant variety of challenges to be addressed. Data scarcity, non-comparability of cases, ‘raw’ theoretical background can only be mentioned as some of the general prob-
lems. These deficiencies undermine the validity of the results and conclusions presented. Moreover, as any other qualitative research, this study was condemned to deal with interpretation and subjectivity challenges. The interpretation of criminal cases and the ‘mail-order-bride’ image catalogues were highly constrained by subjectivity factors. The interpretation involved complex, lengthy, and, therefore, possibly ambiguous descriptions which had to be substantially downsized when embedded in the research.

Nevertheless, in spite of the dearth of data and the challenges in interpretation, the guiding research questions posed in the introduction of the study were covered. The conclusions do not just address the research questions. They enrich the research with a more comprehensible theoretical framework which contributes to the academic discourse in the field by making the phenomenon of human trafficking, particularly its visual aspect, more explicit, conceivable, and engaging. The far-reaching theoretical potential is one of the strongest parts of the research.

Future studies on human trafficking are welcome, as they would provide the grounds to compare and synthesize a variety of interpretations and approaches. A quantitative study on human trafficking would be recommendable, while an observation of the regulation of internet-based trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation would open new areas for future academic enquiry.

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