

NEWS MEDIA POWER AND PUBLIC POLICY:

The mediatized construction of women trafficking for sexual exploitation

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ABSTRACT – Like other areas of violence against women, sex trafficking has become in the last decade increasingly politicized in Portuguese society, with the news media attaching important visibility to it, both for public awareness purposes and government reaction. This happened after the dismantling of a chain of striptease clubs, suspected of hosting trafficking activities. Known as the “Passerelle case”, this event attracted great media attention and brought to the public sphere the problem of trafficking in women for sexual purposes. This article looks at the Portuguese press to understand in what ways the news coverage of the case paved the way for the social and political acknowledgment of this issue, and to what extent it favored an understanding capable of making a real difference in the lives of women. It argues that, despite the news media’s undeniable involvement in sociopolitical changes claimed by feminism, its emancipatory potential remained unexplored.

Key words: Gender. Trafficking in women. Prostitution. Portugal. Press.

O PODER DOS MEDIA DE INFORMAÇÃO E AS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS: A construção mediática do tráfico de mulheres para exploração sexual

RESUMO – Tal como outras áreas da violência contra as mulheres, o tráfico para exploração sexual tornou-se na última década crescentemente politizado na sociedade portuguesa, com os media de informação a concederem a esta prática uma importante visibilidade, tanto no domínio da conscientização pública como no plano da reação governamental. Isso aconteceu após o desmantelamento de uma cadeia de clubes de *striptease*, suspeita de atividades de tráfico. Conhecido como o *caso Passerelle*, este acontecimento atraiu elevada atenção mediática e fez aflorar no espaço público o tráfico para fins sexuais. Este artigo analisa a imprensa portuguesa para compreender de que forma a cobertura noticiosa do caso abriu caminho para o reconhecimento social e político deste problema e em que medida favoreceu uma compreensão capaz de fazer diferença na vida das mulheres. Defende-se que, apesar do inegável envolvimento dos meios de comunicação nas mudanças sociopolíticas reivindicadas pelo feminismo, o seu potencial emancipatório permaneceu inexplorado.

Palavras-chave: Género. Tráfico de Mulheres. Prostituição. Portugal. Imprensa.

EL PODER DE LOS MEDIOS INFORMATIVOS Y LAS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS: La construcción mediatizada del tráfico de mujeres con fines de explotación sexual

RESUMEN – Como otras áreas de la violencia contra las mujeres, el tráfico con fines de explotación sexual se ha convertido en la última década en un tema crecientemente politizado en la sociedad portuguesa, con una importante visibilidad en los medios para la concienciación pública y reacción del gobierno. Esto sucedió después del desmantelamiento de una cadena de clubes de *striptease*, sospecha de actividades de tráfico. Conocido como el caso *Passerelle*, este acontecimiento atrajo elevada atención mediática y aportó el problema a la esfera pública. En este artículo se analiza la prensa portuguesa para entender de qué manera la cobertura noticiosa del caso abrió camino para el reconocimiento social y político de la cuestión y en qué medida favoreció una comprensión capaz de marcar una diferencia real en las vidas de las mujeres. Se sostiene que, a pesar de la innegable participación de los medios en los cambios sociopolíticos reivindicados por el feminismo, su potencial de emancipación permaneció por explorar. **Palabras-clave:** Género. Tráfico de mujeres. Prostitución. Portugal. Prensa.

1 Introduction

Given its estimated large-scale and growing as one of the most lucrative criminal enterprises in the world,¹ sex trafficking has become in the past years an issue of major international concern, attracting great media attention. Governments, nongovernmental and international organizations have recognized it as a global challenge needing equally global answers, in respect to public policies and also to law enforcement. Legislation worldwide has been strengthened in order to give support to the victims and to criminalize the phenomenon and its active agents. Currently, sex trafficking is criminalized in 158 nations (UNODC, 2016), including Portugal, where, as in other countries, both trafficking outside and inside the national borders is punished. The broad consensus this institutional strategy translates is nevertheless challenged by scholars and activists for whom the complex nature of sex trafficking raises issues that cannot be solved by simply addressing it as a criminology problem.

For feminist scholars, it is important to acknowledge sex trafficking as a set of practices committed mainly against women, whose roots cut across gender based violence and the economic and political context of neo-liberalism, where female poverty and female lack of opportunities unleash women's illegal migratory movements.

Although sex trafficking is condemned widely, feminists differ on the kind of link between trafficking for sexual exploitation and “sex work” and prostitution, with the question of whether the sex industry and prostitution should be accepted as legitimate and voluntary (Doezema, 2000; Agustín, 2005; Duarte, 2012; Barnett, 2016).

Despite the difficulty in assessing its “real” dimension, sex trafficking has indeed been well recognized as disproportionately affecting women (American Psychological Association [APA], 2014; UNODC, 2014, 2016). According to the latest United Nations report (Unodc, 2016, p. 27), women and girls make up 96% of victims of exploitation for prostitution and other sexual purposes. Addressing sex trafficking as a form of sex discrimination and a human rights violation, key international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), have been useful to some feminist interventions. But the leading tool to address the scourge of sex trafficking, and the starting point to governments defining and stemming it, has been the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children², which supplements the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted in 2000. While this often referred to Palermo Protocol describes the elements involved in sex trafficking – namely the act (recruitment or transportation, for instance), the means (coercion or abduction, for example) and the purpose (prostitution of others, sexual exploitation) – and states that the consent of the victim is irrelevant, for some critics, it does not clarify the concepts of prostitution and sexual exploration, nor does it distinguish forced from voluntary prostitution and “sex work”. This has been said to fuel the ongoing debates between feminist researchers and activists regarding voluntary versus coerced “sex work” and prostitution and criminalization versus the legalization of voluntary “sex work” (Santos, Gomes, & Duarte, 2009; Duarte, 2012). For anti-prostitution feminists, however, the Palermo Protocol not only acknowledges that trafficking and prostitution are intrinsically linked, but also rejects the “false” distinction between “free” and “forced” prostitution (Bindel, 2006; Jeffreys, 2008).

To what extent the news media have highlighted these gendered cognizant frames with which sex trafficking and its connected practices can also be addressed is a main concern of the research presented here, which takes Portugal as a case study. The Portuguese news media environment turned out to be particularly

stimulating in revealing the gender, the cultural and the political meanings underlying the news during the period when sex trafficking suffered intense politicization, which occurred in the beginning of the last decade. Portugal has adopted several legislative measures since the criminalization of trafficking in human beings by the Portuguese 1982 Penal Code³. But it was only with the revised law in 2007 that the legal type of crime was significantly amended in order to reproduce, as faithfully as possible, the official definition of trafficking, as expected by the Community's and international obligations of the Portuguese State in this matter, and expand the typical criminal behaviors: sexual exploitation, exploitation of labor and extraction of organs. Together with the publication of the so-called Immigration Law, also in 2007, it can be said that there was a punitive law drift in Portuguese realm as a result of the criminalization of new acts and of the intensification of punishment.

Remarkably, these initiatives addressing trafficking followed the dismantling, in January 2006, of a chain of striptease clubs, suspected of hosting sex trafficking activities and other related criminal acts. Known as the "Passerelle case", this complex criminal process was the first and only in this century to attract great media attention to sex trafficking issues. This article aims precisely to discuss in what ways the mediatized construction of trafficking in women for sexual exploitation triggered by this case paved the way for the social and political acknowledgement of the issue. Drawing on data from a broader study⁴, it seeks, more narrowly, to understand the news media role in the symbolic construction of sex trafficking, that is, the process by which the meaning negotiation about the phenomenon nature and the social identities imbricated in it (Fairclough, 1995). It also sought to perceive to what extent news media constructions privileged an understanding of sex trafficking able to make a real difference in the lives of women.

Two analytical and theoretical concepts, resulting from two different but interrelated research programs, were combined in order to understand the process of negotiating meaning and the different relationships and hierarchies within discourse. On the one hand, the concept of frame, mainly for its ability to show the power of a communicative text in delimiting the ideological boundaries of the debates (Scheufele, 1999; Entman, 1993; Reese, 2007). On the other hand, the concept of gender, which has been central in much feminist research, insofar as it helps to recognize that

gender identities are a complex sociocultural product. Gender is, above all, an “ideological structure” (Lazar, 2008) that positions and hierarchizes individuals.

There are some – few – researches based on gender-sensitive analysis of news media frames with international projection, addressing the problem of human trafficking and/or sex trafficking (Pajnik, 2011; Johnston, Friedman, & Shafer, 2012; Sobel, 2016; Barnett, 2016). Looking at the Portuguese press, the research presented here expands these works, by studying the main themes and actors of the news media discourses about sex trafficking in the Portuguese landscape. It will be shown that despite the news media’s undeniable role in raising public awareness to sex trafficking problem, they were less engaged with gender and justice transformative changes than with maintaining dominant interests in society.

2 Human trafficking in Portugal and the “passerelle case”

Research related to human trafficking and its different manifestations is recognized as extremely challenging due to its complexity. Firstly, because there are no typical cases of human trafficking, which frequently overlaps with other closely related crimes, such as human smuggling, prostitution of others and intimate partner violence. This also means that trafficked women may suffer from different kinds of victimization. Secondly, human trafficking is extremely difficult to measure. Several factors are said to be responsible for this difficulty, besides the diversity of trafficking situations. The underground nature of trafficking practices, the absence of a centralized database of human trafficking cases, the difficulty in accessing persons with knowledge of the phenomenon, including trafficked women themselves, contribute to the gaps and weaknesses in the empirical research. As expectable, human trafficking “real” numbers in the Portuguese case are said to be very hard to pin down (Santos et. al., 2008). Some of the public policies of the last decade, namely the first National Plan Against Trafficking in Humans, adopted in 2007, and the Observatory of Trafficking in Human Beings (OTSH), created in the following year, aimed precisely to better understand human trafficking quantitative reality.

New diagnostic mechanisms, such as the National Referral System and the Monitoring System, have given an important

contribution to this task. The Observatory uses its guidelines to identify victims suspected of having been trafficked. Its latest report (OTSH, 2017) reveals the rise in the number of people suspected of being victims, from 193 in 2015 to 261 in 2016. Confirmed victims also increased, according to the Annual Internal Security Report (RASI, 2016), in this case from 32 to 118, in the same period. Among the 261 persons flagged as potential victims, there are citizens from 23 countries, of which the three main ones are: Portugal (72), Romania (70) and Nepal (47). Overall, these official data show two tendencies: given the number of Portuguese among the victims, Portugal is not only a country of destination but also a source of trafficking; regardless of their nationality, the purpose of trafficking is mainly labor exploitation (58%).

A similar picture can be found in the 2017 report of the U.S. Department of State, where Portugal is ranked for the first time since 2011 a “tier 1 nation”, which means that the Portuguese Government has demonstrated that it has made the appropriated efforts to combat trafficking, in line with the Palermo Protocol. According to the Report (USDS, 2017), Portugal is a source, transit, and destination country for women, men and children subjected to sex trafficking and forced labor. Trafficking victims are primarily from West Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, and, to a lesser extent, Latin America. Most of the victims are subjected to forced labor, with seasonal migrant workers being especially vulnerable. The report also indicates that foreign women and children, mostly from Africa and Eastern Europe, and Portuguese women and children are subjected to sex trafficking within the country. Portuguese victims have also been subjected to sex trafficking, mostly in other European countries (USDS, 2017, pp. 283-284).

These trends are very different from the perceptions and the data about the phenomenon ten years ago. In 2008, in the global routes of human trafficking Portugal was a destination country, especially of trafficked Brazilian women. Often coincidental, trafficking and immigration routes seemed to depend significantly on the needs of the “sex market” in the destination countries. Likewise, the internal routes seemed to follow to where the “sex business” is more attractive (Santos, Gomes, Duarte & Baganha, 2008, p. 103).

This was the background of a mega police operation during which an organization involving the chain of striptease clubs Passerelle was dismantled in January 2006. The Portuguese Public Prosecutor's

Office accused, among others, the entrepreneur owner of Passerelle strip clubs as well as the owner of its private security company – a former Public Security Police officer – of leading a criminal network dedicated to the exploitation of sex-related activities. In total, it involved 24 defendants (15 people and nine companies), accused of about 1,200 crimes, including sex trafficking and pimping, besides tax crimes in the amount of 25 million euros. Given the highly complex nature of the process, the mega judicial trial prompted by this case started in October 2007 and lasted until 2012. It remained, however, under the spotlight of the media for a much shorter period, a fact which the research discussed here also seeks to analyze.

3 Media construction of trafficking: framing the public policy

In general, crime and sex are highly appealing to the news media. But the process through which social reality is built is far more complex than an analysis of the operation of news values may offer (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; 1991). Given the importance of news media in democratic societies, particularly as a forum where problems and ideas about the public life can be addressed and debated (Calhoun, 1996), the deconstruction of such processes are an ever-ending pressing task. As well explained by researchers who see the media as agents of social construction (Chibnall, 1977; Hall et. al., 1978; Cohen, 2002), the media not only actively construct social problems, by giving salience to particular facts and interpretations while ignoring others, but also shape the social processes that emerge in reaction to them.

News media are indeed highly selective in their choices. To acknowledge those choices requires understanding the news gathering process and professional routines, as well as the broader ideological values present in collective action and thinking. This helps explain why it is well documented that crime and law and order news tend to be based on official sources, thus supporting their dominant views, limiting the space for alternative diagnostics and solutions.

Frame analysis has assisted scholars examine how media coverage of trafficking explains the issue and which solutions are then proposed as effective solutions. A frame is a structuring idea which gives coherence and meaning to a verbal-visual text, providing to audiences interpretative clues to the understanding of the meanings

given to the ideally neutral presented facts (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999). Looking at cross-border trafficking cases reported by the Slovenian press, Mojca Pajnik (2010) identified four problematic frames which assist the shaping of the trafficking problem, namely criminalization, nationalization, victimization, and regularization. Overall, the author (2010, p. 59) defends that they represent the basis of an anti-trafficking paradigm which “calls for stricter laws” in order “to target middlemen and tighten border regimes”, which legitimize the nation-state “in its role as hunter of criminals, savior of victims and protector of the nation”. Research on the coverage of human trafficking in the United States has revealed a similar consensus among the major participants in the policymaking process (Berman, 2003; Gulati, 2011). As Girish Gulati (2011) states, the big trends run from the heavily concentrated coverage on viewpoints typically voiced by official and other establishment sources (foreign policy elites and activists in the anti-trafficking policy network) to the assumption that trafficking is primarily caused by organized crime and other criminal activity which should be combated in order to build on current policy: more law enforcement, protection programs for victims, and prevention campaigns. By observing which precise points of view or subjects are highlighted within different US media, Anne Johnston, Barbara Friedman & Autumn Shafer (2012) also show that a vast number of news reports only account for planned events, meetings, and occurrences of actual cases, and far fewer offer multiple perspectives or counter viewpoints, including the perspective of survivors and their advocates. Additionally, coverage suggested few remedies and concentrated on crime-focused stories. Through the analysis of the understudied Tai media landscape, Meghan Sobel (2016) demonstrates that, in many respects, the news coverage of human trafficking is similar in Thailand and Western countries.

4 Methodological design of the case study

The goal of the research presented here is twofold⁵: 1) to distinguish the themes and actors⁶ with regular presence in the press discourses; and 2) to show that the way those themes and actors are represented help frame sex trafficking and its connected practices. To meet these research questions, an analysis was made of the content and discourse of nine Portuguese papers, ranging from quality to

popular press, but all widely read: five daily newspapers (*Correio da Manhã*, *Diário de Notícias*, *Jornal de Notícias*, *Público* and *24 Horas*), two weekly newspapers (*Expresso* and *Sol*), and two weeklies (*Sábado* and *Visão*). The analysis was limited to the period of time in which the “Passerelle case” was subject to great media attention, which was mainly during 2007 and the first quarter of 2008. Also important in the definition of the time frame was the political-legal environment regarding trafficking and immigration. New legislation in these domains came into force in September 2007. The period from January 2007 to March 2008 was then chosen to enable the collection of news pieces from before, during and after the new context of law enforcement, corresponding also to the temporal framework of the extensive coverage of the case.

The relevant news pieces were obtained through a keyword research performed on the database of full-text archive of the print edition of the above-mentioned papers, of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG), during the period of study⁷. A total of 194 news pieces (facts and opinion genres) were collected and firstly examined through a content analysis whose protocol⁸ aimed to describe the formal component of the sample and systematize its semantic regularities⁹. This gave a detailed and large picture of the quantitative aspects of the coverage, given that content analysis allows us to see frequencies of meanings and signifiers (Igartua Perosanz, 2006).

In a second stage of the analysis, opinion and journalistic formats other than the news genre were excluded. Also, only the news whose nuclear theme was considered to be “trafficking” (in women) or “prostitution” integrated this sub-sample. Qualitative variables were used to feature the social actors of the news, meaning those the news talk about and/or have a voice in it: police officers and security forces, women, traffickers, pimps, among others.¹⁰ Finally, because it is equally important to identify who is in the news and how those in the news are represented, a discourse analysis was performed on this reduced sample, mainly to reflect about the social and cultural implications of these options. For this purpose, categories were used that essentially focused on the discursive strategies by which social actors are positioned within the discourse (Van Leeuwen, 1996). In what follows, these different methodological approaches were combined to help uncover how the news framed sex trafficking, and the main activity to which it seemingly leads: prostitution.

5 Results and discussion

News pieces categorized as concerning “trafficking” predominated statistically (69,6%) in the sub-sample when compared with those centered on “prostitution” (30,4%). The discussion of the results which are relevant to the study presented here will begin by precisely focusing the attention on “prostitution” news articles.

5.1 News media construction of prostitution: stories of crime and punishment

In Portugal, prostitution is not criminalized, unlike the incentive and favoring of sexual services by a third party for profit, regardless of the use of violence, threats, fraudulent operations, abuse of power or attacking the vulnerability of others. The decriminalization of prostitution and the penalization of its exploitation (through the crime of pimping) are part of abolitionism, the legislative-political framework in most European countries. The abolitionist perspective defines prostitution as a form of slavery, incompatible with human dignity, therefore in this light it is a practice that has to be eradicated, mainly through the punishment of commercial exploitation and the women’s social integration. This is similar to the prohibitionist perspective, but different in its intervention models. This latter approach, which framed the Portuguese penal law until 1982, advocates the criminalization of all actors involved in prostitution practices. A third perspective, the regulating approach, provides constitutional rights to prostitutes. Here, prostitution is acceptable, and it is the state – not the market – that regulates it. Despite the ideological differences, we can identify a common denominator both in the abolitionist and in the regulating systems: neither is successful in incorporating the claims of those who are affected by their politics (Mathieu, 2003).

For some like Kathleen Barry (1996), founder of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), only the abolitionist approach is acceptable, because prostitution always corresponds to sexual exploitation, which is seen as the basis of the subordination and discrimination of women and of the perpetuation of patriarchy. In this context, “sex work”, as Sheila Jeffreys (2008) defends, is a euphemism which serves to naturalize prostitution and the harm

it causes. Since sex trafficking is intimately linked to prostitution, feminist abolitionists argue that it can be more easily combated by fighting prostitution and that the path taken by various states, including the Netherlands and Germany, to establish a differentiation between trafficking and prostitution is dangerous (Santos, Gomes and Duarte, 2009, p. 78).

For others (Weitzer, 2007; Ditmore; Levy; Willman, 2010), consented “sex work” can prove empowering to women. The prostitutes’ social movements that have emerged in the 80s claim the recognition of prostitution as a professional legal activity, demanding equal legal rights and social protection granted to other workers. Besides rejecting abolitionist aims, these movements refuse the regulatory policies, denying the State legitimacy “to control, to regulate and to restrict their activities” (Mathieu, 2003, p. 2).

In the present research, however, news stories about prostitution ignore these different claims and ambivalences, since they concern a central issue only: prostitution itself, mainly represented as work in the “sex industry” and associated with deviant and illicit dynamics. Considering the pieces of information, editorials and opinion, the criminal justice system accounts for 41,8% of the published content. This means that stories are mostly provided by the police and the security forces. These social actors thus control the knowledge on prostitution as well as their own image in the public sphere.

A large amount of their visible actions are isolated police operations or combined with the Portuguese Security Services (SEF). The police and security forces intervene in prostitution through the control of two figures: the prostitutes themselves and those who explore them. The stories continuously portray the detention of individuals or groups suspected of committing old illegal activities or new deviant behaviors in the “sex industry market”, which has become globalized. This permanent monitoring allows a continued flow of news on the arrests of pimps and prostitutes: headlines such as “Dozens of prostitutes identified by GNR¹¹” (*Diário de Notícias*, 30th January 2008), “45 women identified” (*Correio da Manhã*, 19th March 2007) become frequent propositions that reveal a tight control of both explorers and exploited.

The prominent image of prostitution therefore highlights illicit practices that are not necessarily at the root of women’s victimization, as some defend, but which create a symbolic climate of insecurity. The debates surrounding prostitution and

its concerns about health, employment and human rights are practically invisible in the press coverage. Here, law and order control actions clearly predominate.

This data also shows the intertextuality of the narratives with which the press builds prostitution. The “identification” process is a typical practice in the police approach to the phenomenon which, just as many other practices, permeates news coverage. Terms such as “suspect”, “defendant”, “detained”, or “accused” are accepted and reproduced in the press as if they were part of a “natural” grammar used by the law and order institutions, to which society should entrust the solution to prostitution and to the socio-economic problems associated with it.

Furthermore, prostitution occurs mostly within the private domain, concomitant with the trend that the “Passerelle case” symbolizes: “striptease bars or “places of night-time amusement”. On the other hand, “the streets” or “the roads” have a reduced presence in the news coverage of the commoditization of the female individuals.

Another important feature is the systematic exclusion of the actor at the receiving end of the sex industry. The client is visible in less than 5% of the total of stories on prostitution and on sex trafficking. Furthermore, its role, when noticeable, is clearly marginalized, as it is in the informal and institutional discourses on these phenomena (Monto, 2004). The client’s eclipsed figure reveals the place taken both by feminine and masculine sexuality in the dominant patriarchal culture: the use of feminine bodies, particularly in prostitution, is understood as a normal process of the male sexual experience. In this specific sense, it is unsurprising that the client’s role in the sex market is quite restrained in the press dominant discourse, which denies it any kind of active role (Van Leeuwen, 1994, p. 42). Actually, the client was identified in one news piece only as an active agent, meaning as someone with a voice of power on a particular reality where he is, in fact, a crucial element.

Beside the discursive arena occupied by the criminal justice system, the stories show a much less used, but alternative way of addressing prostitution, projecting it as legitimate work and as a means to reach fame and money. In these narratives the prostitutes are not symbolically built as deviants, or as transacted commodity in the globalized sex market. On the contrary, these women are represented as active players who made the choice to prostitute themselves or to become escorts. They only do it with whom they want, when they

want and are well paid for their services: “University students make fast money living a double life” (*Diário de Notícias*, 16th March 2008); “The confessions of four call girls” (*Sábado*, 27th December 2007); “Life of the ex-prostitute Bruna Surfistinha is made into a movie” (*Diário de Notícias*, 10th April 2007). This kind of representation produces a glamour effect exemplary highlighted in the news story “The confessions of four call girls”: “today they are in Lisbon, tomorrow they can be in London, Tokyo or Las Vegas. The most exclusive escorts never know where the next call will come from – which can be worth thousands of euros” (*Sábado*, 27th December 2007).

5.2 News media construction of sex trafficking: the victims and the “others”

Regarding the coverage of items referring specifically to trafficking, four dominant themes were identified: the traffic itself (22,2%), the Passerelle case (12,9%), prostitution stories (9,3%), and stories of violence and/or discrimination against women (7,7%). This dispersion of themes suggests that the imaginary around trafficking for sexual exploitation is more complex, although not very distant from the prostitution field with which it frequently blends.

The most visible stories also result from the press interest in the deviant and the criminal issues. The “Passerelle case” configures the typical example of the links between police and judicial officers and productive routines. Nevertheless, its distinctive characteristic of continuous visibility places it in a particular position: it is the police “mega-operation” that puts an end to the “empire of Passerelle” and to the illicit business practices carried out by a network linked to transnational organized criminality.

It is true that the press has always been attracted to this kind of stories. However, the demands that media face in the market’s economy pushed the well documented trend to focus on what is deviant, on what challenges the borders of legal and morally acceptable behavior. Simultaneously, it favors the journalistic routines that privilege certain sources, discursive arenas and issues that coincide with dominant and hegemonic interests (Hall et. al., 1978; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991). For that reason, these stories are also the expression of the efficiency of the criminal justice system

and of judicial power: dozens of “defendants” were accused of 1.200 crimes and were taken to trial.

Since discursive choices may be politically and socially significant, as explained above, the way social actors were included or simply excluded in the news was analyzed, in particular through the “role allocation” category, which allows to see that the functions played in the discourse do not necessarily coincide with the active and passive roles that individuals play in the social world (Van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 43).

With the exception of police officers, security forces and judicial institutions, no other social actors who have a relevant role in these stories of crime have an included and have an active role in the discourse. The “dealers” and “pimps” are mainly the objectified agents of the discursive action unleashed by the law enforcement officers. In addition, they are represented through generic categories that favor their ‘externalization’ from the ‘common’ world, as the ‘others’, the ‘mafias’, ‘the foreigners’, ‘the networks’: they are not persons like ‘us’.

News media follow the typical dynamics of otherness that characterizes the representation of cultural minorities in the mainstream media (Van Dijk, 1997), also observed in the Portuguese press (Cunha, 2003; Silveirinha, & Peixinho, 2004). The way offenders are portrayed is only slightly inverted in the stories where they acquire the judicial condition of “defendants”, as in the news on the Passerelle case. Here, the social actors are also ‘passivated’, but essentially individualized, specifically through ‘nomination’ (Van Leeuwen, 1996).

Also, the two prevailing classes of women, ‘the trafficked’ and the ‘prostitutes’, do not have an active role in the discourses. News stories reproduce the cultural model of a passive and weak woman who cannot take an active role in the decision processes, except if it leads her to illegal migratory movements and to the condition of a commodity in the sex market. As documented by international research in this field (Barnett, 2016), women are held responsible for making unwise choices (Barnett, 2016). Female “agentivity” is only rarely noticed when women speak in the first person of their individual stories of prostitution.

As for the socio-demographic characteristics, when present, adulthood, nationality, and the indeterminate collective “foreigners” are emphasized, such as the categorization as “Brazilians” in women representations (“Most of the victims of sexual trafficking in Portugal are Brazilian”, *Público*, 9 October 2007; “Brazilians arrested

on the road”, *Diário de Notícias*, 11 January 2008). The dominant portrayal is therefore established through processes of inclusion or exclusion within which they are separated from the *national identity*. Consequently, there is a symbolic bound between ‘we’ and the ‘others’, the ones that challenge our culture, order and morality.

Likewise, an arbitrary mobilization of the Portuguese nationality in the reports was noticed. When the central issue is ‘traffic’, this reference is usually manifest; when the central issue is ‘prostitution’, that link, if present, is only in the latent content of the news text. Differently, with regard to other nationalities, prostitutes are represented through clear references to their illegal presence in the country. The ideological implications of this labeling process suggest different meanings related to the specific discursive context. While the idea of prostitution remains a symbol of moral feminine depravity, ideally placed within the ‘others’, different from ‘us’, trafficking turns national borders expendable, since the explored woman is always a victim. There is therefore a moral polarization of the feminine identity: the victims and the “others”, the prostitutes, who challenge the national morality and are the source of social disquiet. As expected, the centrality given to the sexualized feminine body in the visual content of the newspapers was identified¹².

We can also address the misrepresentation of mainstream press discourses by highlighting the discrete presence of political actors. However, when included, Government and state organisms are active social actors, triggering stories within which a certain political agenda which addresses trafficking as a criminological problem emerges: “Government wants to protect victims of trafficking” (*Público*, 23th June 2007); “Trafficking of human beings under watch” (*Jornal de Notícias*, 7th June 2007).

Also occasionally represented, academy or NGO experts play, along the lines of political actors, active roles through which they reinforce the governmental agenda. In general, they are individualized and nominated, and their function within the symbolic journalistic arena seems to be to provide information on socio-economic contexts, diagnosis and conceptions about trafficked women and other vulnerable groups.

Finally, civil society, even though not entirely absent, has a very limited capacity to access and participate in the analyzed discourse of sex trafficking.

6 Final remarks: the unexplored emancipatory media potential

The analyzed coverage can be seen as a particular type of discourse that dissents from the ideal public space. This dominant discourse is an expression and somewhat a cause of the lack of access by subjects, perspectives and voices to the public space. Given the lack of diversity in the news gathering and source selection, institutions with higher social power, particularly those within the law and order systems, define sex trafficking and prostitution and validate the rightness of the viewpoints about both issues. Indeed, news stories essentially gravitate around criminal events.

These results draw the media's discursive practice as a dominant cognitive and cultural knowledge rooted in beliefs and axiological systems through which ideology is reproduced. News discourse is, in this context, less engaged with transformative change than with the maintenance of dominant interests in society. This coverage invites to frame trafficking issues through the focus of specific social actors. That invitation is embedded at a micro level in the authorial techniques of the crime-reporting genre. As shown, it is through the actors represented as active agents, who already have social power, that the problematic issues are conceived and addressed, through a discursive arena inseparable from a criminological and a nationalist frame. While the criminalization of trafficking and of sexual exploitation is among the States' mechanisms claimed by the feminist project, the truth is that other areas of social intervention are equally in need of serious consideration.

Absent in the press discourse is, for instance, the client, a trend that reveals the focus on the sale of sex, not the purchase of sex, and that skews the real nature of sex industry: that of women and men who are polarized in the roles of demand and supply, corresponding to unequal powers of autonomy and agency. Furthermore, news do not bring into consideration the prior conditions and the economy context that have driven women (voluntarily or not) to migration and prostitution. Yet, they mainly exclude from public discourse society deep-seated contentions, especially those regarding the social, politic and economic contexts of the victims.

Also, by intensifying the foreigners as the main participants in deviant situations, news media representations favored the dynamics of otherness. While doing so, *media* do not act separately and in an

idiosyncratic way. The production of bias news cannot be understood without considering the hegemonic consensus around the question of how society should be: in terms of its morality, legality and collective identity. In the Portuguese press, this consensus was narrowly confined to the social control dynamics – police operations, arrests, trials, surveillance, borders control. However, this does not mean that media coverage of trafficking and prostitution – frequently mixed in the news stories – has failed to provide an important visibility for public awareness. What is troubling is that this visibility only focuses on a part of the problem: the institutional one. The political-criminal agenda was blended with the media agenda, determining that the access to the public sphere was done according to a certain understanding of power hierarchies.

The consequences of these representation dynamics are politically and socially significant for the women who are involved in trafficking and prostitution, and for women in general. It would be in their interest to integrate their narratives in the dominant knowledge of the phenomenon. It turns out that, apparently, their status to access the public sphere is not recognized. What we see in the news are the “problems” that have been identified as such by those who already have the power to define them.

It is therefore essential that feminist research keep the mediatized constructions of sex trafficking under close scrutiny, assessing possible changes in representation trends. The still little-studied journalistic production processes will also be a particularly important subject of research, not only to understand the reasons underlying the profound imbalances documented in media discourses but also, and above all, to explore its emancipatory potential. This intervention front appears as a promising avenue to truly influence the lives of women.

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NOTES

- 1 The International Labour Office (ILO, 2014) estimates that “the total illegal profits obtained from the use of forced labor worldwide amount to US\$150,2 billion per year”. Almost two thirds of the profits – US\$99.0 billion – are made in forced sexual exploitation.
- 2 The Protocol defines trafficking in persons as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs”. It also considers irrelevant the consent of the victim where any of the referred means have been used.
- 3 For a detailed analysis of the normative evolution of this legal precept see: Santos, Gomes, Duarte, & Baganha, 2008.
- 4 The research project “Women and public space – the role of the media in priority areas of the Beijing Platform for Action”, hosted in the Portuguese Center for Media and Journalism Research (PTDC/CCI/67146/2006).
- 5 For an overview of the results of the research on which this work is based, see: Simões & Peça (2009).
- 6 It was used Van Leeuwen (1996) concept of social actor.
- 7 The terms used were “women trafficking”, “prostitution” and “pimping”.
- 8 A diverse range of variables was used, including the journalistic format of the article, the importance of each article in the newspaper’s structure (highlight in the first page or valorization with graphic elements), as well as its nuclear theme.
- 9 The coding was done by the author and an assistant researcher as group work, after several tests have been performed. When-

ever there was disagreement, the information was re-read and discussed until a consensus was reached.

- 10 The following variables were used: socio-demographic (nationality and age range), sociocultural (social roles, naming forms) and formal-descriptive (presence in graphic elements, manifest or latent reference to illegality).
- 11 GNR – Republican National Guard.
- 12 Sexualized depiction of women was found in about 50% of all cases where a picture accompanies news pieces.

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