

# Opportunities and limitations in the counter-trafficking field: the experience of participating in Portuguese counter-trafficking networks

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National and transnational collaborations and networks, within and across different sectors, are often described as critical elements of counter-trafficking efforts. This assumption has encouraged the proliferation in the Portuguese counter-trafficking field of national and local networks, bringing together governmental and non-governmental organizations to work on issues relating to “human trafficking”. Using autoethnography as a methodological and narrative tool, this article explores the type of collaboration and cooperation characterizing these cross-sectoral networks and the opportunities and limitations they bring, including the favouring of a substantial “victim-centered” approach to trafficking. The discussion argues that the differences in priorities, capital and power of network members help shape the opportunities and limitations of these networks, that are largely configured as an anti-politics instrument of the neoliberal counter-trafficking apparatus.

**KEYWORDS:** human trafficking, NGO, networks, cross-sectoral collaboration, autoethnography, Portugal.

**Oportunidades e limitações no campo do combate ao tráfico: a experiência de participação nas redes portuguesas de combate ao tráfico** ♦ Colaborações e redes nacionais e transnacionais, dentro e entre diferentes setores, são frequentemente descritas como uma peça fundamental nos esforços de combate ao “tráfico de pessoas”. Este pressuposto tem incentivado a proliferação, inclusive no campo português de combate ao tráfico, de redes nacionais e locais que reúnem organizações governamentais e não governamentais que trabalham em questões relacionadas com o tráfico. Utilizando a autoetnografia como ferramenta metodológica e narrativa, o artigo analisa o tipo de colaboração e cooperação que caracteriza as atuais redes multisetoriais e as oportunidades e limitações que elas trazem, tendo em vista uma abordagem ao tráfico “centrada na vítima”. O artigo argumenta que as diferenças nas prioridades, no capital ou no poder dos seus membros moldam as oportunidades e limitações dessas redes, que se configuram, principalmente, como um instrumento antipolítico do aparelho neoliberal de combate ao tráfico.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** tráfico de pessoas, ONG, redes, colaboração intersectorial, autoetnografia, Portugal.

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## NEGOTIATING MYSELF, NEGOTIATING MY MEMBERSHIP

The chairs are arranged in a circular pattern, next to the walls of the room. The headquarters of the non-governmental organization (NGO) that manages the meeting is located near the *rotunda*. It is in the socio-economic centre of the city of Lisbon, but the apartment that hosts the meeting is simple. It could have been donated by a wealthy philanthropist who left its unlikely restructuring in the hands of the NGO. Or not.

It is the autumn of 2018. My first meeting with one of the Portuguese trafficking networks. The meeting's manager, before moving on to what she describes as the main item on the agenda, feels the need to say that she knows my work on trafficking and the criticisms it makes. However, she adds that the goal of the meeting is to present the latest counter-trafficking national plan and define the subsequent activities of the network, rather than enter into a debate about its legitimacy.

Alongside me, seated at the perimeter of the room, are representatives of other NGO and municipal governing bodies – mostly women – and a representative of a governmental organization – a tall, well-dressed man.

## AS AN INTRODUCTION

In 2018, I joined a Portuguese organization within the national counter-trafficking field. The NGO unexpectedly found itself without sufficient professional human resources and project activities – let alone economic resources – to guarantee its participation within the counter-trafficking field, including the various counter-trafficking networks of which it is a member. In the preceding few years, I have been working on “human trafficking” as a researcher.<sup>1</sup> By doing so, I developed strong reservations, specifically doubts, as to whether the worldwide fight against trafficking and the progressive strengthening of Portuguese institutional counter-trafficking efforts was actually beneficial to the “victims” they seek to rescue. The experience of conducting fieldwork in particular had fuelled a strong critique, both in respect to the security-led approach to trafficking, and a simplistic, even pathologizing, representation of the problem and its victims (Clemente 2017b, 2021). The NGO's invitation to support it in its counter-trafficking activities and represent it within various national and international networks seemed to me an opportunity to strengthen my academic commitment to justice and social change (see also Cann and DeMeulenaere 2020).

From the first moments of my participation within the Portuguese counter-trafficking networks I referred to above, despite what appeared to me as an

1 I occasionally use quotation marks to emphasize the fact that I am not taking for granted the meaning of certain terms and expressions.

expectation from my interlocutors to suspend my researcher self and act as a regular member, the questions I address in this paper started to emerge: what are the opportunities and limitations of and within counter-trafficking coalitions, and what actual goals and collaboration among the various counter-trafficking actors and organizations are emerging from within these structures?

To answer these questions, I will explore my experience of participating in these networks. Taking an autoethnography analytic approach, in this article I argue that in contexts characterized by a strong institutionalization of counter-trafficking, multi-sector collaborations and networks serve mainly to maintain and reinforce bureaucratic state power. Despite some reservations and resistance from actors and organizations within the networks, differences in priorities, alongside differentials in possession of “capital” and power,<sup>2</sup> effectively limit possibilities for change towards a substantial “victim-centered” approach to trafficking.

#### COUNTER-TRAFFICKING AND COUNTER-TRAFFICKING NETWORKS, COALITIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

To better position my analysis, it is worth remembering that mobilization for the abolishment of “traffic” – identified with the cross-border movement of women and girls into prostitution – has a long history, traceable back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was after this time that a link was established between “human trafficking” and transnational organized crime, leading to the development of the more recent international instrument against trafficking: the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (also known as the Trafficking Protocol or Palermo Protocol), which, expanding the idea of trafficking and its victims,<sup>3</sup> supplemented the 2000 UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (United Nations 2000).

2 I follow Bourdieu’s (1986) definition of capital as a generalized resource – monetary and non-monetary, tangible and intangible – that empowers social agents. According to the scholar (1986, 1990), there are various forms of capital: economic (economic resources); cultural (*e.g.*, cultural goods, competencies, educational qualifications); social (*e.g.*, friendships, social networks); and symbolic (*e.g.*, honour, prestige, legitimate authority).

3 According to the international legal definition of human trafficking provided by the UN Trafficking Protocol, it is “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 labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs” (art. 3[a]).

From the time of the elaboration of the Trafficking Protocol, a series of potential negative impacts of anti-trafficking measures have been noted, starting with state restrictions on women who migrate for sex work (Doezema 2010). In the years following its adoption, other forms of “collateral damage” related to anti-trafficking laws and policies have been confirmed (Dottridge 2017). In fact, counter-trafficking soon proved to be a controversial instrument in the governance of sex work, migration and gender, supporting prejudice against both women, men and transgender migrants (Mai 2018; Molland 2019; Piscitelli 2013; Silva, Ribeiro e Granja 2013). The Trafficking Protocol focus, in ensuring national security, has contributed to make imprisonment, detention and deportation a common experience among migrants labelled as “victims of trafficking”. Meanwhile, in the absence of hard obligations to protect trafficked migrants in the Protocol, states have usually resorted to the implied right, under the convention, to link the provision of victim’s assistance with their willingness to co-operate with criminal justice agencies against their traffickers, even when this put them in danger (Gallagher 2017). Despite acknowledgment of an opportunity to integrate a different perspective into counter-trafficking laws, policies and interventions by the international political discourse,<sup>4</sup> more than 20 years after the Trafficking Protocol, a paradigm that privileges state security and a criminal justice focus on the punishment of “traffickers” prevails over what might be considered an actual “victim-centered” approach that favours their security and well-being.

Turning our attention to the different agents in the counter-trafficking field, the mobilization of a heterogeneous complex of counter-trafficking actors and organizations is as old as counter-trafficking itself. Since the 1980s, in different contexts, NGO have frequently taken the lead in counter-trafficking mobilization (Chew 2015; Limoncelli 2016; Musto 2010). Reflecting on the Trafficking Protocol negotiations, Anne T. Gallagher (2017) describes the level of participation of groups of increasingly well-organized NGO, as well as intergovernmental organizations (IGO), as “unprecedented”. The lobbying and advocacy activities of NGO networks such as the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW), based in the United States, and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), based in Thailand, found a strong push in the issue of prostitution and the way in which it was to be dealt in addressing (sex) trafficking (Doezema 2010; Wylie 2016). At European level, since the mid-nineties, there have also been NGO networks such as La Strada international, characterized by efforts to share information to improve service provision and advocacy activity, and in responding to the scarcity of resources and capacity

4 See also the webinars organized on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the UN Trafficking Protocol: < <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Trafficking/Pages/20-Years-After.aspx> > (last consulted may 2022).

that often characterizes individual NGO that operate in the counter-trafficking field (DoCarmo 2019; Hoff 2014).

In the meantime, both IGO – starting with the various UN agencies – and government organizations (GO) usually depend on NGO – especially domestic ones – to carry out their counter-trafficking activities. This has further contributed to the fact that, in the last 20 years, the number of NGO involved in the fight against trafficking has increased, even in contexts where legislative efforts are weak (Limoncelli 2016). Moreover, in anti-trafficking language and policy, there were “three Ps” – prevention, protection, persecution – but a “fourth P” – partnerships – are increasingly being added as a centerpiece of anti-trafficking strategies, under pressure from the US government. The underlying idea behind these practices is that the (in)effectiveness of the fight against trafficking also depends on the level of collaboration and coordination of counter-trafficking efforts between various local, national and international counter-trafficking actors (Foot 2019; Foot, Sworn and Alejano-Steele 2019). Currently, structured multi-NGO coalitions and multi-sector partnerships are actively encouraged by designated funders and/or as a requirement for funding (Davy 2013a).

Within the small body of studies addressing current inter- and multi-organization collaborations and partnerships, efforts to detail them firstly suggest their extreme heterogeneity (see DoCarmo 2019). Within this scholarship, some challenges to the emergence of NGO networks – such as the absence of a strong local policy framework and a lack of funding as well as power politics and weak organizational capacities – are emphasized (Noyori-Corbett and Moxley 2018). Meanwhile, these studies rarely debate the potential of counter-trafficking national and transnational networks, coalitions and task forces, within and among governmental, private and public sectors, to prevent trafficking, coordinate service provision and advocate for policy change (Gerassi, Nichols and Michelson 2017; Kim *et al.* 2018; Jones and Lutze 2016). In an analysis of transnational anti-child sex trafficking networks in the Greater Mekong Subregion, Deanna Davy (2013b) comes to describe these groups as a new form of “globalization from below” for their role in promoting cosmopolitan values, shaping international norms, and developing international law and policy. Furthermore, according to Davy, what sustains these partnerships over time is the sharing of cosmopolitan ideas and goals, such as the effort to secure social justice through reform of global social arrangements. In line with this argument, Kirsten Foot (2019) identifies tensions between different values, beliefs and priorities as one of the challenges that anti-trafficking collaborations and networks can face. She adds to this challenge, suggesting a need for greater caution in multi-sector practices due to perceived or actual differences in the power, status and financial resources of each organization and sector attempting to collaborate, as well as gender and race-based power dynamics (Foot 2019).

The experience in and of some of the current Portuguese counter-trafficking networks confirms the presence of some of these concerns. These challenges have not led to the dissolution of the established networks – at least formally – but they seem to question their ability to contribute to the better governance of trafficking or even debate the legitimacy of hegemonic approaches.

#### THE PORTUGUESE COUNTER-TRAFFICKING FIELD: ACTORS AND ALLIANCES

In the context of this study, the goal of compliance with international and European agendas on trafficking has contributed to trafficking becoming a political concern (Clemente 2017a). Unlike what has happened in other contexts, in Portugal the mobilization against human trafficking has historically been led by government agencies who have played a major role in defining what “trafficking” is and who its “victims” are, and in the production and implementation of current counter-trafficking policies and interventions. In particular, an analysis of the construction of the Portuguese counter-trafficking field has highlighted the fact that governmental actors have accepted, first of all, the transnational conceptualization of trafficking as an organized crime problem and the security-led approach to trafficking resulting from it (Clemente 2019). Despite the implementation of the practical logics of the “three Ps” – namely the prevention of trafficking; prosecution of traffickers; and protection to secure the human rights of victims – and the adoption of humanitarian language, this focus on national security rather than the security of trafficked persons has challenged victims’ assistance and protection through a controversial subordination to their willingness to cooperate in the criminal investigation, prosecution and trial of traffickers, as well as their identification by police forces (Clemente 2017b). The shrinking of the welfare state and a need for counterparts in addressing human trafficking, combined with pressure from the transnational counter-trafficking field through the monitoring work of bodies such as the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (Greta), has also encouraged the participation of NGO in the Portuguese counter-trafficking field (Clemente 2021). Governmental actors opened this field to NGO with whom they shared strong connections and institutionalized relationships. The historical economic and political dependence of NGO on the state enabled some of them to extend their missions, which previously may have been altogether distant from the migration field, and labour and human rights issues, being perhaps oriented around gender-related issues. In this sense, NGO can be seen as close to the GO coordinating Portuguese anti-trafficking activities – the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality (CIG) – which has historically been committed to gender issues.



Over time, the activity of NGO in the field has remained restricted to the provision of services such as sheltering, awareness-raising, education and training. The NGO that can now be considered the main protagonist in the Portuguese counter-trafficking field, the Family Planning Association (APF), through five regional, multidisciplinary specialized teams (*equipas multidisciplinares especializadas*, EME), has expanded its alliances and interventions, assisting police bodies in the identification of “presumed victims” and their collaboration in criminal investigations against traffickers, as well as collaborating on victim repatriation. However, a large number of NGO have remained distant not only from policy-oriented activities that bring trafficking to the attention of the government, but also from advocating for policy improvements on behalf of trafficked persons. More generally, the NGO closest to the “field of power” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) have never questioned the idea of trafficking and the counter-trafficking laws, policies and practices of interventions of the transnational and Portuguese counter-trafficking field (Clemente 2019, 2021).

In recent years, the extension of anti-trafficking policy to a fourth P, partnerships, has contributed to the prevision, also in the Portuguese field, of different counter-trafficking networks. The first of these,<sup>5</sup> the Network for Support and Protection of Victims of Trafficking (RAPVT) was foreseen in the second National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Human Beings (II PAPCTSH 2011-2013) and was created in 2013. This national network is coordinated by CIG and composed of GO and NGO that either directly or indirectly intervene in the fight against trafficking. The protocol for the creation of the RAPVT describes it as a network of cooperation and information sharing the aim of preventing, protecting and reintegrating victims of trafficking.

In the following years, five regional RAPVT were gradually created with a multi-sector composition and purposes similar to those of the national RAPVT. One of the main differences, compared to the latter, is the dynamization of the networks by the main NGO in the Portuguese counter-trafficking field, the APF, through the previously mentioned EME.

## METHODS

As said earlier, this paper is based on analytic autoethnography (Anderson 2006) conducted within two of the previously mentioned networks: the national RAPVT and one of its regional branches, the RAPVT of Lisbon and Tagus Valley.

5 The establishment of the Support Commission for Human Trafficking Victims (CAVITP), a network composed of lay and religious civil society organizations, dates back to 2006. However, in this article I focus my attention on the networks that arose within the institutional counter-trafficking field.

Describing analytic autoethnography as an attempt to blend key features of evocative autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000) with the theoretical goals of analytic ethnography (Snow, Morrill and Anderson 2003), Leon Anderson (2006) outlines five key features: (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status; (2) analytic reflexivity; (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self; (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self; and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis. With respect to the complete member researcher (CMR) status, I should admit that, with what now feels like a certain naivety, when I joined these networks as a NGO representative, I thought that this would entail a suspension of my researcher self. Nevertheless, since the meeting mentioned in the opening lines of this article, the invitation to focus my attention on the main objective of the meeting, as well as the unexpected but instinctive and frantic act of noting down what was happening around me, led me to confront the fact that this suspension never really took place. On the contrary, even if my presence in the networks I was studying did not begin with a data-oriented research interest, the questions I now address here arose at the very first moments of my participation, challenging the rigid distinction between those that Patricia and Peter Adler (1987) describe as "opportunistic" and "convert" CMR, the former studying settings in which they are already members and the latter converting to group membership during the conducting of the research.

In particular, as consistently as possible, I mobilized an analytic autoethnography approach to inform a sociological inquiry of the opportunities and limitations of and within counter-trafficking coalitions and collaborations. I also sought to use autoethnographic research and writing as an instrument of self-clarification to answer questions relating to what I can and should do as an activist researcher in the counter-trafficking field: above all, if and how I ought to remain within these "networks".

#### BECOMING MEMBERS, NEGOTIATING COLLABORATIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

In the last few years, my research activity on trafficking and as an activist researcher – participating and, in some cases, founding networks and groups for the defense of women, men and transgender persons in the sex market<sup>6</sup> – has given me the chance to come into contact, share values, objectives and actions, and establish relationships of trust with a group of actors. Among these is the Alternative and Answer Women's Union (UMAR), with whom

6 This is the case of the Network on Sex Work (RTS), bringing together NGO, sex workers, and researchers, and of the Interdisciplinary Research Group on Sex Work (GIITS), founded in 2018, composed of researchers from different subject areas working in different Portuguese institutions.



I began to collaborate and represent in different Portuguese and European anti-trafficking networks.

UMAR is a historic Portuguese women's NGO, emerging immediately after the Carnation Revolution of 1974. This NGO concern with sex trafficking – for a long time identified with prostitution – dates back to the late 1970s, when it developed a pioneer initiative in Portugal. This was in 1977 when, following the publishing of a few articles denouncing cases of trafficked women in Spain, UMAR launched a manifesto and convened an assembly which led to a trafficking inquiry concerning these cases (Tavares 2000).

In the following decades, while UMAR took on the feminist label and started making a distinction between sex trafficking and prostitution, the attention and intervention of civil society organizations, including UMAR, focused on other issues, leaving trafficking at the margins (Clemente 2021). Trafficking also remained outside the political and media agenda for a long time. However, in the early 2000s, when the construction of the current Portuguese counter-trafficking field began, UMAR started to be invited by government actors to collaborate on the issue of trafficking.

In an era prior to the creation of the current specialized shelters for trafficking victims, the NGO was called upon to provide assistance and shelter to trafficking victims in centres run by it. Moreover, in some years, the NGO participated, as a partner, in European and national projects focusing on activities promoting the prevention and access to assistance of “sex trafficked women”. Furthermore, since 2013, UMAR has been integrated as a member in national and European networks committed to fight against trafficking and the protection of its victims. This is the case of the national and regional RAPVT, as well as the European Union Civil Society Platform against Trafficking of Human Beings.

The solid relations of UMAR within the field of power witnessed by its belonging to the Advisory Council of the current CIG – that is, the coordinating entity of counter-trafficking policies – as well as the “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu 1990) it has accumulated through its intervention on women issues, has contributed to the involvement of the NGO in the counter-trafficking field (Clemente 2019, 2021), although as I will come to discuss, does not necessarily extend to influencing or even debating the trafficking political agenda; as is the case of other NGO, in more recent years it has remained substantially on the margins of this field.

Furthermore, within this field, a small number of NGO that have never questioned the idea of trafficking as a criminal problem and the relative policies and logical practices of intervention have attained increasing prominence. The logics of the counter-trafficking field envisage, among other things, the consolidation of partnerships with actors, such as police forces, who have very different objectives. The challenges that accompany these logics are

well expressed in the words of a UMAR's representative during an interview conducted during the field research:

“We met in the situation of having to decide whether or not to be part of a European project that involved partnership with the police of several European countries. Our senses were immediately alert. In the work on domestic violence there has always been collaboration with the police: if we have to get a woman out of a house, we turn to the police. But that doesn't mean we have been partners of the police.” [UMAR, interview April 2018, author's translation]

These collaborations and partnerships, as conditions of being allowed to make interventions in the counter-trafficking field, have contributed to challenging the availability of human resources dedicated to the issue: “We are too few for so much work. We have an approach that doesn't allow us to accept things like that, without questioning ourselves, but we are few” [UMAR, interview April 2018, author's translation].

The sharing of certain concerns, albeit deriving from different experiences – of research in my case and intervention in the case of the NGO – has contributed to a broader reflection on the mutual expectations of intervention in the counter-trafficking field. It was a process that took place through the creation of discussion groups and training moments, as well as at public events – in all cases taking place outside project activities. This reflection motivated a constructive pro “victims” rights intervention, which could have given substance to the membership of the NGO in the various networks.

#### CHALLENGED BY THE UNQUESTIONABLE

The approval of the Council of Ministers during the spring of 2018, the 4<sup>th</sup> National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Human Beings 2018-2021 (4<sup>th</sup> PAPCTSH 2018-2021), which went into public consultation with citizens, and public and private entities, also created opportunities for mobilization and participation among NGO. The public consultation notice stated: “The construction of the new plan was based on extensive consultation with government departments, municipalities, specialists and organized civil society organizations, under the technical coordination of the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.”<sup>7</sup> However, despite its historical presence within the counter-trafficking field, UMAR remained on the sidelines of this consultation.

7 See < <https://www.portugal.gov.pt/pt/gc21/consulta-publica?i=243> > (last consulted may 2021).

Through a series of meetings, I participated in the analysis and discussion of the plan within the NGO, in order to respond to the public consultation. In its response, the NGO firstly emphasized “the need to promote and strengthen networking with civil society organizations working [in the area of trafficking]” considering, among other things, the need to “strengthen its composition and the modalities of its functioning” (Contribution for the 4<sup>th</sup> PAPCTSH, April 30, 2018). As for the objectives of the plan, the NGO limited itself to drawing attention to the need to assure a concrete “victim-centered” approach, fearing that current “legislative provision is not sufficient, in practice, to guarantee this objective” (Contribution for the 4<sup>th</sup> PAPCTSH, April 30, 2018). In fact, as previously referred to, trafficked persons’ rights are subordinated to their cooperation in the criminal persecution of traffickers and, despite a special regime for granting residence permits to those unwilling or unable to co-operate with law enforcement, it has never been concretely applied. In June 2018, the plan was however approved with no response made to this concern.

On the occasion of my first meeting at the regional RAPVT of Lisbon and Tagus Valley, mentioned in the first page of this article, I was shown what can be concretely discussed within this kind of network. As time confirmed, this would have included the general sharing of information on some of its members’ activities – mostly awareness-raising activities performed outside a coordinated and predefined plan. The main focus of the (two) annual meetings of this network would have been the sharing (*i.e.*, reading) of the objectives of the National Plan and the confirmation of the subsequent objectives of the regional network – mostly public events and campaigns. Despite episodic and prudent references to challenges in the assistance of trafficked persons, at local level, the absence of a substantial discussion on opportunities and limitations in intervention with the “victims” remained and became chronic, suggesting that certain issues were not to be regarded as subjects for criticism.

Power relations among actors and organizations of the network come into play by contributing to defining what is questionable and what is not. Scholarship on cross-sectoral coalitions have highlighted how perceived or actual differences in power based on financial resources and status can influence the dynamics of collaborations between organizations and sectors also in the counter-trafficking field (Foot 2019). In the case of regional RAPVT, its very constitution is part of the funded activities of one of the NGO in the field, the APF. Through national funding, with the creation of this network, the NGO has strengthened what Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1990) would define as its “economic capital” as well as its “social” and “symbolic capital”, by calling up a series of other actors and organizations selected by it and coordinated within the network, resources it presumably does not wish to lose through taking

oppositional positions towards prevailing institutionalized norms and values. The differences in capital of this NGO are also reflected in differences in power that characterize the regional RAPVT (*i.e.*, a NGO-led network), as well as the GO-led network (the national RAPVT). In other words, substantial differences in power significantly affect interactions within the same sector – the NGO sector – as well as between different sectors, defining what is questioned and what is not within counter-trafficking networks.

The result is at least singular. It creates a climate of (apparent) non-conflictual collaboration within the network by excluding traditional elements of tension. This is firstly the case in regard to a conflicted conceptualization of a “victim-centered” approach to trafficking, that traditionally creates tensions, primarily between the law enforcement sector and the victim service provider sector – the first prioritizing the pursuit of criminal justice through the prosecution of traffickers, the second, the support of victims (see also Foot 2019).

As for the members of the RAPVT, I have no doubt that many of those I have found myself sitting alongside in a circle over the past few years share a sincere concern for “trafficked men, women and children” as well as having the harshest condemnation for their “traffickers”. Meanwhile, they are mostly representatives of organizations and institutions whose mission remains substantially distant from the fight against trafficking and the protection of trafficked persons and, with it, from any traditional conflicting debate in this field. I imagine that a few members of the RAPVT have even shared the feeling of frustration, which I felt since the end of my first network meeting. Then, when I reached my PC, I couldn’t help but ask myself:

“What was I doing sitting there today? What contribution can I make outside of legitimizing the policies and practical logics that arouse my criticism both as a researcher and as an activist? How to be there without contradicting my ideas, values, goals of justice? What is the space for dialogue and action that really exists within a counter-trafficking network?” [author’s field notes, November 9, 2018]

The months following my first network meeting went by in silence.

#### CHALLENGED BY THE QUESTIONABLE

The questionable, as well as the unquestionable, soon proved to be challenging elements within and of the network’s activities. Exhibitions, seminars and public debates – generally coinciding with the dates of the World Day against Trafficking in Persons (July 30) and the European Anti-Trafficking Day (October 18) – mobilize all its members without resistance. The questions are few. Multi-sectoral support is broad.

“The team [of APF/EME] reached the meeting smiling with a new game. It was the tool of the new counter-trafficking campaign. The previous months have passed without any further news. I was convinced that the idea of the campaign had failed due to the lack of funds. When I saw the team satisfied with the new game in hand, I was tempted to ask where the idea for the campaign came from, as well as the funds. The unreserved acceptance of the remaining participants in the meeting suspended the opportunity of any question. During an hour, the game passed from hand to hand. We discussed the need to specify one word or another within it. No one has questioned the idea and its effectiveness. There is also no doubt of the interest of the respective organizations to sign the game with their own logo.” [author’s fieldnotes, October 4, 2019]

Those are fieldnotes made following a meeting of the network which took place in the autumn of 2019. A few days later, on October 18, European Anti-Trafficking Day would be celebrated. All the participants in the meeting were ready to disseminate the new anti-trafficking awareness campaign. When it was first talked about, a few months earlier, the chance to participate in its construction seemed to me like an opportunity to make a contribution within the limited space of what was questionable within the network. However, the way the project was managed had left little chance for a substantial contribution to be made.

After months of silence, the idea of the campaign reappeared only a few days before its launch, with a name and an appealing message: “Human trafficking: myth or reality?”, as well as an evident ambition to give definitive answers to questions traditionally defined by the variable local intersection of the neoliberal governance of gender, labour and migration. What actually appeared in the meeting was the tool, the game “How much do you want”? Its plan was undefined, without clear and measurable objectives, a chosen public, key actions, effective monitoring or evaluation.

Then I naively asked: “Who is the target of the game?” With some hesitation, the team of organizers replied: “The general population, the professionals... it’s to raise awareness of the need to know more about the issue”. It’s at this point that one of the few men at the meeting (they are usually representatives of GO, IGO and police forces) took the floor, adding: “Mara, the important thing is that we talk about [trafficking]”.

Over time, the campaign target has probably been redefined and oriented towards the migrant population.<sup>8</sup> With the support of the members of the network, the game “How much do you want?” was translated into various

8 See < <http://www.apf.pt/node/786> > e < <https://www.cig.gov.pt/2020/10/combate-ao-traffic-seres-humanos-assinalado-norte-sul-do-pais/> > (last consulted may 2022).

languages and disseminated on social networks and in the headquarters of some network members. An analysis of this and other awareness raising campaigns carried out in the context of the study remains outside the scope of this article. I will limit myself to noting that the limited analysis available has constantly emphasized the opportunity for actions designed on the basis of an assessment of previous measures and targeting identified needs (Greta 2013, 2017). The most important thing the episode of this campaign suggests is that the questionable, as well as the unquestionable, can place similar challenges.

Once again, I am not questioning the humanitarian desire of the various members of the network to fight against trafficking, which was probably animated further on the occasion of the launch of the game “How much do you want?”. Meanwhile, the different priorities, as well as the power of each organization and sector, in which gender-based power dynamics may also be present, seem to challenge any constructive possibility of counter-trafficking collaborations. As a scholar, I became aware of the need to speak about trafficking in the most informed and effective way, as well as with caution with respect to stereotyped and simplistic representations of the problem and its victims (see also Cojocaru 2016). It’s not enough for me to just talk about “trafficking” and its “victims”. As an activist, on the occasion of the launch of the game “How much do you want?”, I felt troubled by the dubious mobilization of human and financial resources for a campaign whose utility I could not grasp. The enthusiasm of the remaining members of the network was probably greater than my ability to share my reservations about the campaign.

In the few (three) days left to the network members to contribute to the “campaign”, within the UMAR NGO, reservations increased. After a shared evaluation, the NGO explained in a communication that:

“We have some doubts about the objective, the target population, the planning and the content of the campaign that we would have liked to think about better.

The tight deadlines will not allow our best contribution to the campaign. Thus, UMAR requests that its logo won’t not be used.

It remains to be emphasized that we remain available to make our contribution to upcoming initiatives, suggesting sharing the planned activities with the appropriate advance.” [E-mail communication, October 15, 2019]

Even within the field of what was questionable, the participation and substantial contribution within the network seemed challenged until emptied of its potential.



## NEGOTIATING OTHER OPPORTUNITIES

Until now, I have made reference to my experiences within one of the local branches of the RAPVT. After several years, at the end of November 2020, a message broke the multi-year long silence of this network, announcing that a National Referral System (NRM) of “victims” under 18 years of age was being drawn up.

Despite its relevance, the tool had essentially remained, once again, outside of what could be questioned. At least for some members of the network: the communication also mentioned the presence of a “sector working group”, made up of GO, police bodies and two NGO, involved in the development of the referral system. The remaining members of the network were asked to provide comments on the document within a few days. The nature of the contributions, it was felt, had to be in “track-changes format and with inclusion of alternative wording and no reference to other documents.” [E-mail communication, November 24, 2020].

After a few days, I laboriously shared within the NGO my comments relating to the document, of almost a hundred pages.

“Did you see the email I forwarded to you? – I asked – “We have 10, no, nine days to send our contribution”.

“Can we meet to review the document together?”, someone replies.

A naïve question follows: “I have noted some points that are not clear to me. Do you think we could ask for more information?”.

“It is useless for you to send me your notes, at most we can insert in a comment the alternative wording of a few sentences”, I explain, while I ask myself perplexed in front of the document: “... the characterization of the profiles is based on experience on the ground or on desk research”?

After hectic days dotted with annotations in the margin and unanswered questions, emerged the idea of asking for a meeting of the RAPVT to share the proposal more widely, as well as defining working modalities and times that guaranteed the constructive involvement of the different members of the network. Once again, the communication received no response.

In this article I will not enter into the merits of the NRM in question. Once again, this system would deserve an analysis dedicated to it. What interests me here is that, although the NRM’s creation document indicated one of the key moments of its inception in the validation of RAPVT, the actual involvement of this network appears as formal rather than as a substantial element.

Over the years, doubts have sometimes emerged within the UMAR NGO, as well as for me, about the appropriateness of our presence within the various counter-trafficking networks. This presence has repeatedly confronted political and intervention logics that passively accepted rather than debated via participation. In the meantime, as in other contexts, belonging to the

aforementioned networks has become a premise, even if not a guarantee, for developing interventions in the area of trafficking and gaining access to the resources provided, at least on a national level.

In the case of UMAR this possibility has progressively reduced to episodic training activities over the years, usually following the predefined training programmes of funders. This is the case with one I was invited to participate in as a trainer. It was in autumn 2020. Among the participants were both GO representatives and NGO of different nature and with very diversified experiences. Some were looking for definitive answers on identifying and rescuing “presumed victims” they intended to seek. To my naïve surprise, there were those (but not many) with experience in victim support, who started challenging the idea of the problem, its victims and above all current policy and practice in interventions.

This is the case for the social worker I will call Melina who, during the training course, shared some support challenges. One of these involves the experience of a middle-aged homeless drug addicted man I will call Zé, trafficked for exploitation in criminal activities. After a period of exploitation and violence, Zé managed to escape and report this to the police. Zé was housed in a shelter for trafficked people, but after a few months he received a court notification that condemned him for the crimes he committed. Zé is of Portuguese origin and does not risk “voluntary” repatriation to the country of origin. While the police needs to investigate the victimization experience lived by Zé (*i.e.* evidence for the conviction of his trafficker), social workers seek solutions so that Zé has access to his rights as a “victim”, including the right not to be convicted for crimes committed during exploitation.

Within a space of relative liberty, all the challenges I had encountered during my research on trafficking seemed to re-emerge. To continue thinking about the best answers, it will probably be necessary to wait for new counter-trafficking networks and coalitions. Or for the next training course.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article I have discussed my first-hand experience on engaging with some of the most prominent Portuguese counter-trafficking networks with a view to developing a better understanding of their internal collaborations. The main research question concerned the opportunities these networks offer to promote a substantial “victim-centered” approach to trafficking in a field that is characterized by the institutionalization of counter-trafficking norms and practices inspired by a state security approach and a criminal justice focus. My expectation, as an activist-researcher, was that these networks could offer spaces of confrontation around the policies and interventions that currently limit the broadest access to substantial protection for people labelled as

“victims”. However, I soon discovered that the different priorities, statuses and power levels of the members of these networks contribute to the leaving out of substantial confrontation regarding what is deemed questionable (in the case of anti-trafficking awareness campaigns, seminars, etc.), as well as what remains outside these confines (such as current policies and practices of intervention).

Unlike some international agencies, these networks arose mostly under the direction of governmental actors, encouraged by international and European counter-trafficking actors to enact greater involvement of civil society organizations and multi-sector interventions. Even when the promoter and coordinator of these networks is an NGO, this is a highly institutionalized actor, with a different status and a privileged position of power compared to the other members of the networks, whose priorities do not include the (at least public) concern with sharing successes and challenges in interventions with trafficked persons. Rather, in addition to the name, the NGO-led networks seem to re-propose the logic of the GO-led networks, where comparison among members on the limited space of the questionable has a formal rather than substantial nature.

My experience in other contexts of interaction also suggests that the individual professionals of the (limited number of) Portuguese agencies and organizations that interact with and assist trafficked persons need to mobilize a certain “practical knowledge” (Caria 2017) to face the challenges posed by current counter-trafficking policies. This kind of knowledge – that together with the “abstract and formal knowledge” make up the “professional knowledge” (Caria and Pereira 2017) – is fundamental in dealing with the limitations that the current security approach places on the protection of trafficked persons. Meanwhile, the networks that bring together some of what Michael Lipsky (2010: xi) would describe as “street-level bureaucracies” – that is “agencies whose workers interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions” – remain far from being configured as spaces for translation and adjustment of counter-trafficking policy in concerns with guaranteeing the substantial rights of “victims”.

Although Portuguese counter-trafficking networks start with a formal mission of generating information and cooperation in the furtherance of trafficking victims’ rights, within these organizations any constructive dialectic around what might be the best protection for the “victims” is silenced, thus limiting the mobilization of the professional knowledge of its members. This is made possible by the different role and power of GO and NGO protagonists in the creation and coordination of these networks: they annul the potential in promoting pro “victims” rights policies and interventions and focus their concerns on the procedural objective of networks creation and perpetuation.

In this way, these networks doubtless produce the expansion and entrenchment of bureaucratic state power, which apparently responds to the

counter-trafficking transnational objectives of a multi-sector counter-trafficking approach. Although good for keeping counter-trafficking organizations in business, these networks are also able to conveniently ignore many of the political facts that challenge access to rights among migrants labelled as “trafficking victims”. In fact, as we have seen in the course of this article, even issues that are apparently open to debate (as is the case for the organization of counter-trafficking events or campaigns) are actually managed without making possible substantial participation from the different members of the networks. As a result, these networks configure themselves into what could be termed as an anti-politics instrument of the neoliberal counter-trafficking apparatus (Ferguson 1990; Wacquant 1989): they contribute to the depoliticization of counter-trafficking, and their work ends up ignoring both the political reasons for “trafficking” and the failure of the counter-trafficking in both the persecution of “trafficking crime” and the protection of “trafficking victims”.

Probably only when, at Portuguese state level, the current limitations of the trafficking instrument are recognized, as happens within the wider transnational field, will it be possible to open up some space for reflection on the best way to guarantee the “victims” rights, also among the various agencies and organizations that populate the current counter-trafficking networks. This would mean combining current neoliberal “protection” and “partnerships” in a more political way. Meanwhile, in the pandemic winter of 2021, during a meeting of the regional RAPVT, I learned that the NGO I represent was in its Secretariat, as an alternate member. The network partners were asked to express themselves regarding the renewal of the Secretariat, even if without inviting them to its election. After a moment of internal reflection, the NGO decided to let other members of the network be involved, hopefully in a more substantial way, in this Secretariat. Will this favour greater participation and exchange of experiences and the best intervention in the fight against trafficking and protection of its victims? I will have to wait some time before I can answer.<sup>9</sup>

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