

Social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women: A systematic review[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Social schemas act as relatively enduring guidelines that impact individuals' interpretation and the planning of action toward a social phenomenon. Understanding the state of evidence on social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women is critical to the development of anti-trafficking responses. This systematic review aimed to a) examine the characteristics of studies (e.g., aim, design, methodology) addressing social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women victims, and b) map the social schemas regarding different types of human trafficking. An electronic search for peer-reviewed articles was conducted in 12 databases, resulting in 46 manuscripts meeting the inclusion criteria. Most of the studies rely on a qualitative design, were focused on human trafficking for sexual exploitation, and assessed social perceptions and knowledge. Overall, differences were found in social schemas between different social groups, namely victims, professionals, community members, and media, namely on beliefs, attributions, awareness, and knowledge. Media social schemas were mostly focused on human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Studies exploring community members' schemas suggested relevant associations of peoples' awareness, beliefs, and perceptions of self-efficacy with their knowledge about human trafficking, attributions of responsibility, and attitudes toward victims, as well as their willingness to engage in anti-trafficking actions. Victims and youth at-risk of human trafficking showed awareness about the risk factors and recruitment strategies but showed a lack of knowledge regarding local resources to help them in case of need. Finally, professionals presented the most incongruent schemas, suggesting that their knowledge depends on the type of organization they belong to and their personal attitudes and perceptions about human trafficking involving girls and women. The literature suggests the influence of these schemas on people's willingness to engage in anti-trafficking actions. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

1. Introduction

Combating human trafficking is a growing concern in socio-political agendas worldwide (Hancock, 2019). To achieve the international consensus, the United Nations (Gibbons et al., 2020; UNODC, 2018a) provided a definition of human trafficking embracing three components: 1) an "action" in which a person is recruited, transported, transferred, harbored, or received; 2) the use of "means" by which the action is achieved, such as threats, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception,

abuse of power or a position of vulnerability; and, 3) a "purpose" of exploitation (e.g., the exploitation of the prostitution or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, the exploitation of criminal activities, organs' removal).

Besides a severe violation of human rights (Gibbons et al., 2020), human trafficking is also recognized by international organizations (UNODC, 2018b) and academic research (e.g., Cockbain & Bowers, 2019; Duong, 2020; Menaker & Franklin, 2015) as a gendered phenomenon. Indeed, over the last 15 years, women and girls have been

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representing more than 70 % of reported victims (UNODC, 2018b). Gender-based violence comprises gender-stereotyped acts of abuse, reflecting unequal power relations and denying human dignity, rights, and development to millions of women. In the context of human trafficking, gender-based violence operates both as coercion caused by fear of violence, enforcing the vulnerability of girls and women, and as a risk factor for migration movements, given that motivates girls and women to move where they believe (mistakenly) more freedom and opportunities can be found (Burke et al., 2020; Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2015).

However, the different interpretations of what constitutes human trafficking and the inaccurate prevalence estimates make the phenomenon difficult to assess (Farrell & Vries, 2020; Merry, 2016; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2018a). Despite the overall growth in detection and reporting of human trafficking victims, the lack of reporting standards, reliable measures, and data to accurately estimate the nature and magnitude of this phenomenon, and consequently, to intervene, suggest that trafficking situations are misrepresented (Dell et al., 2017; Farrell & Vries, 2020; Merry, 2016).

Identification of the victims and recognition of their needs is essential to professionals (e.g., law enforcement and justice professionals, social services providers, health professionals) and allocation of the required resources to assist them is paramount (Farrell et al., 2015). In turn, successful identification of human trafficking victims depends on the awareness, perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge of human trafficking of those who contact with them and their capacity to assist them (Dell et al., 2017; Hodge, 2014; Lutz, 2018; Sharapov et al., 2019). Since it is difficult for human trafficking victims and survivors to report, and they may not feel comfortable revealing their experiences to professionals, victims' acquaintances and community members might offer direct assistance or indirect support by getting in touch with professionals and services accountable (Kenny, 2020). Notwithstanding, research points out that those who contact with human trafficking victims often lack awareness of the complexity of the phenomenon as well as knowledge and training (Greenbaum, 2014). In this regard, studies exploring bystander intervention programs have been suggesting that a bystander who is aware, has cognitive and emotional empathy, and knows how to intervene, can be an agent of change (Kenny, 2020; Leone et al., 2020).

Thus, identifying human trafficking victims and tackling this phenomenon implies focusing on victims' and survivors' empowerment, as well as professionals' and community's knowledge and mobilization (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015). The social schemas theoretical framework postulates that individuals have schemas (i.e., cognitive structures) that represent their knowledge of the social world, influencing the processing of new information (Foti & Lord, 1987; Hogg & Vaughan, 2018). Applying this framework to the human trafficking topic, the present systematic literature review aims to understand the state of evidence on social schemas (e.g., perceptions, attitudes) about human trafficking involving girls and women, critical to inform evidence-based policies and guide social responses in the anti-trafficking field.

1.1. Social schemas on human trafficking

According to schema theory, individuals organize and make meaning of the social world within schemas (Foti & Lord, 1987), which allow them to integrate, simplify, and accelerate information processing (Freeney et al., 2008). These schemas are structures of interrelated holistic cognitions (e.g., perceptions, beliefs, attitudes) that represent knowledge about a social stimulus/situation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 98) and have an impact on phenomenon perception, selective attention, encoding, expectations, and affective and behavioral reactions (Bourdieu, 1990; Meisenhelder, 2006). Despite ensuring cognitive efficiency, schemas can result in confirmation bias influencing what information individuals attend to, what information is not sought or is excluded for not being congruent with the existing social schemas, and how

individuals react to that information (Hill et al., 2008).

Based on the previous assumptions, understanding the state of evidence on social schemas about the phenomenon of girls and women trafficking is of paramount importance to the development of evidence-based anti-trafficking responses at different levels (Kingdon, 2003). Social schemas may impact the identification of human trafficking and its victims and consequently the allocation of the required resources to assist them.

As a cross-cutting theme, cognitions about human trafficking could differ in terms of their contents or "topics." They may be related with (a) the ways human trafficking is perceived (descriptive cognitions), and (b) the perceived reasons for human trafficking-related events (analytical cognitions). The questions posed by these types of cognitions do not compete nor do they differ in legitimacy as topics of study in human trafficking. Instead, they may be understood as addressing different issues and serving different purposes. Descriptive cognitions focus on knowledge, perceptions, beliefs, and expectations regarding the nature of a certain phenomenon. These formulations are focused on what people are aware of, know "think about", or "talk about". Such scripted or schematic accounts are thought of as affectively tagged and acting as organizers of expectations and guides to behavior (e.g., Bargh et al., 1996). In turn, analytical cognitions refer to the ways in which people think about causality (e.g., Kelley, 1967; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rotter, 1966; Weiner, 1986), that is, the explanations that people find to explain an event or phenomenon. Such cognitions have often been conceptualized in terms of attributional processes.

1.2. The origins of social schemas about human trafficking

A variety of theoretical approaches has been reflected in the research addressing the origins of cognitive processing. Kenny (1996) suggested that these processes may be understood as involving reciprocal or interdependent influences, mutual influences, and shared influences. Consistent with Kelley's interdependence theory (Kelley, 1979) and social relations model (Kenny & La Voie, 1984), in studies of reciprocal effects or interdependence models, the social schemas held by each individual influence the cognitions held by other group members. Social schemas have also been thought of as a function of mutual co-construction, collaboration, negotiation, and conflict. Such activities may reflect either group processes or broader processes within the culture. Finally, cognitions also reflect a variety of shared experiences. That is, social schemas may be similar because of the factors that have jointly influenced the cognitions of the collective or cultural group.

Applying these concepts to the studies on human trafficking, some authors (e.g., Clifford & White, 2017; Rodríguez-López, 2018) suggest a reciprocal relationship between media representations, social constructions, and laws against human trafficking. Media representations (e.g., narratives, images) about human trafficking frame how the society perceives, appraises, and understands the phenomenon and set the agenda for policy priorities, funding allocation, and what issues are relevant for scientific research (Birkett, 2017; Clifford & White, 2017; Sanford et al., 2016). Among its several implications in identifying and fighting human trafficking, media sources have the potential to raise and increase people's awareness, influence social and policy changes, and promote public support to the victims (Krsmanovic, 2020). However, media content is often characterized by stereotypical representations, simplistic narratives, and misconceptions (Gregoriou, 2018; Mobberley, 2020).

General population's perceptions and awareness on human trafficking, and its impact on the victims and society are essential to support public policies and intervention programs aiming to reduce the phenomenon (Dando et al., 2016; Sharapov et al., 2019). Lack of public awareness and knowledge would impact people's perceptions and, in turn, lead to misperceptions and negative attitudes toward the frequency and the severity of human trafficking, ignoring or not prioritizing it (Farrell & Pfeffer, 2014; Sharapov et al., 2019). Some studies

that involved the general population (e.g., Lutz, 2018; Tanielian & Tanielian, 2019) have shown that, despite respondents' awareness of human trafficking, most did not perceive this phenomenon as affecting their community. They confound it with the migration of people from one country to another and human smuggling and fear their personal safety if involved in helping a victim. Such schemas about human trafficking, along with stigma and lack of knowledge of victims' rights not only could defy victims' credibility as even could result in victims not identifying themselves as trafficked persons (Dell et al., 2017; Lutz, 2018). Moreover, victims and ex-victims of traffickers' coercion and deception commonly experience intense shame, self-blame (Clawson et al., 2008), loneliness and helplessness (Zimmerman et al., 2011), insecurity, and self-pity (Hopper & Gonzalez, 2018). Anxiety and sadness (Altun et al., 2017), fear of retaliation, and humiliation are also common (Pascual-Leone et al., 2017). These feelings might hamper their disclosure to professionals and, therefore, the identification and combat of human trafficking (Byrne et al., 2017).

Finally, professionals have an important role in the identification of, and support provided to the victims (Holland, 2014). Their perceptions and attitudes about human trafficking can affect law interpretations and implementation (Dando et al., 2016; Farrell et al., 2015). Since professionals work with their clients' feelings and emotions, training their empathy while simultaneously maintaining emotional distance is of utmost importance to their practices (Leser et al., 2017). Professionals who are aware of victims' identification indicators, believe that human trafficking affects the whole community, and feel confident in their ability to identify human trafficking victims are more likely to approach someone suspected to be a victim (Coppola et al., 2019; Havig & Mahapatra, 2020). However, not being properly trained can result in limited knowledge, oversimplification of the phenomenon, and difficulties in distinguishing between human trafficking and other crimes and in identifying the required tools and procedures to investigate traffickers and support the victims (Donahue et al., 2019; Havig & Mahapatra, 2020; Lourenço et al., 2018). Also, a few studies (e.g., Farrell et al., 2015) using schema theory to explore law enforcement perceptions about human trafficking suggested that these professionals, in the absence of training and resources, frame human trafficking into pre-existing schemas of other crimes, interfering in the definition of specific investigation strategies. Several studies with health professionals (e.g., Albright et al., 2020; Coppola et al., 2019), law enforcement, justice professionals (e.g., Mapp, 2016), and social services providers (e.g., Cunha et al., 2019) have shown gaps in professionals' awareness, knowledge, and training, namely regarding trafficking definition and laws, and victims' identification, assessment, and referral.

Although some forms of trafficking of human beings are encountered systematically with boys and men as victims (Cockbain & Bowers, 2019; UNODC, 2018b), the number of reported victims, in the last 15 years, mainly refers (more than 70 %) to females (UNODC, 2018b). Considering this evidence, understanding social schemas about human trafficking focused specifically on females would be more enlightening to a successful identification of human trafficking cases and its victims.

1.3. Study overview

The present study aimed to understand the state of the art of the research on social schemas regarding the human trafficking of girls and women. Specifically, we aimed: a) to examine the characteristics of the studies addressing social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women victims; and b) to map the social schemas (i.e., inter-related cognitive representations) of different social groups analyzed in the literature regarding different types of human trafficking. The study of those aims will a) give an insight into the interrelated cognitions that structure the social schemas explored in research as relevant variables to the development of anti-trafficking interventions; b) underline disparities in the literature, in terms of definitions, measures, and results; and c) indicate future areas of research and actions that should be taken to

prevent and fight against human trafficking.

2. Method

2.1. Information sources and search strategy

To carry out the systematic review, an electronic search was conducted in 12 databases, namely Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Eric, JSTOR, PsycArticles, PsycINFO, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PubMed, Sage, Scielo, Scopus, and Web of Science. The studies selected were peer-reviewed articles from scientific journals, published in English in the last 25 years (since January 1998), as the turn of the century, with the implementation of the United Nations *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children* (United Nations, 2000) and the U.S. *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* (TVPA, 2000), marked the worldwide interest on human trafficking. The keywords used in the search were combined as follows: (a) human trafficking OR exploitation OR slavery; (b) AND girls OR women OR females; (c) AND beliefs OR attitudes OR perceptions OR opinions OR thoughts OR values.

2.2. Inclusion criteria

Studies were considered for this review if they met a set of inclusion criteria: (1) were focused on human trafficking (or exploitation or slavery); (2) explored social schemas (i.e., perceptions, conceptions, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge) about human trafficking of girls and women; (3) had a qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method design; (4) published in English language; and (5) presenting a clear method, sample, and results. Considering that a systematic review attempts to collate empirical evidence answering a specific research question (Higgins et al., 2019), scale validation articles, intervention outcome articles, opinion articles, historical analyses, case reports, and descriptive ethnographic studies were excluded.

2.3. Studies' selection and data extraction

The selection of studies was conducted according to the PRISMA Statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Liberati et al., 2009), a set of evidence-based guidelines for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Through a four-phase process, the searched studies are initially examined through the screening of titles and abstracts, and subsequently, the eligibility criteria are applied to the full-text of the relevant papers to decide about which studies to include.

As illustrated in the flowchart (Fig. 1), the initial electronic search resulted in 1641 articles, of which 543 were duplicates and were removed using a reference manager software. From the 1098 articles left, 974 were excluded based on the information included in the title and abstract, which did not meet any of the topics of the systematic review. The articles assessed for full-text analysis were then 124, of which 78 were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria of measuring variables related to human trafficking social schemas, presenting the method or results section, and having a sample corresponding to the target population of this systematic review. Finally, 46 articles were included in this systematic review. The screening of titles and abstracts and decisions on full-text reading were conducted by two members of the team, and conflicts were discussed in team meetings, with a third member.

The data extraction was performed by both researchers involved in the studies' selection process, in a non-independent process. Using a synthesis form, the following information was coded: publication information (author(s), title, year, source of publication, funding source, and country where the study was carried on), aims and research theories, sample size and characteristics (age, gender, education, ethnicity, social condition), measure description, data analysis procedure, type of

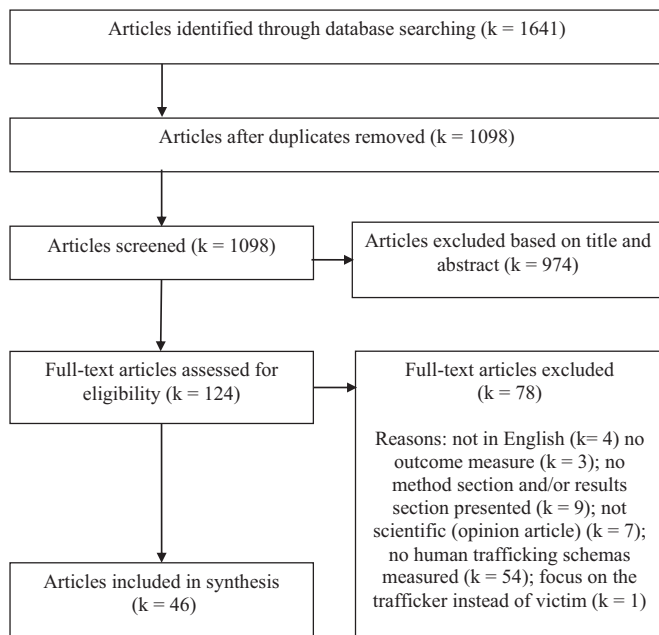


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the search strategy based on the prisma statement.

human trafficking (human trafficking in general, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, human trafficking for labor exploitation, other) and variables measured, and main results.

3. Results

3.1. General study characteristics

As indicated in Fig. 1, 46 manuscripts were included for further analysis in this review. Although this systematic review focused on studies published during the last 25 years, the oldest ones included in this review were from 2009 ($k = 2$) and the majority were published in 2022 ($k = 9$).

Regarding methodology (Table 1), the studies reviewed used mostly a qualitative design ($k = 24$), followed by a quantitative design ($k = 14$), and a mixed design ($k = 8$). Eleven studies collected data from multiple samples, while other studies reported data from specific samples, such as victims ($k = 10$), professionals ($k = 10$), and community members ($k = 10$). The sample sizes varied from 12 to 6,603 participants, and the 43 articles presenting sample size information totaled 14,423 participants. Overall, quantitative (ranging from 31 to 6603 participants) and mixed-methods' (ranging from 15 to 2571 participants) studies rely on larger samples than qualitative studies (ranging from 12 to 142 participants). Relevant data have been collected mostly by semi-structured and in-depth interviews ($k = 12$), followed by the combination of measures ($k = 15$), self-report measures such as ad-hoc questionnaires ($k = 9$) or standardized scales ($k = 4$), the collection of content from materials like newspapers, webpages, and legal instruments ($k = 4$), and focus groups ($k = 2$).

3.2. Social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women

Except for eight articles, the studies in this systematic review analyzed more than one variable regarding social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women (Tables 2, 3, and 4). Overall, the social schemas (i.e., interrelated cognitive representations) mainly studied were perceptions ($k = 27$) and knowledge ($k = 23$). Most of the articles exploring social schemas were focused on girls and women trafficking for sexual exploitation ($k = 25$), while labor exploitation was the human trafficking type least explored ($k = 2$). Nine articles focused

on the analysis of human trafficking in general and the remaining studies ($k = 10$) combined different types of human trafficking.

To present a clear organization of the literature reviewed, the results of the included articles on social schemas about different types of human trafficking involving girls and women were divided into three sections based on the study design and different sources of information.

3.2.1. Qualitative studies on schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women

3.2.1.1. Media. The studies focused on how media, specifically contemporary magazines (Barnett, 2016), webpages (Hu, 2022), and newspapers (Saewyc et al., 2013), framed human trafficking pointing out the perpetuation of a stereotypical image (e.g., crime against heterosexual female youth and women without agency) of the phenomenon in the society as well as a proliferation of inconsistent definitions. Despite the recognition of human trafficking as a practice with physical, emotional, and psychological negative effects, a threat to social stability and children's welfare, media conceptualizations paid little attention to trafficked males and women traffickers, depicted women who helped trafficked women as having agency while neglecting trafficked women's strength, blaming, infantilizing, and disempowering them (Barnett, 2016; Hu, 2022). The work of Saewyc et al. (2013), in opposition to the study of Hu (2022), showed that media conceptualizations contradict some research evidence that gender is not a factor of vulnerability to sexual exploitation and the greater risk of sexual exploitation among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth compared to heterosexual peers. Moreover, media representations categorize women into two groups, namely, trafficked women who were forced to prostitution vs. women who chose prostitution.

3.2.1.2. Victims, ex-victims, at risk. A set of studies explored victims/ex-victims' beliefs about what makes them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The study of Fogel et al. (2017) showed that youth victims conceptualized sexual exploitation as a continuum of explicit interactions/behaviors (e.g., conversation, stripping, fetish work) and were aware of the recruitment strategies used by recruiters. Children and youth are believed to be vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation when trying to escape from the oppression of the marital home, seeking independence and love, better opportunities, better education, employment, and living conditions.

Corbett (2018) and Dodsworth (2014) focused on the meaning attributed to the factors that can support victims and influence their perceptions of victimhood and agency. Overall, these studies found that despite having the same beliefs about the factors contributing to their vulnerability to sexual exploitation, women's perceptions of agency or coercion in their initial involvement with sexual exploitation and their positive or negative expectations about their commitment to stay out of the human trafficking industry were significant to their pathways outcomes and to their sense of self (sense of being a victim or a survivor), self-worth, and ability to access support services. Also, regarding perceptions of victimhood, the research article of Fehrenbacher et al. (2020) points out that besides their awareness of what trafficking means, transgender participants do not perceive themselves as victims.

In response to a gap in the literature, the research article of Russell (2013) sought to analyze the narratives of women victims of sex trafficking regarding the effects of sexual violence and body boundaries transgression. The author found that victims' perceptions and thoughts of body boundary violation and control were articulated through the notion of dirt, smell, and pollution and made them feel pain, physical pollution, and disgust hampering their rebuilding body boundaries when they exit trafficking.

Regarding victims' and ex-victims' engagement with social services and willingness to make a statement about their experience of trafficking, the results show that disclosing can be harmful (Gerassi et al.,

Table 1
Methods section data of the studies included in the systematic review.

Authors/year	Design	Sample	Sampling techniques	Measures/Data collection
Andretta et al. (2016)	Quantitative	901 youth at risk	Not specified	<i>Sex Trafficking Assessment Review (STAR)</i> <i>Children's Attributions and Perceptions Scale (CAPS)</i> <i>Conners' Comprehensive Behavior Rating Scales Self-Report (CBRS-SR)</i> Semi-structured in-depth interviews
Atauz et al. (2009)	Qualitative	110 professionals 32 community members	Non-probabilistic	Semi-structured in-depth interviews
Babu et al. (2022)	Quantitative	149 psychology students	Non-probabilistic	Demographic questionnaire Vignettes about prosocial behavior
Baldwin et al. (2015)	Qualitative	12 ex-victims	Non-probabilistic	Semi-structured in-depth interviews
Barnett (2016)	Qualitative	n.a	Probabilistic	Mass media content (110 magazine articles)
Bonilla and Mo (2019)	Mixed	2.135 community members 436 college students	Probabilistic and non-probabilistic	NGOs websites True or false questionnaire Experimental manipulation Mass media content (12,763 newspaper articles)
Breuil et al. (2011)	Qualitative	Professionals	Non-probabilistic	Interviews Narratives (law, law enforcement, and academic ethnographic studies)
Buckley (2009)	Mixed	1620 community members	Probabilistic	Focus Group Questionnaire
Cokar et al. (2016)	Quantitative	82 professionals	Non-probabilistic	Questionnaire
Corbett (2018)	Qualitative	13 ex-victims	Probabilistic	Semi-structured interviews
Cunningham and Cromer (2016)	Quantitative	409 undergraduate students	Non-probabilistic	Demographic questionnaire Vignettes Human Trafficking Myths Scale Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey
Digidiki and Baka (2022)	Quantitative	624 community members	Non-probabilistic	Vignettes Blame Scale Experimental manipulation Demographic questionnaire
Dodsworth (2014)	Qualitative	12 victims	Non-probabilistic	In-depth semi-structured interviews
Fehrenbacher et al. (2020)	Qualitative	50 sex workers and victims 17 key informants	Non-probabilistic	In-depth semi-structured interviews
Fernandes et al. (2020)	Mixed	199 college students	Non-probabilistic	Questionnaire
Fogel et al. (2017)	Qualitative	24 homeless young adults	Non-probabilistic	Focus groups
Fukushima et al. (2020)	Qualitative	58 professionals	Non-probabilistic	Online questionnaire Focus group Interviews
Gebre (2012)	Mixed	400 children (victims and at risk) Professionals and stakeholders	Probabilistic Not specified	Survey In-depth interviews Focus groups Case studies
Gerassi et al. (2017)	Qualitative	20 professionals 30 victims	Non-probabilistic	In-depth semi-structured interviews
Gerassi and Pederson (2021)	Qualitative	23 professional	Non-probabilistic	In-depth semi-structured interviews
Gonzalez-Pons et al. (2020)	Quantitative	69 professionals	Non-probabilistic	Online Questionnaire Questionnaires about: Belief of trafficking myths; Ability to identify victims; Service provision
Helfferich et al. (2011)	Qualitative	53 victims	Probabilistic	Semi-narrative biographical interviews
Herrero-Villoria et al. (2022)	Quantitative	179 students	Non-probabilistic	<i>Sexual Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS)</i>
Honeyman et al. (2016)	Quantitative	216 community members	Probabilistic and non-probabilistic	Online questionnaire Questionnaires about: Perceptions of trafficking; Perceptions of the victims; Emotional reactions; Willingness to take action; Outcome efficacy; Cost.
Hornor et al. (2020)	Quantitative	223 at-risk adolescents	Non-probabilistic	Demographic questionnaire Knowledge, Awareness and Attitudes about CSEC <i>Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS)</i>
Houston-Kolnik et al. (2016)	Quantitative	601 community members	Probabilistic	<i>Sex Trafficking Attitudes Scale (STAS)</i>
Hu (2022)	Qualitative	n.a.	Non-probabilistic	Webpages of US anti-trafficking groups
Ikeora (2016)	Qualitative	46 victims and stakeholders	Not specified	Interviews
Katsanis et al. (2019)	Mixed	9 key informants 900 professionals	Non-probabilistic	Semi-structured interview Online questionnaire
Kuosmanen and Starke (2011)	Qualitative	19 professionals	Probabilistic	Focus groups
Le (2016)	Mixed	15 ex-victims	Non-probabilistic	Interviews Participant observation
Liang (2023)	Qualitative	27 victims	Non-probabilistic	In-depth interview
Loyens and Paraciani (2023)	Qualitative	32 professionals	Non-probabilistic	Vignettes Interviews
McAmis et al. (2022)	Quantitative	6.603 professionals	Non-probabilistic	Online questionnaire

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued)

Authors/year	Design	Sample	Sampling techniques	Measures/Data collection
Madeswaran and Ravi (2013)	Qualitative	Victims	Not specified	Interviews
Mobasher et al. (2022)	Quantitative	227 community members	Non-probabilistic	Questionnaire
Mujica (2013)	Qualitative	30 victims 20 community members	Non-probabilistic	Interviews Non-participant observation Law and judicial files content
Houston et al. (2016)	Mixed	59 community members (adolescents)	Non-probabilistic	Focus group Questionnaire
Nguyen and Le (2021)	Qualitative	30 professionals	Non-probabilistic	In-depth interviews
Nwokeoma (2013)	Mixed	570 community members 10 victims 14 professionals	Probabilistic and non-probabilistic	In-depth interviews Questionnaire
Pereda et al. (2022)	Mixed	67 adolescents	Non-probabilistic	Online Questionnaire Scales: sociodemographic; runaway information; Knowledge of CSEC and its related risk factors; CSEC prevention
Preble (2019)	Quantitative	31 victims	Non-probabilistic	Questionnaire Scales: experiences with poverty; social support; community support; prior abuse history; perceptions of power; characteristics and relationship with traffickers; demographic details
Rani and Manglam (2016)	Mixed	39 ex-victims	Non-probabilistic	Interviews Depression, anxiety, and stress scales Scale for suicidal ideation
Ruiz-Gonzalez et al. (2022)	Qualitative	14 professionals	Non-probabilistic	Semi-structured in-depth interviews Focus groups
Russell (2013)	Qualitative	12 victims	Non-probabilistic	Narratives (letters)
Saewyc et al. (2013)	Qualitative	n.a	Probabilistic	Mass media content (835 newspaper articles)
Salami et al. (2022)	Quantitative	190 criminal justice students	Non-probabilistic	Demographic questionnaire Vignettes Proactive Behavior Questionnaire
Tanielian and Tanielian (2019)	Quantitative	135 community members	Non-probabilistic	
Tidball et al. (2016)	Qualitative	40 professionals and ex-victims	Non-probabilistic	In-depth semi-structured interviews

2017; Helfferich et al., 2011). Women's perceptions and beliefs about the relevance of addressing complex feelings and to help, or relate to, other women were found to be perceived as facilitators of access and engagement with social services. However, their perceptions of needing meaningful communication and space to process sex trafficking, as well as their fear of being discriminated by service providers and judged by other women are barriers to their disclosure (Gerassi et al., 2017). Moreover, victims know the multiple offenders' strategies (e.g., threats of violence, isolation, control, and punishment) and attribute to them the main motive to not disclose information on their trafficking experience. The willingness to disclose and victims' beliefs on anti-trafficking organizations' capacity to meet their needs seems to be affected by women's interpretation of the police actions, empathy, acceptance or disinterest and discrimination, and victims' sense of security and attitudes toward prostitution, knowledge of local language and laws (Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Helfferich et al., 2011).

Aiming to determine the types of workplace exploitation experienced by young women migrant workers, Madeswaran and Ravi (2013) analyzed victims' knowledge and perceptions through a phenomenological analysis of the interviews. The authors found that the young migrant workers know that their labor rights are being denied (e.g., the absence of a labor contract) and recognize the negative physical, psychological, emotional, and in health effects of the exploitation.

Finally, three studies analyzed the belief system, particularly religious and cultural beliefs, and the experiences of psychological coercion of sexual and labor exploitation victims (Ikeora, 2016; Liang, 2023) and ex-victims (Baldwin et al., 2015). Framed by Biderman's theory of coercion, the work of Baldwin et al. (2015) indicated that women were aware of the psychological coercive tactics (e.g., isolation, induced debility, and exhaustion) which they perceived as reinforcing their submission to the traffickers even in the absence of physical force and restraint and their feelings of social and emotional isolation. The results

of the study of Ikeora (2016) showed that victims' belief systems, particularly religious and cultural beliefs (e.g., traditional oath-taking rituals, juju) are used as control mechanisms to keep victims in bondage and at the mercy of traffickers. In Liang's research article (Liang, 2023), victims believe that local demand for marriage constitutes a premise for the emergence and development of a marriage trafficking market, which they associate with three forms of exploitation: domestic violence (physical and sexual violence), labor exploitation, and reproductive exploitation.

3.2.1.3. Professionals. A set of studies explored professionals' awareness, perceptions, knowledge, and feelings about human trafficking for sexual exploitation (Breuil et al., 2011; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Gerassi & Pederson, 2021; Kuosmanen & Starke, 2011; Ruiz-Gonzalez et al., 2022; Tidball et al., 2016). Through a phenomenological approach, Tidball et al. (2016) studied the awareness, knowledge, and perceptions of NGO representatives, law enforcement officials, and public officers and found that most professionals were aware of human trafficking, although a minority admitted only having a basic knowledge of it. Most professionals revealed their concerns for human trafficking laws and state and federal practices, and perceived that trafficked girls are unfairly treated and prosecuted instead of protected as victims. The research of Kuosmanen and Starke (2011) suggested that despite the general recognition of the phenomenon, the different levels of knowledge among professionals may be more related to the type of agency or organization (general agencies vs. target group-oriented agencies) than to the specific work task or job positions. Despite the knowledge about signs or clues to identify victims as well as the knowledge about consequences of trafficking on sexual and reproductive health, they identify some barriers to identification and control efforts: concepts' confusion and difficulties differentiating between human trafficking and sex work; hesitancy in labeling the situation as trafficking and fear of being

Table 2
Qualitative studies on social players' schemas about human trafficking.

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
Atauz et al. (2009)	Attitudes Knowledge	Negative and stigmatizing attitudes of local stakeholders toward victims Low level of knowledge about human trafficking among the different professionals and low engagement with counter-trafficking practices
Baldwin et al. (2015)	Awareness Perceptions	Women were aware of the nonphysical coercive tactics (e.g., isolation, induced debility and exhaustion) which they perceived as reinforcing their submission to the traffickers even in the absence of physical force and restraint Victims felt extreme stress and deprivation of their social support, autonomy, and control over their lives
Barnett (2016)	Conceptions	Definitions of human trafficking as a practice with physical, emotional, and psychological negative effects on women, and a threat to social stability and children's welfare Recognition of the efforts of governments and individuals to combat trafficking Non-conceptualization of women as traffickers Conceptions of trafficked women neglecting their strength and disempowering them
Breuil et al. (2011)	Conceptions Stereotypes Knowledge Perceptions	(International Law) Exploitation as a central element of the law definition of human trafficking Recognition of human trafficking as transnational or national crime, linked or not to organized crime Conceptualization of human trafficking as a matter of law and human rights Image of the victim considering men also as potential victims and women also as perpetrators National (Dutch) law's conceptualization of human trafficking inspired by local norms, values, traditions, and appraisals of prostitution and (illegal) migration (Law enforcement) Stereotypical image of a trafficking situation Knowledge and dissonance between the law enforcement approach (repression of perpetrators) and the human rights approach (victim's protection) Human trafficking perceived as an organized mobile crime with ruthless business morals and rapid lines of internal communication The perceived difficulty to make a good assessment of a case based only on the victim's complaint, the overburden felt by the police forces, and the perceived risk of wasted police capacity contributes to the reluctance to start an investigation (Ethnographic narrative) Empirical studies contradict the stereotypical image of the trafficked women as innocents, passives and helpless Victims and perpetrator are not interpreted as opposites, since often victims can become perpetrators or facilitators The conceptualization of human trafficking as generally organized in large and transnational crime networks is not conclude
Corbett (2018)	Expectations	Positive expectations about their commitment to trying to stay out of the sex trafficking industry
Dodsworth (2014)	Perceptions Sense of self Self-worth	Women's perceptions of agency or victimhood were significant to their pathways outcomes and to their sense of

Table 2 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
	Meanings Attributions	self, self-worth, and ability to access support services Those who interpreted their childhood experiences of sexual exploitation as coercion, felt that they had to remain involved in sex work as adults; those who attributed that remaining in sex work was her choice had a perception of agency
Fehrenbacher et al. (2020)	Awareness Perceptions Knowledge Feelings	Normalization of violence against trans women. Trans participants are aware of what trafficking means and report those experiences but do not self-identify as victims. Trans participants lack a sense of security and trust in law enforcement officers and are skeptical about anti-trafficking organizations capacity to meet their needs without marginalizing them further. Perceived differences between transgender and cisgender sex workers and victims. For trans participants who did come into contact with anti-trafficking organizations or other sexual humanitarian interventions, they highlighted that the label of victim did not afford them the same benefits, protections, or services provided to cisgender victims. Anti-trafficking organizations identify the law enforcement filtering of trafficking victims as a barrier to action Advocates have to work harder at proving transgender women victimization because of the stereotype that trans people like sex work and cannot be exploited Advocates identify that over-policing in trans communities limits access to services, and criminal records are used against transwomen more than cisgender women Key informants identify economic necessities and limited choices among trans workers as drives for engagement in survival sex work
Fogel et al. (2017)	Conceptions Beliefs Awareness	Sexual exploitation conceptualized as a continuum of sexually explicit interactions (i.e., stripping) Belief that sex exchange is one of the few options for homeless youth to acquiring needed resources Awareness (e.g., recruitment strategies) and concerns about experiences of CSEC Mind frames (e.g., seeking love, feeling desperate) are believed to contribute to their vulnerability
Fukushima et al. (2020)	Perceptions	Stigma as a barrier to service access for victims of HT Stigma as a multiple phenomenon, comprising biases in access to care, barriers of shaming, shunning and othering, catalyzers for misidentification and mislabeling, multiple levels of furthering how survivors are deeply misunderstood and a culture of mistrust
Gerassi et al. (2017)	Perceptions Beliefs	Perceptions and beliefs about the relevance of addressing complex feelings associated with sex trading and to help or relate to other women with similar experiences (facilitators) Perceptions of needing meaningful communication and space to process sex trading (barriers) Fear of being viewed differently by services providers, and judgment from other women Fear of discrimination based in racial stereotypes

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Table 2 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
Gerassi and Pederson (2021)	Perceptions Knowledge Feelings	Fear of being perceived as judgmental by patients and projecting stigma. Difficulty in differentiating between human trafficking and sex work. Perceived sense of lack of expertise.
Helferich et al. (2011)	Knowledge Attributions Attitudes	Victims know the multiple strategies of the offenders (e.g., violence, threats, isolation, control) Victims attribute to the offender strategies the main motive to not make a statement Interpretations of the police action as punitive or collaborative (e.g., granting of residence permits), feelings of trust vs. fear of the police, perception of police's empathy or disinterest, acceptance or discriminations, recognition as victims vs. accusation affect the victims' willingness to make a statement Victims' attitude toward prostitution, knowledge of language and law as determinants of victims' willingness to make a statement
Hu (2022)	Conceptions	Inconsistent definitions of human trafficking. Only seven groups refer to "sex trafficking" as involving commercial sex acts imposed under "force," "fraud," or "coercion." Seven groups do not provide a definition for sex trafficking, whereas the remaining six reference the UN Trafficking Protocol Definitional inconsistency and the interchangeable use among the three terms – "prostitution," "sex trafficking," and "sexual exploitation" The term "victims" is often used in a much broader sense to refer to both victims of trafficking and those in sex work in general When representing victims, "Women," "girls," and "children" were commonly referenced. Women are almost always mentioned together with "girls" or "children" when presenting trafficking vulnerabilities, trafficking victimization, or related statistics Only three groups mention gender or sexual minority communities, such as describing LGBTQ or gender non-conforming groups as being vulnerable to trafficking Racialized women in the sex work industries (consensually or trafficked) are essentialized and infantilized. Structural issues such as racism, sexism, and poverty are rarely mentioned Women are often placed in a passivated position and as being incapable of understanding their circumstances "Sex buyers," "pimps," and "traffickers" are presented paratactically The discourse between victims and other actors is focused on customer-blaming narratives. Sex service clients are stereotypically portrayed as a monolithic group being equivalent to traffickers
Ikeora (2016)	Beliefs Attributions	Victims' belief system, particularly religious and cultural beliefs (e.g., traditional oath-taking rituals, juju) are used as control mechanisms to keep victims in bondage and at the mercy of traffickers Victims fear the reprisals (e.g., sickness, misfortune, mental illness) of breaking the rituals, which compels them to suffer in silence Victims are scared to give information to law enforcement
Kuosmanen and Starke (2011)	Knowledge Perceptions	Knowledge of some cases of women with ID selling or exchanging sexual services for

Table 2 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
		some kind of payment seems to depend more on the type of organization (target group-oriented vs. general agencies) than on the specific work tasks or position of the professionals Professionals identify the need of recognition of the problem Knowledge of the places where sexual contacts take place (e.g., streets, hotels, internet) Professionals perceive three motives for selling or exchanging sexual services among women with ID: to create relationships and to gain affirmation; in exchange for products and goods or to change their living conditions; to obtain money Participants know the difference between engaging in sexual services out of one's free will or exploitation and express their concern over the vulnerability of the individuals with ID Professionals perceived as problematic the line between which is self-chosen and being exploited
Liang (2023)	Beliefs Conceptions Knowledge Norms	Local demand for marriage constitutes a premise for the emergence and development of a marriage trafficking market Victims identify three forms of exploitation: domestic violence (sexual and physical violence), labor exploitation, and reproductive exploitation The durability, individualization and privacy of domestic violence within marriage trafficking distinguishes it from sex and labor trafficking Reproductive exploitation impedes trafficked women's agency, as their emotional attachment to their children leads to reluctance to leave harmful situations Participants perceive that their social networks tolerate or even support trafficked marriage, since locals perceive the institution of marriage as legitimate, private, and out of the public's control in character
Loyens and Paraciani (2023)	Stereotypes Social norms	Perceived vulnerability and blameless of employees influence how inspectors assess victimhood Migrant workers are seen as more vulnerable than native workers, particularly if they are female Perceived complicity of social fraud (e.g., being an illegal worker) reduces the chance that workers are seen as exploitation victims
Madeswaran and Ravi (2013)	Knowledge Perceptions	Young women migrant workers know their rights are being denied (e.g. the absence of a working contract) Women had an impression that the employer is taking undue advantaged of her work by intentionally refusing to follow the conditions as contain in workers and collective agreement Recognition of the negative (physical, psychological, emotional and in health) effects of the exploitation
Mujica (2013)	Meanings Perceptions Conceptions	The sexual services provided by children and teenagers are interpreted as a key feature of local port economies, sawmills, and local bars (e.g., a way of attracting customers to food and alcohol outlets) Image of the children and teenagers as symbols of pleasure and cleanliness The girls and young women are perceived as 'safer' and more 'fit for consumption', since the recruitment is made by family/kinship networks

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Table 2 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
Nguyen and Le (2021)	Awareness Perceptions Knowledge	Sexual exploitation is not conceptualized as a core activity of the local economy but a phenomenon occurring among a set of individual business Policemen have high level of knowledge and differ partly from the image of stereotypical trafficking victims Policemen identify some victims of HT that do not fit the traditional victim images of this crime, including trafficked men for sex tourism, forced labor, organ removal, sex workers, migrants in search of seasonal employment and girls with high education levels
Ruiz-Gonzalez et al. (2022)	Awareness Knowledge Perceptions Feelings	Midwives report signs or clues used to identify victims of HT (e.g., companion, control, disorientation, physical injuries, fear and jitters) Midwives identify barriers to identification and control efforts (e.g., language barrier, cognitive weakness, lack of documentation) A lack of knowledge on the topic, confusion among concepts and hesitancy in labelling the situation as trafficking as barriers in treating victims Feelings of shame for probing questions that can be intimidating and uncomfortable Knowledge about consequences of trafficking on the sexual and reproductive health of victims (i.e., sexually transmitted diseases, bleeding, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, fetal death)
Russell (2013)	Perceptions Thoughts	Priority for imminent issues like privacy, protection and secrecy Women's perceptions of body boundary control and violation were articulated through the notion of dirt, smell, and pollution The feeling of pollution mark the body boundary as transgresses and create a sense of the abject body Trafficked women perceived that their bodies are subject to the attraction (as she has little control over her body) and repulse (her body is perceived as contaminated and contaminating) Victims thought that their bodies will be socially constructed as polluting to social cohesion
Saewyc et al. (2013)	Conceptions	Conceptualization of human trafficking as a crime against youth Conceptualization of the victims of sexual exploitation as the young and heterosexual female
Tidball et al. (2016)	Awareness Knowledge Perceptions Beliefs	Sexual exploiters conceptualized as mostly males (e.g., "pimp", "john", "recruiters") Most participants were aware of the human trafficking, although a few admitted only having a basic understanding of it Most interviewees showed concerns for human trafficking laws and state and federal practices Knowledge about exploiters strategies (e.g., the use of the internet to find girls; the use of specific words to refer to young girls and sex buying; the search for girls around 12 and 14 years old because of their vulnerability) The majority of professionals perceived that trafficked girls are unfairly treated and prosecuted, instead of being protected as victims Participants framed a common pattern for trafficked girls: individuals who grew up without a father, in an unsupervised or neglectful environment; had the experience

Table 2 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
		of sexual abuse or exploitation and had no choices of her own when younger Participants perceived that trafficked girls need a safe home/ environment

perceived as judgmental; stigma; language or lack of documentation; law enforcement filtering of trafficking victims and the over-policing in trans communities as well as distinct international and national legal definitions and conceptions of human trafficking its victims and perpetrator (Breuil et al., 2011; Fehrenbacher et al., 2020; Fukushima et al., 2020; Gerassi & Pederson, 2021; Ruiz-Gonzalez et al., 2022).

In opposition to these conclusions, the research article by Nguyen and Le (2021) suggests that policemen have high levels of knowledge and differ partly from the image of stereotypical trafficking victims.

Regarding professionals' schemas about human trafficking victims for forced labor, the recent article of Loyens and Paraciani (2023) found that perceived vulnerability and blameless of employees influence how inspectors assess victimhood and that perceived complicity of social fraud (e.g., being an illegal worker) reduces the chance that workers are seen as victims.

Professionals identify stigma as one of the main barriers to service access for victims of human trafficking furthering how they are deeply misunderstood (Fukushima et al., 2020). In turn, Atauz et al. (2009) point out the need to promote awareness and strengthen the capacity of local actors through educational and informational materials, and awareness-raising and training programs as a strategy to reverse the low knowledge about the phenomenon among the different professionals, the negative and stigmatizing attitudes, as well as the low engagement with the counter-trafficking practices.

3.2.1.4. *Victims and community members.* Finally, the study of Mujica (2013) on contexts and mechanisms of sexual exploitation of young girls, suggests that community perceptions of young people as symbols of pleasure and cleanliness were associated with the practices of human trafficking in developing countries like Peru as a supplement to the retail market economy (Mujica, 2013).

3.2.2. *Quantitative studies on schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women*

3.2.2.1. *Victims, ex-victims and/or youth at risk.* Two studies with youth at risk of human trafficking for sexual exploitation explored their attributions, attitudes, knowledge, and awareness. While youth presented an overall negative attitude toward children's sexual exploitation, some knowledge of it, and potential sex traffickers, most of them were not aware of local resources to help teens if they were being forced (Hornor et al., 2020). Another result of a study with youth at risk showed that the ones with a higher risk of victimization revealed higher levels of personal attribution to negative events (Andretta et al., 2016). Preble (2019) suggested victims' perceptions of differences in power in the relationship between victims and traffickers and between female and male traffickers.

3.2.2.2. *Professionals.* A study by Cokar et al. (2016) found that among healthcare professionals there are opposite perceptions and attitudes about sex work which could impact the identification and the report of suspected situations of human trafficking to the security forces. Interestingly, the research article by Gonzalez-Pons et al. (2020) points out that professionals who hold more beliefs on myths about human trafficking for sexual exploitation were also more likely to report to their organizations and were able to accurately identify victims.

3.2.2.3. *Community members.* Community members' attributions,

Table 3
Quantitative studies on social players' schemas about human trafficking.

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
Andretta et al. (2016)	Attributions	Youth at higher risk of victimization revealed higher levels of personal attribution to negative events
Babu et al. (2022)	Beliefs Perceptions Attributions	When compared to male and labor trafficked victims, participants were more likely to accurately identify female and sex trafficked victims.
Cokar et al. (2016)	Attitudes Perceptions Knowledge	Opposite perspectives and attitudes about sex work as a job: some physicians not consider it a job while others do, some do not think that it should be banned while other do, and some agree that the individual's right to self-governance over their body covered sexual exchange for money All physicians know that some women among sex workers were exploited, exposed to violence, and coerced to work against their will Knowledge about how to proceed toward a suspect situation (to inform the security forces)
Cunningham and Cromer (2016)	Beliefs Perceptions Attributions	Participants show moderate belief in the veracity of the sex trafficking situation in the vignette On average, the victim was not perceived as responsible for the situation More than a third of the sample indicated a belief in misinformation about human trafficking and its victims Men had lower means on belief and higher means on both victim blame and human trafficking myth acceptance than women Human trafficking myth acceptance predict belief and victim blame
Digidiki and Baka (2022)	Perceptions Attributions	Victims of sex trafficking are attributed blame for their victimization Regardless of the degree of blame attributed to the victim, clients are always attributed more blame for further victimizing the victim Attributions of blame are higher when victimization conditions contain elements of personal desire and choice (e.g., financial and emotional factors) compared to cases where the victim was perceived to have had no choice or control (e.g., abduction) Participants with previous experience tend to blame the client significantly less than participants with no experience Female participants tended to blame the client significantly more than male participants
Gonzalez-Pons et al. (2020)	Beliefs Knowledge	The majority of participants were able to distinguish myth from fact. Lack of definitional knowledge, particularly tied to the requirements of force, fraud, or coercion. Individuals holding administrative roles believed myths pertaining to DMST more often than their colleagues but were also more likely to report their organizations were able to accurately identify DMST victims.
Herrero-Villoria et al. (2022)	Knowledge Beliefs Awareness Perceived self-efficacy Attitudes	Efficacy to reduce sex trafficking (ST), knowledge about ST and empathic reactions toward ST were associated Information and training (cognitive attitudes) shape the interpretation of how difficult it is for affected women and girls to leave ST Acquired knowledge promotes individual

Table 3 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
		actions to influence the phenomenon (behavioral attitudes) Awareness of sex trafficking of women and girls was negatively correlated with student's knowledge Empathic reactions and knowledge about ST were negatively associated with dimensions that value to help survivors Results identified three clusters: 1) women of degree program in Law with high attitudes toward helping survivors and raising awareness; 2) women of degree program in Social Work with high attitudes toward the ability to leave sex trafficking, knowledge about it and empathic reactions toward those affected; 3) male participants with low score on helping attitudes toward survivors Students in cluster 1, mainly female from degree program in law, do not know or have less information about sext trafficking
Honeyman et al. (2016)	Awareness Perceptions	Participants were more aware of human trafficking for sexual exploitations (HTSE) and they perceived it to be more serious, concerning, and important than human trafficking for labour exploitation (HTFL). However, participants perceived HTFL to be more relevant to them than HTSE Awareness was positively correlated with willingness to take action against both forms of trafficking All participants view a "typical" victim of HTSE and HTFL as an Asian female, aged between 12 and 19, and an Asian male, between 12 and 19 years, respectively
		No effect of perceived costs of social actions nor perceived victim demographic characteristics on willingness to take social action for either human trafficking type Women reported more personal distress (but not empathy) than men when thinking about the victims of HTSE and HTFL, which was, in turn, associated with greater motivation to combat trafficking Women showed stronger perceptions of outcome efficacy than men; Perceptions of the outcome efficacy of social action influenced the willingness to combat human trafficking
Hornor et al. (2020)	Knowledge Awareness Attitudes	Overall negative attitudes toward Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) 10 % of participating adolescents agreed that it is a teen's fault if they get involved with a pimp Higher awareness of sex trafficking versus labor trafficking 13 % of these high-risk adolescents indicated that they had not heard of sex trafficking Accurate baseline knowledge of CSEC, although that knowledge was not universal. 9 % of study participants were not aware that sex trafficking happens to American teens. 16 % of study participants did not believe that pimping someone out was a form of abuse, which dovetails with placing blame on CSEC victims for their own victimization Accurate knowledge regarding potential sex traffickers was also not universal. 23 % did not know that a pimp is a sex

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Table 3 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
McAmis et al. (2022)	Beliefs Knowledge	trafficker or the various recruitment and control tactics of traffickers, such as beating them (14 %), acting as a love interest, boyfriend, or girlfriend (16 %), or using social isolation (21 %) Most adolescents (96 %) in a high-risk group of individuals indicated that they were unaware of local resources to help teens if they were being forced to sell sex The majority of participants believes they would benefit from human trafficking training Levels of knowledge about human trafficking were suboptimal Participants in the age group from 61 to 70 were found to have the highest level of knowledge when compared to age groups above and below those number Nurse practitioners had the highest knowledge level followed by social workers
Mobasher et al. (2022)	Awareness Knowledge Perceptions Beliefs	Participants demonstrated high levels of knowledge of human trafficking (HT) but it was not comprehensive Gaps in recognizing the context in which HT usually takes place; understanding the local laws that govern this activity; and ways to follow related policies/ procedures when the problem is suspected Overall participants believe there are not enough services to help survivors of HT, cannot recognize the signs of HT, and do not know what steps to take if they suspected this criminal activity Participant's educational levels, knowledge of HT, and with their beliefs and attitudes toward this violation of human rights were associated
Preble (2019)	Perceptions	Male traffickers are perceived to have significantly more reward powers (i.e., the perceived ability of one to give or deny rewards for positive or negative motives) than female traffickers Continuity of presence is an important aspect of perceived ability to maintain power in a relationship Shared characteristics (i.e., nationality) between victims and traffickers enhanced perceptions of positive personal power (i.e., the ability to effectively use power) Victims without abuse history perceived positive personal and political power more than those with abuse histories Those unemployed before becoming trafficked perceived illegitimate power among their traffickers Participants who reported experiencing low community support perceived more political influence of the trafficker
Salami et al. (2022)	Beliefs Perceptions Attributions	Female and sex trafficking victims are more identifiable than male or labor trafficked victims
Tanielian and Tanielian (2019)	Attitudes Perceptions	Both Thai and English participants considered trafficking a low or moderate threat in their communities Thai language respondents were significantly more likely than English participants to believe trafficking is affected by family and community behavior or morals. English respondents perceived higher association of religion with trafficking. Males and English speakers were most likely to think legalized prostitution would lead to a reduction in human

Table 3 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
		trafficking while females and Thai speakers were most likely to believe legalized prostitution would increase trafficking

empathic reactions, and knowledge were explored as well as their association with perceived self-efficacy toward human trafficking tackling. The results indicate that both female and male participants were more aware of human trafficking for sexual exploitation than human trafficking for forced labor (Honeyman et al., 2016), since when compared to male and labor trafficked victims, participants were more likely to accurately identify female and sex trafficking victims (Babu et al., 2022; Salami et al., 2022). However, in one study victims seem to be significantly more blamed for their victimization by female participants than by male participants, with higher attributions of blame when victimization conditions contain elements of personal desire and choice (e.g., financial and emotional factors) (Digidiki & Baka, 2022). While Honeyman et al. (2016) found that women reported higher levels of personal distress toward both types of human trafficking and higher perceptions of outcome efficacy of social action than men, which were, in turn, related to greater willingness to engage in anti-trafficking activities, a more recent study found community members' empathic reactions and knowledge were negatively associated with helping attitudes (Herrero-Villoria et al., 2022).

Underpinned by the literature on false beliefs and myths' acceptance related to human trafficking in general and trafficking for sexual exploitation, the empirical research of Cunningham and Cromer (2016) supported the role of beliefs in public attitudes toward trafficking victims, public policy, and services combating human trafficking. Human trafficking myths' acceptance was found to be associated with the beliefs on the veracity of trafficking situations and women's and girls' responsibility for that situation. It was also found to be associated with negative attitudes toward girls and women victims of human trafficking, and lower levels of knowledge about human trafficking. Moreover, beliefs about trafficking situations and myths, as well as blame attributions on the victims, were significantly distinct between male and female participants.

3.2.2.4. *Victims, professionals, and community members.* Three research articles focused on victims, professionals, and community members' social schemas about human trafficking in general (McAmis et al., 2022; Mobasher et al., 2022; Tanielian & Tanielian, 2019). The participants of these studies showed suboptimal levels of knowledge, namely in recognizing the context in which human trafficking takes place, signs and procedures when the problem is suspected, and believed they would benefit from human trafficking training (McAmis et al., 2022; Mobasher et al., 2022). Despite their similar perceptions of trafficking as a low to moderate threat in their communities, Thai and English speakers showed significant differences in some beliefs and perceptions about factors associated with trafficking and solutions to tackle it.

3.2.3. *Mixed studies on schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women*

3.2.3.1. *Victims, ex-victims and/or at-risk.* In the recent research article by Pereda et al. (2022), most young participants showed knowledge about sexual exploitation of children as well as risky behaviors that enhanced the probability of becoming involved in it; however, a significant number of adolescents do not receive any information about the phenomenon. Children and youth are believed to be vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation when trying to escape from the oppression of the marital home, seeking independence and love, better opportunities, better education, employment, and living conditions

Table 4
Mixed design studies on social players' schemas about human trafficking.

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
Bonilla and Mo (2019) [study 2]	Beliefs Knowledge Perceptions	[Study 2] General knowledge on issues of human trafficking involving sex work Sex trafficking is perceived to be a problem that mostly affects women, and smuggling is intertwined with people's understanding of the human trafficking process. [Study 3] Most participants identify victims involved in the sex industry as a victim of HT (89.9%) Participants attribute victims of exploitative environments and menial labor to HT (66.2% and 49.7%, respectively) less than those involved in the sex industry Victims described as victims of menial labor are more likely to be viewed as illegal immigrants (41.5%) or legal migrants (8.8%)
Buckley (2009)	Perceptions Beliefs Awareness Expectations Thoughts Conceptions Knowledge	Most citizens do not perceive that human trafficking is a large or enormous problem in Russia Almost half of the sample believe that those sexual exploited were responsible for their situation. Males attribute the blame on the victim more than female respondents Although 37% think that trafficked persons were looking for job opportunities abroad, 35% of male participants and 32% of female believe that the migrants were mostly prostitutes Citizens are aware of various reasons behind women and girls trafficking (e.g., deceived by criminal gangs, sold by parents or friends) Low expectations about the efficacy of political and social institutions to solve the problem of human trafficking Most citizens think that the human trafficking could be solved through better international cooperation, better police work and more convictions, education programs in schools and local communities, and more visibility of the problem in media Although participants seem to be aware of human trafficking characteristics, the term was not used. The prevalent conception of human trafficking was that it is a criminal activity despite the low awareness about Russian law. Lack of knowledge about the profiles of trafficked people. Recognition of the difficulties associated with returnees (e.g., lack of support, availability of services)
Fernandes et al. (2020)	Knowledge Perceptions	The profile of the victim and the trafficker is constituted mostly by differentiating characteristics like sociodemographic data, vulnerabilities, and motivations Victim portrayals trace foreign, naïve, with lower levels of education, living in poverty or seeking a job to suppress the needs of her and her family, that accept any job offer that is presented to her without questioning Traffickers portrayals trace adult male, older than the victim, cruel, manipulative, without regard to human rights, wealthy and someone with a criminal history The participants that gave an undifferentiated portrayal were able to correctly identify aspects of human trafficking dynamics. Some of them reveal that they have no knowledge of human trafficking and his causes. Some participants were able to identify some central features of victim-trafficker

Table 4 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
		dynamics, referring to different forms of recruitment (e.g., taking advantage of victims' vulnerabilities, promising better living conditions, false job proposals, force or abduction), facilitating factors of trafficking (e.g. social and communication skills, informed, access to money), forms of control (physical and psychological abuse, fear, ID retention), modus operandi (e.g., organized crime, individual initiatives), various types of human trafficking (labour or slavery, sexual, and organ exploitation), the relationship between victims and traffickers (known or unknown to the victim) and trafficking flows (e.g. international and domestic trafficking) Although most participants are able to make a connection between vulnerabilities (individual and/or structural) and the human trafficking victimization, fewer describe characteristics of traffic dynamics
Gebre (2012)	Beliefs	Vulnerability to CSEC is associated to beliefs about the reason for migration
Katsanis et al. (2019)	Awareness Beliefs Knowledge	Belief that human trafficking is not a problem in the geographic area where participants work and that encountering a patient known or suspected to be a trafficked person is relatively low Low level of awareness of the warning signs or indicators that a patient is a victim of trafficking Low level of confidence in the capacity, understanding and preparedness to provide patient-centered care
Le (2016)	Perceptions Meanings	Ex-victims' trafficking experiences made them feel socially and emotionally isolated Feelings of loss of sense of belonging and trust, loss of integrity, safety, and control over their physical appearance and mobility; Fear of reprisals and worries about economic conditions Perception of little social support and stigma Ex-victims gave meaning to their experiences and sought congruence between their self and the contextual factors through the regulation of the expression of emotion and thought, the creation of opportunities with constraints, and relating to cultural schemas, and social norms and values
Nwokeoma (2013)	Awareness Knowledge Perceptions Beliefs	Awareness of (women and child) human trafficking and of its existence in their community Some victims (especially the young and illiterate) do not understand the concept and are not aware of child trafficking The majority of the participants perceived females both as the most likely traffickers and trafficked Large family size, absence of formal parental education, low income families, and poor planning measures are perceived as important factors to consider when combating human trafficking Participants believe that the reasons used by traffickers to convince possible victims are offer of a good job (woman victims) and offer of school education (child victims)
Pereda et al. (2022)	Awareness Knowledge	The majority of our young participants knew what CSEC is A significant number of adolescents had not received any information about CSEC Perceived motivations to become involved in risky activities include means to obtain money, alcohol and drugs, material goods and a place to sleep Knowledge about risky behavior that

(continued on next page)

Table 4 (continued)

Authors/year	Contents	Outcomes
		enhances the probability of becoming involved in CSEC situations (e.g., sexting, sharing sexual content)

(Gebre, 2012). Moreover, ex-victims perceived little social support and stigma and gave meaning to their experiences through the regulation of the expression of emotion and thought, and the fit into cultural schemas, social norms, and values (Le, 2016).

3.2.3.2. Professionals. The research article by Katsanis et al. (2019), consistent with some qualitative and quantitative studies on this matter, suggests professionals' low levels of awareness of the warning signs or indicators of a potential victim of trafficking as well as low confidence in their ability, understanding and preparedness to provide victims-centered care.

3.2.3.3. Victims, professionals, and community members. Bonilla and Mo's (2019) research article suggests that participants identify victims involved in the sex industry as victims of human trafficking and have general knowledge about sexual exploitation. Despite the overall high awareness of human trafficking among community members, victims, and professionals, sex trafficking is perceived to be a problem that mostly affects women, and smuggling is intertwined with people's understanding of the human trafficking process (Bonilla & Mo, 2019; Nwokeoma, 2013). Community perceptions on the role of demographic factors (e.g., family size, number of children, poor family planning measures, low-income families) religious beliefs, and cultural practices (e.g., absence of formal education, fertility rite) were associated with the practices of human trafficking in developing countries like Nigeria (Nwokeoma, 2013).

The research article by Fernandes et al. (2020) explored participants' portrayals of victims' and traffickers' profiles and the features of victim-trafficker dynamics. The results point out the perceptions of differentiating characteristics between the profile of the victim and the trafficker, mostly in terms of sociodemographic data, vulnerabilities, and motivations. Some participants were able to identify some central features of victim-trafficker dynamics, referring to different forms of recruitment, facilitating factors of trafficking, forms of control, modus operandi, types of human trafficking, the relationship between victims and traffickers, and trafficking flows.

3.2.3.4. Community members. Despite the recognition of human trafficking as a problem and the community awareness of the reasons behind women's and girls' trafficking, most citizens were not aware of the law and showed a lack of knowledge about the profiles of trafficked people (Buckley, 2018). Also, most community members believe that those sexually exploited were responsible for their situation, with males attributing blame to victims more than females. Also, citizens believed that the government should be accountable for legislation, education, counseling, and rehabilitative actions, but revealed very low expectations regarding the effectiveness of political and social institutions to solve the problem.

4. Discussion

Considering the challenges of accurately estimating the nature and magnitude of human trafficking (Dell et al., 2017; Farrell & Vries, 2020), the empirical research focused on the social schemas (i.e., interrelated cognitive representations) about the phenomenon can provide relevant information to guide social responses and inform evidence-based policies in the anti-trafficking field (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2018). The purpose of the present review was to understand the state of the art of the research on social schemas of different groups (i.e., victims, ex-

victims, at-risk, professionals, community members, and media) about human trafficking involving girls and women.

4.1. An overview of the research articles' characteristics

Forty-six articles, published in the last 25 years and spanned all continents, met the inclusion criteria for this review. Most of them rely on a qualitative design which, in general, presented smaller sample sizes than mixed and quantitative studies. Sexual exploitation was the most analyzed type of human trafficking in the studies included in this review, and labor exploitation was the least explored. Despite this, findings do not suggest that there is great variability of social schemas studied by human trafficking type.

4.2. Social schemas about human trafficking involving girls and women

Media social schemas were only explored in studies with a qualitative design and its focus was mostly on human trafficking for sexual exploitation. Given the recognition of the role of media in societal perceptions (Rodríguez-López, 2018), we might think the predominance of studies included in this review on sexual exploitation could also be explained by media's ability to stimulate a greater (academic) interest in the study of the social schemas about girls and women involved in this type of human trafficking. Indeed, the results of the three studies exploring media representations are consistent with the literature, suggesting a simplification, a stereotypical and stigmatizing conceptualization of the phenomenon - a crime against heterosexual female youth and women with no agency perpetrated by men -, with sexual exploitation being overrepresented (Birkett, 2017; Mobberley, 2020; Rodríguez-López, 2018). In this respect, media should be aware of the impact of their stories on the way society frames human trafficking and its victims.

One key finding in this review, useful to inform evidence-based policies and to guide social responses in the anti-trafficking field (Szablewska & Kubacki, 2018), is the relationship between different inter-related cognitions that structure social schemas and between these schemas and the willingness of engaging in counter-trafficking actions. Both quantitative and mixed-methods studies exploring community members' schemas suggested some relevant associations of peoples' awareness, beliefs, and perceptions of self-efficacy with their knowledge about human trafficking, attribution of responsibility, and attitudes toward victims, as well as their willingness to engage in anti-trafficking actions. Despite some positive results on community members/general population awareness of human trafficking involving girls and women, it was also found lack of knowledge about victims' profiles and low expectations of the efficacy of political and institutional responses.

Moreover, findings on gender differences were not consistent among quantitative studies on community members' attributions of blame. While some results suggest that females' beliefs about trafficking situations, myths acceptance, responsibility attribution, and their perceptions of outcome efficacy of social action were more favorable to the victims than male social schemas, in one study victims were significantly more blamed for their victimization by female participants than from male participants, with higher attributions of blame when victimization conditions contain elements of personal desire and choice. In the first case, such differences may be related to higher levels of awareness of potential victimization in women than men, and the status of women as likely victims may make them more prone to believe that a successful anti-trafficking strategy can be found. Since the successful identification and assistance of human trafficking victims depends on the schemas of those who come in contact with them (Dell et al., 2017; Sharapov et al., 2019), there is a need for future research to replicate and validate these findings, as well as to understand what causes these gender differences and explore how to effectively enhance societal awareness, knowledge of the phenomenon, and mobilization.

(Ex-)Victims and youth at-risk of human trafficking seem to be aware

of the recruitment strategies of traffickers and conceptualized the exploitation as a continuum of explicit behaviors, which made them feel fear, sadness, stress, and anxiety. They appear to be aware of the risk factors and beliefs associated with sexual exploitation (of children) but showed a lack of knowledge regarding local resources to help them in case of need. Moreover, the results on women and young adults as victims and/or ex-victims show that disclosing their experiences could be harmful, but their perceptions and beliefs about the importance of addressing complex feelings, and their search for congruence between their self and the contextual factors facilitate the access and engagement with social services. On the other hand, the traffickers' strategies as well as professionals' stigma and negative attitudes were the main motives they attributed to not making a statement. Also, women who have been trafficked in childhood and interpret their exit as a success showed the development of a positive sense of self and self-worth, as well as perceptions of agency and adaptive coping strategies, suggesting that a better understanding of the psychological impact of the trafficking experiences as well as the personal and social resources to cope allow the design of better-informed exit and post-trafficking assistance approaches. Thus, exit and post-exit interventions should target victims' feelings and needs, as well as recognize and promote victims' agency.

The incongruent findings about professionals' social schemas on human trafficking involving girls and women regardless of the studies' design make it difficult to draw conclusions and point out the need for more training and resources strategies, as well as the need for replication studies to clarify these inconsistencies. While some articles suggested the need to reverse the low knowledge, the negative and stigmatizing attitudes, and the low engagement with the counter-trafficking practices of professionals, others pointed out the high awareness of the phenomenon and the knowledge about traffickers' strategies. Others, in turn, suggested that professionals have different levels of knowledge accordingly to the type of organization they belong to, and distinct attitudes and perceptions about human trafficking involving girls and women. As such, research can explore which factors explain these different outcomes and support political agendas establishing funding, training, and resources priorities. In turn, practitioners (e.g., law enforcement, justice, social services, and health professionals) should consider that victims' perceptions of professionals' attitudes and empathy can affect their access to support services and willingness to make a statement/disclosure as well as be aware of the impact of their own beliefs and attitudes toward human trafficking victims in the identification of and report of suspected situations. In fact, some professionals perceive some barriers to the identification of human trafficking situations and control efforts which are consistent with ex-victims' and victims' perspectives, such as fear of being perceived as judgmental and projecting stigma, and difficulties regarding language.

Finally, victims/at-risk, professionals, and community members' beliefs and perceptions about the role of sociodemographic, religious, and cultural factors on the vulnerability to human trafficking and the willingness to disclosure, should be considered in political agendas. Community awareness and education on victims' and traffickers' profiles, as well as central features of victim-trafficker dynamics (e.g., different forms of recruitment, facilitating factors of trafficking, forms of control, types of human trafficking, the relationship between victims and traffickers), should be promoted.

4.3. Limitations

Despite the interesting results, this systematic review presents some limitations. The exclusion of unpublished work and the use of systematic searching strategies may have limited the extension of the review. Considering that we used a systematic strategy for the identification of articles eligible for this review, it is possible that some studies were not identified due to the diversity of terms referring to cognitive schemas, some of them not included in our search terms. Furthermore, the screening of the manuscripts was conducted only by one reviewer,

which provided a better use of time and resources, but increased the risk of missing relevant studies (Camilo & Garrido, 2019).

5. Conclusion

This systematic review points out the complex nature of human trafficking making it difficult to study, and highlight the need for funding sources allowing the development of research, intervention programs, and prevention tools focused on the awareness, knowledge, and skills of different stakeholders to the identification and intervention with the phenomenon and its victims.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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