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Bénédicte Lavaud-Legendre

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## **Gig prostitution and recruitment processes**

### **A false promise of freedom**

**Bénédicte Lavaud-Legendre, Legal Specialist and CNRS Researcher, COMPTRASEC UMR – 5114, University of Bordeaux**

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#### **Abstract:**

This article is based on the results of two research projects conducted between 2018 and 2022, illustrating the recruitment processes used as part of the criminal activity which I define as “gig prostitution,” a form of criminal organisation which revolves around the commercial sexual exploitation of children. It highlights the emphasis placed on negotiation and contractual relations during the recruitment phase.

Gig prostitution is described by those involved as being based on personal integrity and the right to decide what use one makes of one’s own body. However, closer examination of the facts reveals that this freedom exists in name only. In spite of the accent placed on consent, negotiation and individual interests, such discourse is in reality accompanied by mechanisms which prevent victims from breaking free of exploitative relationships.

#### **Key words:**

Commercial sexual exploitation of children, procuring, bodily integrity, consent, gig prostitution, negotiation, socio-demographic profiling, recruitment processes, pimping

In recent years, the proliferation of digital technologies has had a profound impact on the organisational dimension of prostitution. The point of contact between supply and demand is no longer the kerbside, but the internet. Services and prices are agreed in advance via the exchange of digital messages, while the physical encounters take place in hotel rooms or apartments (ARRIGHI, 2023). The activity, designated here as gig prostitution, is a form of procuring which reflects these changing practices, and is particularly prevalent among younger generations. In France, a boom in such practices has been noted since 2010, leading to the launch of a major government campaign in 2020 (CHAMPRENAULT *et al.* 2021; First strategy to combat the commercial sexual exploitation of children 2021).

Based on the results of two research projects conducted between 2018 and 2022 (LAVAUD-LEGENDRE *et al.* 2021; LAVAUD-LEGENDRE *et al.* 2023), the aim of this paper is to analyse the process used to recruit victims into sex trafficking operations, revealing the emphasis placed on negotiation and contractual relations at this stage in the process.

First of all, it is worth briefly summarising the current state of our understanding of this phenomenon. Previous studies have analysed the prevalence of trends identified at the global level (DUPONT *et al.* 2021; BAIRD 2023, KRISCH *et al.* 2019; SMITH *et al.* 2009). Much attention has been devoted to the ways in which sexual exploitation has been shaped by new information technologies (WELLS 2012, JONSON *et al.* 2014, GEZINSKI *et al.* 2022, ARRIGHI, 2023) and the importance of logistics (PACHE 2022; LAVAUD-LEGENDRE 2023).

As for those involved, studies have focussed specifically on those working as prostitutes, pimps (PARADIS *et al.* 2005) and other parties (BIGOT 2008). Among those directly involved

in prostitution / procuring, a substantial proportion of individuals from difficult backgrounds has been identified (PORTS 2016, LAVAUD-LEGENDRE *et al.* 2023), something which is also true of those who have been victims of sexual abuse as adults (PORTS 2016, DIAMOND-WELCH 2020). Other studies have considered the backgrounds of sex criminals (BULLENS 2007) and how they are dealt with (ROMERO 2022).

More specifically, a number of studies have focused on the strategies employed to recruit victims and keep them trapped in a state of submission to those who profit from their work (REID 2015, KENNEDY 2007). This research is an extension of such studies, with a particular focus on the processes used to recruit minors in a context which could be defined as Prostitution 2.0. The extensive efforts made to normalise such practices will be demonstrated. The purpose is to dissociate them from negative representations of procuring and the other criminal activities commonly associated with prostitution (HANNEM 2017).

### **Definition of “gig prostitution”**

Based on the results of this research, gig prostitution has been defined as a particular form of procuring involving a specific location used to sell sex (a hotel room or apartment rented for this purpose), for a set period of time (usually around three days), with a number of interdependent individuals playing different roles in the organisation of this illicit activity – at the very least, one Prostitute and one Boss, along with various individuals playing accessory roles (Service Providers) (PLESSARD, 2022). In this definition, Prostitutes are persons engaging in sexual activity in return for some form of remuneration.<sup>1</sup> The Boss directs or manages this activity, playing a coordinating role. Logistical Service Providers contribute to the organisation, running and supervision of the activity (LAVAUD-LEGENDRE, 2023). Recruiters provide another service, and are remunerated in return for bringing in new Prostitutes.

Le contexte du recrutement : dans les foyers de protection de l'enfance<sup>2</sup>

« De multiples jeux d'influence et comportements mimétiques ont été observés. Ces adolescentes apparaissent comme « perdues » à l'entrée dans l'institution et semblent chercher à nouer des relations, des amitiés, quelles qu'en soient les conséquences »<sup>3</sup>. Le mimétisme conduit les intéressées à « développer les mêmes valeurs afin d'appartenir au groupe et d'être reconnues »<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> All of the Prostitutes involved in the cases we studied were female.

<sup>2</sup> FRITHMANN Helena et GAVENS Nathalie, « Entrée dans des pratiques prostitutionnelles d'adolescentes nouvellement placées en foyer : analyse des interactions et facteurs favorisants », *Sociétés et jeunesse en difficulté - Revue pluridisciplinaire de recherche*, n° 27, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> FRITHMANN Helena et GAVENS Nathalie, « Entrée dans des pratiques prostitutionnelles d'adolescentes nouvellement placées en foyer : analyse des interactions et facteurs favorisants », *Sociétés et jeunesse en difficulté - Revue pluridisciplinaire de recherche*, n° 27, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* § 41.

L'identité du recruteur : recrutement par les lover boys.

Le phénomène des « lover boys » a fait l'objet d'une importante visibilité médiatique aux Pays Bas dans les années 2000. BOVENKERK Franck et Van SAN Marion, « Loverboys in the Amsterdam Red light District : A resalist approach to the study of a moral panic », *Crime media Culture* 7(2), pp. 185-199 ; Les ressorts psychologiques de ces pratiques ont également été analysés Bullens et van Horn. Néanmoins, le phénomène est beaucoup plus ancien. A la fin du XIXème siècle, la pratique consistant à séduire des jeunes femmes à leur arrivée à Amsterdam avant de les pousser à se prostituer était déjà identifiée.

Le contexte particulier des gangs de rue (Dorais)

Attention il apparaît plus tard

Quantitative and qualitative analysis of these data allowed to retrace the interplay of these various trajectories (SAPIN et al. 2007). A “trajectory” is a more modest unit of analysis than the “background” as a whole; it evokes a specific aspect of an individual's life path (family life, school life, professional life, living arrangements etc.) (FRECHON et al. 2013).

## Method

The research is based upon the analysis of data stemming from legal proceedings.

It was supported by a partnership with a lawyer (Bénédicte Lavaud-Legendre), a sociologist (Cécile Plessard) and an epidemiologist (Gaëlle Encrenaz) to analyse ten criminal cases which resulted in convictions in the period between 2012 and 2019. All of these cases involved the sex trafficking of minors, and all of the victims were young women. These cases were selected by the public prosecutors responsible for bringing them to trial in the Greater Paris region (France). Reading the case files allowed to identify the individuals involved, their socio-demographic backgrounds and their interactions. So, different criminal roles were identified, corresponding to different levels of involvement with the prostitution / procuring ring. Criminal role means all of the rights and duties incumbent upon an individual engaged in what can be legally defined as a criminal activity. Analysing these roles allowed researchers to better define what those involved understood the term “gig” to imply.

Subsequently, a number of individual stories were reconstructed by analysing the procedural documents pertaining to specific persons. Of the 186 individuals originally identified, 103 were retained, for whom sufficient information was available. Of this number, 36 were the subject of an educational support file (French: *dossier d'assistance éducative*) – a measure which enables the relevant administrative and legal authorities to implement protective measures in response to potential risks to the health, safety or integrity of the child in question (Article 375 of the Civil Code). 30 such cases were consulted, enabling researchers to flesh out the familial and institutional backgrounds of those involved (educational background, health issues, criminal records etc.).

The legal definition of prostitution used by the French *Cour de Cassation* involves payment in return for any form of physical contact intended to satisfy the sexual desires of another person or persons (Crim. 27 March 1996, n° 95-82.016). French law takes a neo-abolitionist view of such practices. The actions of the Bosses, the various Service Providers and the clients are all illegal (Articles 225-5 et seq. and Article 225-12-1 of the Criminal Code). Individuals working as prostitutes may be entitled to specific social support (Article L. 121-9 of the Family and Social Action Code), and all minors involved in prostitution are regarded as being at risk, and thus subject to child protection laws (Law of 4 March 2002, No. 2002-305). Minors involved in prostitution cannot legally be considered as consenting, neither from the perspective of child protection legislation nor in terms of the sentences dispensed for criminal activity (LAVAUD-LEGENDRE (1) 2022).

Those involved describe “gig prostitution” as being based on the freedom of individuals to choose what they do with their own bodies. This point is emphasised during the recruitment process. However, closer examination of the facts reveals that this freedom exists in name only. In spite of the accent placed on consent, negotiation and individual interests, such discourse is in reality backed up with various mechanisms of violence and entrapment.

## **I - Results**

We make a distinction between the initial point of contact between Prostitutes and Bosses and the recruitment process proper, wherein victims are isolated and entrapped.

### §1 – Introduction

In most cases, the initial contact between future victims and their exploiters takes the form of a relationship of trust established with criminal intentions. These relationships may be formed by individuals acting as “Recruiters,” or “Bosses” themselves using the “lover boy” method.

#### **A – Making contact through a Recruiter**

Gig prostitution involves a specialised division of tasks. The Recruiter puts future Prostitutes in touch with their future Bosses. They may do this “to order,” for example: “*One day, XF called me (...). She said someone had suggested she should be an escort, and that her pimp had asked her to bring a friend.*”<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, some individuals may spontaneously “pass girls on” to Bosses: “*Actually, what I [male interviewee] did was provide advertising for other people.*” In both cases, the *modus operandi* is identical.

First contact may be made online, or else in a face-to-face encounter. For online contacts, social media platforms such as (Instagram, Tik Tok, Facebook and Twitter) and messaging

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<sup>5</sup> All quotations presented in italics are extracts from depositions taken during the cases we studied. In cases where these extracts are taken from phone-tapping operations, this is specified.

applications allowing for the sharing of photos and videos (Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, WhatsApp) are the preferred channels. Targets may be led to trust recruiters on account of their numbers of followers or views, but also on the basis of the visual tools they use, including photos and *emojis*.

Online recruitment may be either reactive or proactive.

In the latter case, accounts with names such as “Cash\_Plan” or “Easy money + [name of town or district]” are frequently used. Recruiters may also publish time-limited videos, or “stories,” aimed at an unknown number of recipients. These ephemeral videos disappear after a few hours or minutes, making them hard for investigators to trace. **Ces offres visent un nombre indéterminé de destinataires : l’ensemble de celles et ceux qui visualiseront le compte.**

In the case of reactive recruitment, recruiters scour social media profiles or publications in search of suitable targets: “*On social media, you have girls posting their phone numbers saying that they want to get into escorting.*” Recruiters are looking for a combination of different elements on display: “*It depends on the girls. If I see one acting like a slag on Snap, I’ll make her an offer. [...] It’s just about weird photos, like if the girl is showing her ass, or just the way she dresses, the way she Snaps, that’s all there is to it. [...] I ask her if she wants to work. And she knows straight away (...) that it means escorting. They’re not always into it.*” **Une fois les profils sélectionnés, un message leur sera envoyé : « On envoie un message à des filles pour savoir si elles sont intéressées. Il y en a qui ne répondent pas et il y en a qui demandent comment ça se passe » [extrait d’audition]. A ce stade, l’activité de prostitution n’est pas toujours explicitement évoquée. L’objectif des auteurs est surtout d’attirer vers eux leurs cibles potentielles pour qu’ils puissent mettre en place une relation de confiance.**

When contacts are made on the basis of in-person encounters, the process requires both a minimum degree of familiarity with the potential recruit and an opportunity for a physical interaction to occur. In many cases, bonds of trust pre-exist any propositions. Potential recruits may be inclined to trust people they already know from various social contexts (school friends, neighbours etc.): “*I bumped into XF one day, I’d known her since she was a kid. I suggested that she should work as a prostitute.*” One Recruiter reported that: “*My role was to put girls in touch with pimps. They were my friends, and the pimps were my friends too. There wasn’t a single one with whom I didn’t have some personal connection.*”

**Comme cela a été observé pour internet, celle qui va se prostituer peut être réactive : « Je connaissais XH depuis le printemps dernier via un ami commun. Je l’ai recroisé au mois de janvier et je lui ai dit que je cherchais un complément de revenu. C’est là qu’il m’a parlé d’une fille prénommée XF qui avait un plan d’Escort girl. Je n’étais pas d’accord, mais après réflexion j’ai accepté sa proposition » [extrait d’audition]. Le lien de connaissance peut être récent. Ainsi, l’intégration dans une structure de protection de l’enfance apparaît comme un moment propice au recrutement dans la prostitution. Au sein des données étudiées, X % des jeunes en situation de prostitution avaient bénéficié de mesures de protection de l’enfance. Cette entrée dans le lieu de placement s’accompagne dans bien des cas d’une rupture scolaire**

et d'une rupture amicale avec le groupe d'amis d'origine. Comme par compensation, se développent dans le même temps des relations amicales au sein du groupe de paires hébergées dans l'établissement, créant ainsi un important sentiment d'appartenance. Ici celles qui procèdent à la mise en contact peuvent ne connaître que très superficiellement celles qu'elles présentent à ceux qui organisent l'activité.

Whatever the context in which this initial contact occurs, we identified the use of different registers of language. Recruiters often employ terminology derived from the business world: *"Hi, I've just come across your profile (...). I represent a collective of escort girls. We are looking for girls who meet our standards to work with us, guaranteed pay. (...) 500 to 800 / week for the first two months."* [text message]. The term "collective of escort girls" suggests some form of professional organisation. **En outre, le terme "contrat" est fréquemment utilisé pour désigner le fait de se prostituer en participant à un « plan » : « Ce que j'appelle contrat c'est le fait de dire que tu fais un contrat pour une semaine, pour travailler pour lui, en échange d'argent. ». De même, le terme « bosser » est également utilisé comme synonyme de « se prostituer » : « Après, (...) avec des gens j'ai entendu dire qu'elle voulait bosser, ... quand je dis bosser, c'est se prostituer ». Dans toutes ces hypothèses, le registre de langage employé renvoie au monde du travail.**

In other examples, particularly when the Recruiter is a woman, **le registre de langage relève davantage du mode affectif et tend à souligner** great emphasis is placed on shared similarities and experiences: *"Don't worry I'm a girl, and I do it too."* [text message] By suggesting that they will work together, Recruiters may put their targets at ease: *"Don't worry, it's cool, it's easy, sometimes you have to do stuff, but it's cool."* [text message] Another aspect of this discourse is the insistence upon the benefits to be derived from the activity: *"what do you reckon, we could work together? You can have whatever you want, ciggies, drinks, telephone."* [extract from judicial hearing]. In some cases, prostitution is not explicitly mentioned: *"I didn't directly tell the girls that they could become escorts; I asked them to be friends with so-and-so, and that there was money to be made."* [extract from judicial hearing]. **Au cours de cette phase d'entrée en contact, les différents protagonistes vont adapter différents registres de langage en fonction de leur interlocuteur.**

Le rôle de Prestataire recrutement n'a été attribué qu'aux individus qui s'étaient fait rémunérer. En droit français, ce critère n'est pas déterminant. Le seul fait d'exercer une pression sur une personne pour qu'elle se prostitue (225-5 CP) ou encore de faire office d'intermédiaire entre deux personnes dont l'une se livre à la prostitution et l'autre exploite ou rémunère la prostitution d'autrui suffit à caractériser le proxénétisme (225-6 CP). Néanmoins, l'existence d'une contrepartie pourra avoir une influence lors de la fixation de la peine. With regard to the remuneration received by Recruiters, it tends to be around 500 Euros for each new recruit. **En outre, certains Prestataires recrutement peuvent intervenir pour plusieurs Patrons, suivant alors un modèle que l'on pourrait qualifier de « Prestataires multicartes ».** Some Recruiters work for multiple Bosses: *"XF2 told me it was the best network, she did suggest another network to me [...] they were guys of about 30, I met them with XF2 but they said I looked too young so they turned me down."* The sums generated by such procuring activities can be considerable.

Contrary to the clear gender distinctions observed in other roles,<sup>6</sup> Recruiters may be either men or women. Of the 14 Recruiters we identified, 5 were men and 9 were women. This is potentially evidence of a criminal strategy employed by those seeking to lure young women into prostitution: *“Someone contacted me on Instagram (...) saying that if I wanted to make some easy money, without hurting anyone, then it could be easily done, just come over to Snapchat, let’s talk... So I went onto Snapchat and he said, ‘my girlfriend is going to call you,’ I get a call from a private number, she says ‘we should meet up, don’t worry, I’m a girl and I do it too, we should really meet up’.”*

We may posit the hypothesis that the role of Recruiter constitutes a step on the criminal career ladder (BECKER 2012). It appears to be rare, although perhaps not entirely impossible, for a young woman to become a Recruiter without first having worked as a Prostitute. With regard to the men involved, a certain amount of experience in the business is required before one can ascend to the role of Boss. Such experience may be gained by working initially as a Service Provider, either as a Recruiter or as a Logistical Service Provider. Nevertheless, the data at our disposal are not sufficient to establish this point with any degree of certainty.

Furthermore, recruitment may involve an emotional dimension.

REPRENDRE ICI

## **B – Recruitment using the “lover boy” method**

One common practice is for a man to take on the role of “lover boy” and strike up a sexual/romantic relationship with a young girl who is subsequently drawn into prostitution. The term “lover boy” is used to refer to young men who make use of romantic discourse in order to exploit young women through prostitution. Within the system described in our research, “lover boys” may be either Bosses or Logistical Service Providers. As we shall see, such relationships are founded upon massive power imbalances.

To begin with, young women lured into prostitution are often in desperate need of recognition and affection. The admiration or even fascination they experience may cloud their judgement and override their sense of autonomy: *“I was in awe of him, I thought he was the man I loved, I was crazy about him (...) I thought we were a couple, me and him, even when I was working. But actually he didn’t give a shit about me [...]”* [extract from judicial hearing]. This phenomenon may arise even in cases where no romantic relationship exists: *“When I was working with him, I wasn’t in love with him (...) but I was in awe of him, I gave him all my money. It was supposed to be 50/50 but I would give him everything, all he had to do was say: ‘You get the hotel room’ and I would do it, I’d pay cash.”* [extract from judicial hearing]

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<sup>6</sup> 25 of 27 Bosses were men - 92%; 22 of 24 Logistical Service Providers were men - 91%; 100% of the Prostitutes were women



Bosses make full use of this coercive technique: “*My love, hey, I don’t want you to cry. Listen to me, I’m talking too, hey, I really love you, OK, and I really want to marry you, I want to keep you with me.*” [phone tap]

The discourse within the group of people who gravitate around Bosses and Prostitutes also feeds into this imbalance. Bosses may be imbued with considerable prestige: “*XH is known for being the biggest pimp in the 94 [post code]. All the girls wanted to work for him, but he didn’t want them.*”. The girls working as prostitutes, on the other hand, are discussed in humiliating terms: “*It’s dirty. Do you think I’m going to touch a chick who gets touched up 20 times a day? Those girls are disgusting.*”.

Age difference is another factor in these asymmetrical relationships. As one girl, who was far beyond the average age observed in these cases, observes: “*For me it was OK because I’m 27, they know I have a kid. I do my thing and then I’m off, I make enough money. But with the other girls, if they didn’t make enough money the boys would be more aggressive. (...) I know that the other girls sometimes had trouble getting their money.*” [extract from judicial hearing].

Our analysis of the backgrounds of those involved further confirmed this imbalance. Twenty-two percent of Prostitutes grew up in violent homes, including families with confirmed cases of physical violence. The proportion among Bosses was 10%. Furthermore, 37% of the Prostitutes had been victims of sexual violence, compared with 0% of the Bosses.

In terms of criminal records, 92% of the Bosses considered in this study already had previous criminal convictions. The proportion was much lower, albeit far from negligible, among the Prostitutes (almost 46%). More specifically, 48% of Bosses had previous convictions relating to drug dealing, compared with just 5% of the women working as prostitutes.

There is therefore a clear difference in age, social standing, prestige, vulnerability and income between Bosses and Prostitutes.

Bosses posing as *lover boys* depict themselves as protectors, and their previous criminal convictions probably contribute to the prestige they are able to project. They draw upon their experience to get what they want from young women in desperate need of attention. And thus the recruitment process begins.

## §2 – The Recruitment Process

Once the future Prostitute and future Boss are in contact, recruitment can begin in earnest. Negotiation plays a prominent role in this process. Nonetheless, these proceedings can ill conceal the criminal strategy upon which the entire process is based. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the practice of “sexual tests” or entrapment by ambush.

## A – Negotiation

The discourse used by victims to describe how they got started in prostitution suggests that it is a professional activity like any other. They employ terminology borrowed from the world of work (“working,” “hard worker,” “contract,” “job interview,” “work telephone,” “workers,” “Boss,” “turnover” etc.), a form of linguistic subterfuge which allows them to discuss such matters in terms which conceal its true nature (DE GAULEJAC *et al.* 2015; KLEMPERER, 1996). This contributes to the normalisation of the activities in question.

As such, the contract process includes a phase in which the potential recruit is provided with information, leading to discussions supposedly tantamount to a negotiation, followed by a period of time for the recruit to think over the proposition.

The information phase is illustrated by the following extract: *“Yo, anyway when you go up to Paris don’t start being difficult. Just come and see how it works. Come and check out the deal (...), you go into the apartment, right, it’s all organised. I show you the apartment and give you the keys, I come round once a day, and you give me what you have to give me.”* [phone tap].

Negotiations may also cover the types of services expected: *“XH [BOSS] asked me to do the interview. (...) I explained to her what she had to do, how it would work for her, the prices, and I asked her what she was willing to do.”* [extract from judicial hearing]

One girl who worked as a prostitute discussed the scope for negotiation in this arrangement: *“The guy’s name is XH. We had an agreement about the prices. He said he worked on contract. You say you want 1000 Euros, you work for a week and he hands over the money at the end of the week. (...) However many clients there were he gave me 1000 Euros. (...) There was no written ‘contract’, it was oral.”* [extract from judicial hearing]

When two Bosses are in competition, they may offer “better conditions” to make them appear more attractive as employers: *“I stopped for two months. XF (Recruiter) was contacting me about other networks but I refused. XH contacted me through XF2, he said he was a friend of hers. He said, ‘don’t worry you’ll have more freedom, we’ll split it 50/50 and I can work around your hours’.”* [extract from judicial hearing]

A period of “time to think it over” is something which appears frequently in the discourse of the Bosses: *“In any case I’ll see you around, think about it and if you want to make some money then you know where to find me.”* [extract from judicial hearing] The idea is also internalised by the young women working as prostitutes. One of them told investigators that her involvement in prostitution was the result of an informed decision: *“He never forced me. When he made me the offer, I went and thought about it and then I got back in touch with him. He never put any pressure on me.”* [extract from judicial hearing]

These successive phases are not dissimilar to those associated with legitimate recruitment processes in the formal economy, and do not correspond to the image of clandestine

recruitment by force or constraint which we might more readily associate with criminal activities. Nevertheless, the lexical sleight-of-hand which seeks to pass off prostitution as a job like any other is starkly at odds with the so-called “test” which often forms part of the “job interview.” At such moments, the criminal nature of the activity becomes abundantly clear.

## **B – Criminal strategies disguised by recruitment interviews**

The practice of “testing” girls is mentioned regularly in our sources: *“He asked me what I did and didn’t do, sexually. He told me he needed to test me himself, to see if I was capable or not. I agreed to sleep with him, I thought that’s what the job was like.”* [extract from judicial hearing] A recurring feature of these accounts is the scant attention paid by the men to the expectations or conditions expressed by the young women being inducted into prostitution: *“We used condoms. We did everything, even stuff I didn’t really want to do (fellatio and anal sex). He said it was good and that I was ready.”* [extract from judicial hearing] The existence of such “procedures” may be openly admitted by the criminals, as in the example cited above, but may also remain implicit. *“He’d send the girls to see them first. Then he’d bring them over and sleep with them. He took my virginity. And then he asks the girls if they want to work.”* [extract from judicial hearing] Such “tests” are conducted systematically by some Bosses.

Their exact purpose merits further examination. Describing these incidents as “tests” suggests that they are akin to a “trial period,” reinforcing the pretence that the Prostitute / Boss relationship is a legitimate professional relationship. In theory, these tests should thus be a means of selecting future “workers.” However, we did not come across a single case in which a young woman was judged to have failed this selection process. So what purpose does it really serve ?

The accounts of such tests found in our data illustrate the state of confusion into which the young women are plunged, their inability to position themselves in relation to the men they are dealing with, and to consent to or refuse certain practices. They appear to lose their bearing entirely. When asked, *“Did you experience violence or threats at XH’s hands?”* one young woman responded: *“No. We slept together, I didn’t really want to, I gave in but it wasn’t really what I wanted, I didn’t have the will to say no, so I spread my legs. He couldn’t have known but I didn’t really want to...”* [extract from judicial hearing] We can thus postulate that the function of these “tests” is not really to select future Prostitutes, but rather to “prepare” them for sex work by means of practices designed to break them down, to undermine their capacity to decide for themselves and express their own will. They thus form part of the broader criminal strategy. In legal terms, these actions can be regarded as crimes (LAVAUD-LEGENDRE (1) 2022).

Although it appears to be rarer, recruitment through a form of ambush occurred in three of the cases included in our data. In these situations, the future victims are lured into a group situation by a friend (male or female), with the pretext of being invited to a party. They then

rapidly discover that their telephone is missing. They find themselves, in their own words, unable to leave the group without recovering their telephone. They are plied with cannabis and alcohol, then forced to engage in sex acts (one of the girls who suffered this treatment, aged 14, was a virgin). Later that night, they are introduced to clients. Viewed from the outside, it is clear that this chain of events is not fortuitous; it is the fruit of a criminal strategy.

In our data it is very rare for violence to be employed directly as a form of constraint: “*He wanted to force me to work. He wanted me to prostitute myself for him, going to people’s houses. I said no, but since he was starting to be violent with me I thought it better to say yes, because he was going to take away my telephone.*” [extract from judicial hearing]

While the first-person accounts generally indicate that the young women are consenting to begin with, closer analysis of the data reveals the degree of constraint exercised upon them once the seduction phase is over. Constraint may take the form of physical violence, or else threats to destroy a young woman’s reputation by sharing compromising photos.

## **II – Discussion**

The results of our study illustrate the three components of the exploitation continuum as identified in the articles featured in our literature review: recruitment context, methods of entrapment and enmeshment (BAIRD *et al.* 2023).

Our findings primarily correspond to the first two of these phases: the profile of recruiters, and their pre-existing relationships with targets, are elements of the recruitment context, while the tactics employed to make contact with young girls, and the use of terminology pertaining to contracts, freedom and self-determination, are methods of entrapment.

With regard to the backgrounds of those involved and the relationship dynamics between exploiters and victims, our results broadly corroborate the findings of previous studies. They differ, however, with relation to the forms of constraint utilised in the recruitment process.

### A – Recruitment contexts and relational approaches

Generally speaking, the internet has had a significant impact on the sex trafficking of minors (FREDLUND *et al.* 2013). Victims are often lured in by the promise of luxury goods and the opportunity to earn money quickly through “escorting.” (JEHEL 2022) Nevertheless, a narrow majority of recruitments still appear to occur via in-person encounters (56%) rather than online (MOORE *et al.* 2020).

Young people who were victims of sexual abuse during childhood, or who grew up in violent households or with absent parents, are over-represented among the victims of child sexual exploitation (BAIRD *et al.* 2020, O’BRIEN 2018, REED *et al.* 2019, SMITH *et al.* 2009). From a psychological perspective, children falling into these categories appear to be more inclined to self-destructive behaviour, putting themselves in dangerous situations and demonstrating

high-risk behaviour during adolescence (BENGHOZI 2021). A pressing need for affection may make them more receptive to offers of protection as well as the seductive techniques employed by those who profit from the sexual exploitation of children (CECCHET *et al.* 2014).

It is in this context that recruitment using the “lover boy” method operates. This is certainly not a new phenomenon (BOVENKERK *et al.* 2011; SMITH *et al.* 2009, WELLS *et al.* 2012; CECCHET *et al.* 2014, CAVAZOS 2015). In late 19th-century Amsterdam, the practice of seducing young women arriving in the city and then forcing them into prostitution was already a well-known problem (BOVENKERK *et al.* 2011; GIBBS *et al.* 2015). In a somewhat different context, the technique known as “love bombing” consists of “overwhelming displays of affection designed to break down all resistance in the minds of the young women targeted. When the time is right, the manipulator will turn to pity, emotional blackmail and even threats to finish the job.” (DORAIS *et al.*). In previous studies, the time required for a “lover boy” to win the trust of his target has been estimated at between three and six months (KENNEDY *et al.* 2007). This far exceeds the timeframes observed in our results, something which can perhaps be attributed to the general acceleration of social relations in the digital age (ROSA 2012).

Recruitment through peer networks also plays upon the desire for affection and a sense of belonging felt by young people suffering from a lack of validation. The use of female recruiters to bring in new “workers” (EDINBOURGH *et al.* 2015; SMITH *et al.* 2009) contributes to the normalisation of the exploitation (MOORE *et al.* 2020). Adolescents entering the care system are viewed as particularly vulnerable targets for this process, particularly as they often change schools and lose contact with existing friendship groups (FRITHMANN *et al.* 2022; MOORE, *et al.* 2020). By way of compensation, they often form new relationships with other children in the care system, finding a sense of belonging. They may thus behave mimetically, “developing the same values in order to achieve recognition and a sense of belonging to the group.” (FRITHMANN *et al.* 2022)

The specificities of the recruitment context thus explain the fact that exploiters do not often have to resort to violence or threats. The imbalance of power serves to cement their control by in what is an “extreme form of unequal relationship, characterised by the influence that one partner has over the other, unbeknownst to the latter. [...] Differentiation becomes unclear, individual boundaries are gradually eroded and the victim ends up trapped and isolated in this relationship.” (DRONNEAU 2010; PERONNE *et al.* 2006) In these relationships of control, victims become entirely devoid of critical perspective in relation to their exploiters: “*XH was always putting pressure on XF. He’d call her up and tell her to come over, like come now (...) she does whatever he says. Q: Why does she do that? R: I don’t know, she’s too in love with him, she’s under his spell.*” [extract from judicial hearing]

In this respect, our findings very broadly corroborate the results of previous studies. Where they differ, however, is with regard to the use of constraint in the recruitment phase.

## B – Forms of constraint used in recruitment

We did not identify any situations in which family members were directly involved in recruitment, either through emotional pressure or any other form of constraint, contrary to the findings of certain previous studies (SMITH *et al.* 2009; REED 2019). A study conducted in the US state of Kentucky in 2012-2013 focusing on structures (particularly judicial institutions) housing young people (COLE *et al.* 2013) found that the majority of subjects (62%) had been exploited by a member of their own family. In situations where individuals were exploited by their families, the mother played a decisive role in 63% of the cases identified (REID *et al.* 2015).

In some cases, young women turn to prostitution to fund a drug habit (KENNEDY 2007) or pay back a debt (REID 2016). We did not identify any such situations in our data. In some of the cases we studied, prostitution may lead to an increase in consumption as a means of coping with the sex work. It is not uncommon for prostitutes to end up using all of the money earned through sex work to cover the cost of the drugs consumed during that work. As such, drug dependency and debt do not necessarily predate their sexual exploitation, but are instead used to prevent them from breaking out of the cycle.

Some previous studies have observed physical violence during the recruitment phase (KENNEDY *et al.* 2007). “Gorilla / Guerrilla Pimps” use violence to recruit and control the women they exploit (GIBBS *et al.* 2015, DALLEY, 2010; WILLIAMSON & PRIOR 2009). A previous study found that 62% of the women entrapped into prostitution had been raped before starting sex work (FARLEY *et al.* 1998). Our own data reveal examples of violence not during the recruitment process, but during the exploitation phase.

Nevertheless, this discrepancy disappears under further scrutiny. The incidents analysed in our study involve a considerable amount of linguistic subterfuge and manipulating behaviour, designed to mask the violent nature of the practices employed. The practice of “testing” girls is a good example: *“I should say that that day, before going to work, they "tested" us, XF and me, at the same time and without condoms, switching from one partner to another. To start with we refused, but then we did what they said.”* [extract from judicial hearing] In spite of an initial agreement to engage in a test exclusively involving certain sex acts, it is not uncommon for other acts to be imposed subsequently. The context established by the prior negotiations means that the girls do not necessarily define these transgressions as acts of violence. Adopting a neutral, external perspective on these experiences, it seems likely that a majority of the individuals identified in our sources did indeed suffer acts of violence, particularly rape, before their sexual exploitation began in earnest.

In *Gangs and Girls*, a *gang bang* is defined as a “ritual gang rape in which a girl is forced to have sex with several gang members at once or in rapid succession.” (DORAIS *et al.* 2006) Dorais describes how the “post-traumatic stress symptoms the girl may experience, such as loss of sexual sensation or even a feeling of being cut off from her own body, reinforce the ‘normality’ of submission to men’s desires, however extreme.” (DORAIS *et al.* 2006) This description chimes with the analysis of Judith Trinquart, who argues that *“physical violation of a sexual nature makes victims more vulnerable to further violation of the same nature.”*

(TRINQUART 2002) We can find echoes of these descriptions in several of the situations analysed in our own study, wherein girls being recruited into prostitution find themselves unable to determine where the boundaries of their consent lie, due to the profound sense of confusions induced by the circumstances in which they find themselves: first sexual experiences, people engaging in sex acts in their presence, first experiences with drugs etc.

It is also worth discussing how our results illustrate the process of enmeshment (REID 2016). This encompasses the various factors which facilitate exploitation beyond the recruitment phase, including barriers preventing victims from escaping. These factors are connected with the backgrounds of victims, their desire for affection, the measures employed by abusers (constraint, violence etc.), the effects of past trauma, dependency factors etc. Our own observations highlight the tactics used to recruit young girls, but these tactics also have lasting effects throughout the exploitation phase, preventing victims from breaking free of the connections thus created. They thus play a role in the process of enmeshment.

The enmeshment process also involves physical and sexual violence, threats against victims or their families, and actions intended to exacerbate their material and emotional dependency during the exploitation phase. These elements are not studied in the present article because they belong to the exploitation phase, and thus arise after the recruitment process.

### **Limitations**

Transforming judicial data into research data required us to sift through the information gathered by investigators and identify those fields pertinent to our research question. Judicial data can shine a light on criminal activities and groups who would otherwise remain almost invisible. Nevertheless, they also introduce a degree of selection bias: we were only able to access information about prostitution networks which have been the object of criminal prosecutions and convictions. Furthermore, data was not recorded in a systematic manner. The investigators recorded only the information of interest to them; the result is a partial and potentially biased portrait of a criminal organisation, in which certain forms of information are over-represented.

Since the data gathering process was not standardised, we encountered a high proportion of missing data, leading to a degree of measurement bias.

In spite of these difficulties, the significant quantity of data available enabled us to piece together a precise description of this criminal activity and profile those involved.

### **Conclusion**

Our findings illustrate the elaborate, complex methods used to recruit minors into prostitution. Linguistic subterfuge, a misleading emphasis on consent, contractualisation and the creation of a close bond between exploiter and victim are all factors which not only facilitate recruitment, but also severely complicate the work of investigators and social workers in direct contact with victims, since the latter often refuse to recognise themselves as such. In many cases, the exploitation they suffer only begins to feel unbearable when they become

aware of the lies, deception and violence involved. Nevertheless, sexual exploitation of children brings with it a host of harmful consequences, even if they are not immediately evident to those directly concerned (eating disorders, sleep disorders, suicidal thoughts, self-harm, addiction etc.). It thus seems essential that those working in the field to help young victims should familiarise themselves with the vocabulary and linguistic subterfuge utilised by pimps, in order to help victims deconstruct the discourse they have been sold. It is therefore important to state clearly that, although there may have been prior negotiations, and although a young woman may have agreed to engage in prostitution, she was not subsequently free to choose her clients, she was not able to refuse certain acts or positions, she was not allowed sufficient breaks, she did not receive the money she had been promised, and so on and so forth. Taken together, these constraints and privations illustrate the extent to which these young girls are treated as plaything in the hands of people whose only goal is to exploit them for financial gain.

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