

## [en] Sub-Saharan Women Trafficked for Sexual Exploitation: A Transdisciplinary Approach from the Paradigm of Resilience

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**Abstract. Introduction.** Human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a growing social problem in today's democratic societies, affecting mainly girls and women (Eurostat, 2018). It is also a crime (Palermo protocol [UN, 2000]), a violation of human rights, and a manifestation of gender-based violence (UN's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women [UN, 1993]), and a type of slavery (Correa, 2011) against the most impoverished women. **Purpose.** In this article, we focus on the sub-Saharan trafficked women who come to southern Europe via the human trafficking routes that cross northern Africa going through places such as Lagos, Tinzouat (Mali), Tamanrasset (Algeria), the Sahara Desert, and different Moroccan cities, before reaching Europe over the Southern Spanish coastline. We show the resources used by these women when going through the said contexts of exploitation and forced prostitution. **Methodology.** Our research reviews the existing literature taking resilience as a pivotal point that is present in various areas of knowledge, including psychology and literature, among others. It allows us to show a change of perspective in this matter, by making these women visible in terms of their capacities. **Results.** We show examples, from different fields of knowledge and disciplines, of women who, having lived in these contexts, have carried out processes of fortitude, recovery, and personal growth. A new glimpse of this phenomenon and of these processes is studied, from a scarcely researched perspective to this day. **Contribution.** The originality of this analysis contributes a new understanding of the capacity of resilience of this population, despite the adverse conditions of their migratory experience.

**Keywords:** resilience; gender violence; sub-Saharan trafficked women; migration; transdisciplinary approach.

## [es] Trata de mujeres subsaharianas con fines de explotación sexual: una mirada transdisciplinar desde el paradigma de resiliencia

**Resumen. Introducción.** La trata de personas con fines de explotación sexual es un problema social creciente en las sociedades democráticas actuales, que impacta mayoritariamente en mujeres y niñas (Eurostat, 2018). Es también un delito (Protocolo de Palermo [UN, 2000]), una violación de derechos humanos, y una manifestación de violencia de género (Declaración de Naciones Unidas para la Eliminación de la Violencia contra las Mujeres [UN, 1993]) y una forma de esclavitud (Correa, 2011) cometida contra las mujeres más empobrecidas. **Propósito.** Este artículo se centra en las mujeres subsaharianas tratadas que llegan al sur de Europa a través de rutas de compra-venta de personas que recorren África atravesando, lugares como Lagos, Tin Zaoautin (Mali), la ciudad de Tamanrasset (Argelia), el Desierto del Sáhara, o determinadas ciudades de Marruecos antes de cruzar a Europa a través de las costas del sur de España. Se muestran los recursos que estas utilizan al atravesar los contextos de explotación y prostitución forzada mencionados. **Metodología.** A través de la revisión de la literatura, nuestra investigación recoge la resiliencia como un eje presente en distintos ámbitos de conocimiento, como la psicología y la literatura, entre otras, para mostrar un cambio de mirada y un nuevo acercamiento a este fenómeno, así como a los procesos puestos en marcha por estas mujeres desde un enfoque de capacidad. **Resultados.** Se muestran ejemplos de mujeres, recogidos desde distintas disciplinas y campos del saber, que habiendo estado en contextos de trata han llevado a cabo procesos de fortalecimiento, recuperación y crecimiento personal. **Aportación.** Nuestra aportación es original en la medida en que contribuye a una nueva comprensión de la capacidad de resiliencia de esta población a pesar de las adversas condiciones de su experiencia migratoria.

**Palabras clave:** resiliencia; violencia de género; trata de mujeres subsaharianas; migración; enfoque transdisciplinar.

**Sumario.** 1. Introduction. 2. Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation: What the data say. 3. The paradigm of resilience in studies on violence against women. 4. Transit migration and the trafficking of sub-Saharan women from the perspective of resilience. 5. The representation of trafficking in the cultural and literary spheres. 6. Discussion and conclusions. References.

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“How much did one know of the true feelings of those who do not have a voice?”

(Ngozi Adichie, 2006, 250)

## 1. Introduction

This article examines the violent reality regarding women trafficked for sexual exploitation in democratic societies, focusing on those who arrive on the shores of southern Europe through the human trafficking routes which start in the sub-Saharan African countries and cross North Africa. Specifically, we explore these women's processes of resistance and resilience despite the traumatising situations they are exposed to during these migratory journeys. To this end, we have drawn from contributions made by women from different fields, such as psychology, literature, or the Seventh Art, in which they show, denounce, and bring attention to this social problem, focusing on the processes of resilience and human agency that make it possible for migrant women in trafficking contexts to sustain their lives.

The reality of trafficking, with its own forms, means, and ends (see United Nations' Palermo protocol [UN, 2000]), befalls a number of migrant women as they attempt to cross the countries' borders, in a migratory journey that begins thousands of kilometres away in their native lands. Indeed, this social problem we are facing and that is infiltrated into our society via the informal and black economy is a growing one. Furthermore, the phenomenon of trafficking has become known through different spheres and genres, where a perspective of resilience interconnects psycho-emotional, written, visual and oral approaches (Vera, 1999, 2). Hence, our contribution is of an integrative nature because we find synergies between different fields of study, such as social and human sciences. It is also transcultural since there is evidence that this violation of fundamental rights occurs in different cultures and geographical locations.

Trafficking in persons is a crime defined in various international legal systems (UN, 2000; Council of Europe, 2005)<sup>3</sup> as a manifestation of gender-based violence (see UN's Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women [UN, 1993]) and a form of slavery (Correa, 2011) that violates fundamental rights as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). It is also a crime involving other offences, i.e., the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, and reception of persons, which is carried out by means of threats, use of force, coercion, deception, and abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability (UN, 2000). All of this is done with the aim of obtaining a person's consent to be exploited. Human trafficking mostly affects women and girls due to the socio-economic logics of power in patriarchal and market structures in which the abuse of victims of poverty and social exclusion is legitimised. This type of violence, in which different levels of infringement are intertwined (Expósito, 2014), is inherent to a globalised world that allows the culture of sexual violence and legitimises the buying and selling of women's bodies thereby suppressing the aspirations of the most impoverished (Cacho, 2010; Sassen, 2008). The realisation that these situations exist challenges us and leads us to reflect on those forms of atrocious inequality, and on the “*espanto y la indignación por las consecuencias de lo que existe*” (De Sousa Santos, 2019, 38).

In spite of all this, recent research has explored and pointed out the capacity of migrant women to use their personal resources to compensate for the consequences of the said violent acts by resisting, building themselves up, and reorganising their lives around their migration experience. This is how the protagonists of *Fracturas emocionales y procesos de resiliencia en víctimas de trata: el caso de las mujeres de origen subsahariano* (García Navarro, MM, 2018) describe it when asked how they were able to continue and maintain their migration aspirations. These women refer to strength as a necessity, as well as to perseverance to be able to move forward and achieve their objectives<sup>4</sup>. On the basis of these narratives and by using the existing literature, we decided we had to examine the migratory experience of these women, i.e., their capacities and the certainties they had about themselves from the perspective of resilience (Cyrułnik, 2006, 2013; Herman, 1992; Manciaux *et al.*, 2003; Ungar, 2008, 2012). The exploration of the different areas under study allowed us to focus on our object of study contributing to make new knowledge about it. This review also allowed us to value the importance of the behaviours, strategies, and ways in which these women are able to overcome victimisation despite having been exposed to inhumane and degrading conditions.

On a similar note, other approaches acknowledge Sub-Saharan women's contributions to the development of their societies from an economic and social standpoint (Onor, 2017). For our part, as women and citizens writing from the European context, specifically from Andalusia, on the southern border of Spain, discovering the existence of this reality inspired this work. Our contribution as teachers and researchers committed to the

<sup>3</sup> The European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings was signed in Warsaw in 2005 and ratified by Spain in 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See the study by García Navarro, MM (2018).

scientific and social community to which we belong, stems from the need to expand and shine a light on an unjust social reality, by making known the theoretical and cultural contributions that address the migration of these women from a perspective of resilience.

## 2. Trafficking of women for sexual exploitation: What the data say

Today, we are witnessing an upsurge in migratory flows: in 2019 alone, the number of migrants on the planet reached 272 million, with women representing slightly less than half of them (UN, 2019). In this regard, Eurostat's 2018 Report and the 2006 Report on human trafficking of the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2006), mention several causes, including economic, social, and criminal. Also, in this line, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2018) states that human trafficking affects more than two and a half million people, with women representing 72% of the victims of this crime, and Eurostat (2018) points out that this reality mainly affects girls and women, with data collected in 2015 and 2016 referring to a total of 20,532 victims of trafficking in EU Member States, except the United Kingdom (Eurostat, 2018). Of these victims, women represent 68% and children 23%.

Regarding children victims of trafficking, institutions such as the American Sanctuary for Families report that, currently, between 100,000 and 300,000 minors have become victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation, and that in New York State alone the number of minors trafficked for sexual exploitation reaches 4,000 (Mendelsohn, 2016)<sup>5</sup>. In the case of Spain, the Report of the Prosecutor's Office (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2018, 1236) shows that 90% of the victims of trafficking are sexually exploited. As for women from the sub-Saharan African countries who enter Europe crossing the south-eastern Mediterranean borders, reports specialised in this geographical area indicate that more than 90% become victims of human trafficking (The UN Refugee Agency [UNHCR], 2012) and are forced to set off on migration journeys in increasingly precarious conditions (see also the report by the Andalusian Pro-Human Rights Association [APDHA, 2020]).

We are here referring to those migrant women and young people who are crossing some of the most violent (UN, 2020) and traumatising parts of the world (García Navarro, MM, 2018). All this has led us to focus on their plight, both from a human and academic perspective, our purpose being to draw attention to the unnamed victims of poverty and social exclusion and their narratives, who have either been silenced, forgotten, or barely acknowledged in any area, as shown by the protagonists of the study *Fracturas emocionales y procesos de resiliencia en víctimas de trata: el caso de las mujeres de origen subsahariano* (García Navarro, MM, 2018).

As far as we know, this reality has mainly been explored from the sociological (Acién, 2015; Farr, 2004), social work (García de Diego, 2014), legal (Maqueda, 2001), journalist (Mesa, 2014), or psychological perspectives (García Navarro, MM, 2018). However, the approach of most of these studies is based on migration policies, the functioning of human trafficking networks, border controls, crime repression, and migrants' safety (Acién and Checa, 2011; Cortés *et al.*, 2011). Certainly, there are but a few studies by the academic community that delve deep into the subject of human trafficking from the perspective of resilience (Cortés *et al.*, 2011). In fact, we have only found a small number of doctoral theses on this research topic (Adebiyi, 2018; Flamtermesky, 2012; García Navarro, MM, 2018).

## 3. The paradigm of resilience in studies on violence against women

Different cultures make reference to the strength of those who suffer life's upheavals. The word *mandala*, used by the Navajo Indians of the southwest of the United States, represents inner strength and resistance to disease (Kotliarenco *et al.*, 1996), and the expression *lotus flower*, used in India, describes the street children who are capable of growing up without having the basic conditions for their proper development (Vanistendael and Lecomte, 2002). To be able to fully understand the resilience paradigm, we base our work on the pillars upon which individual resilience relies (Wolin and Wolin, 1993).

In addition, we draw on Ungar's studies (2008, 2012) regarding the ability of people to question the interpretation of traumatic life events, as well as the capacity to create new narratives of strength and learning, and Becoña (2006), Infante (2001) and Ruth (1985) regarding the ability to learn from experience. From the European school of resilience, we use the concept of post-traumatic growth, understood as the possibility for people to carry out personal development processes after having lived through traumatic circumstances (Cyrulnik, 2006, 2013; Manciaux 2003). We also rely on the contributions of Vera Poseck (2006), Vera Poseck *et al.* (2006), and Villalba (2004) on post-traumatic growth and the strength of individuals to recover beyond pain and suffering. All of these contributions will help us to describe the resources that the women in our study employ.

<sup>5</sup> Discovering this reality drove Mendelsohn (2016) to write her novel *Burning Down the House* (2019).

Meanwhile, other cultural artefacts, such as fiction literature or the visual arts, are also using resilience as an object of study, where we can find representations of women whose narratives are of resilience and transformation (Diego Sánchez, 2020; Domínguez García, 2019; García Navarro, C, 2019; Lozano, 2020). In these written works, the main characters find the elements of strength to rebuild themselves and go through a healing process where life, made up of a multitude of past and present experiences, starts over again. Resilience is also, as Joy Harjo writes, the capacity to live “many lives in this one” (Harjo, 2015, 99), accepting and transforming pain without it dominating our present life.

By bringing together all the mentioned contributions that deal with vulnerability and resilience, we move away from the stigmatising and victimising discourse, to focus on the possibilities of developing a resilient identity (Butler *et al.*, 2016). In terms of the opportunities for dialogue between theory and textual examples, we believe that the studies on migrant women and those who have suffered gender violence should be reviewed first. With respect to victims of gender violence, Salvador (2015) highlights the traits of women who are capable of rebuilding their lives, which are: independence, self-confidence, self-esteem, creativity to rebuild one’s life, their capacity to enjoy themselves with other people, and their ability to set limits with their surroundings and integrate their experiences, as well as their ability for introspection (Infante, 2001; Wolin and Wolin, 1993).

For their part, Canaval *et al.* (2007) refer to spirituality as a resource that helps to start and maintain processes of change that alleviate suffering and pain, providing strength, energy, and courage, while diminishing feelings of guilt and helping to accept traumatic events<sup>6</sup>. It is interesting, therefore, to underline the fact that women who have suffered violence are able to recover and learn from what they have experienced, which allows them to abandon the discourses that stigmatise them and perpetuate the idea of their victimhood and inability to recover (Ungar, 2008).

As for women who are victims of trafficking, there are different ways in which each woman faces her migratory experience marked by the commodification of herself, as a human being, and also, of her body (García *et al.*, 2011). Several reports describe the resources that these women employ (Doctors Without Borders, 2005, 2010, 2013)<sup>7</sup>. Using the concept of resistance by Kobasa (1979), we can describe the trafficked women who travel from sub-Saharan Africa to the southern Mediterranean shores as a population group that is capable of continuing their migratory journey by employing their own resources and making use of strengthening processes in the face of adversity. In this regard, Zimmerman *et al.* (2006) affirm that some of these women exhibit diverse symptoms and disorders; however, not all of them get sick or suffer significant damage.

Likewise, in a study on migrant populations with trauma, Pérez Sales (2006) mentions the capacity of such populations to get back on their feet and carry out recovery processes, while in another study on torture, Frankl (1991)<sup>8</sup> points out that to be able to rebuild themselves, human beings need to make sense of their experience of suffering. Following these studies, our work examines women of sub-Saharan origin from the perspective of their capacities, recognising the role of human agency in them. These women’s strategies and personal resources enable them to continue moving forward and to rebuild themselves, giving a new meaning to their lives and taking control of their life processes.

#### 4. Transit migration and the trafficking of sub-Saharan women from the perspective of resilience

The transit of trafficked women across the North African countries also means them undertaking a psycho-emotional journey (García Navarro, MM, 2013). This journey, which is motivated by their desire to improve their lives, is frequently marked by a series of events that threaten their own lives (Pérez, 2006) and can lead to changes in the main aspects of their identities, as well as corroding their physical and mental health (Farley *et al.*, 1998; Doctors Without Borders, 2005, 2010, 2013; Zimmerman and Watts, 2003; Zimmerman *et al.*, 2006). In the case of the sub-Saharan female population, specific factors, such as extreme poverty or the refugee crisis, and there being only a few safe and legal channels for migration to Europe, are resulting in a type of migration which occurs in extremely precarious conditions.

In this regard, various reports have described the objectification and commodification women suffer along these trafficking routes, where all kinds of abuse, aggressions, and human rights violations are committed

<sup>6</sup> Spirituality is a factor that transforms and drives the migratory processes of men and women who travel through sub-Saharan Africa (Palma, 2017). This author gathers the spiritual experience of the protagonists throughout their migratory journey, where it becomes a fundamental element that transforms the life of each one of them.

<sup>7</sup> In the Spanish context, studies are usually carried out by organisations that work directly with this population group, such as Cáritas Española Religiosas Adoradoras (with their specialised programmes *Proyecto Esperanza* and *Fundación Amaranta*), the Red Española contra la Trata de Personas, the Comisión Española de Ayuda al Refugiado, the Asociación Comisión Católica Española de Migración or the Organización Médicos del Mundo. In a study by Cáritas Diocesana (2002), we learnt that women who have been victims of trafficking have the ability to start over and learn from their experiences to be able to overcome traumatic events. Likewise, *Proyecto Esperanza* (2011) attests that in this population group, we can find integrity, strength, and the capacity to rebuild and give meaning to life.

<sup>8</sup> Frankl (1991) develops his theory from his analyses of people tortured in the Auschwitz camps, showing how the ability to give new meaning to life is what enables those who have been tortured and subjected to extreme violence to recover emotionally.



against them (Women's Link Worldwide, 2008, 2011; 2014; Defensor del Pueblo<sup>9</sup>, 2012, 2013). Additionally, several other works have addressed the conditions of sub-Saharan women during their migratory journeys (Cacho 2010; García Cuesta *et al.*, 2011; Manzanedo *et al.*, 2016), or have described the situation of migrant minors who also become victims of trafficking (Castaño and Pérez Adroher, 2017). This journey usually begins with these women being recruited in their countries of origin or in migration transit zones, and where travel routes are normally organised by third parties and made by road or plane, the former being the most common way of travelling (García Cuesta *et al.*, 2011; Women's Link Worldwide, 2011, 2014, 2017). At times, part of the journey has to be made in vehicles or on foot crossing the desert, which can take years and involves passing through irregular border crossings where all kinds of acts of violence occur (Maleno 2012; Khachani 2006; Doctors Without Borders Report 2005, 2010, 2013). These transit points are characterised by a high level of violence which migrant women and girls become victims of, being threatened, imprisoned, kidnapped, or even beaten and sexually abused by men in a systematic way; and because it is virtually impossible for them to report the said crimes, they frequently get trapped in those places that are situated in countries like Libya or Morocco (Amnesty International, 2015; Celis and Álvarez, 2017; UN, 2020).

One such route begins in Nigeria, a country which, with the Edo State region at the forefront, is currently "a hub for trafficking of women and children for sexual exploitation" (Adebiyi, 2018, 5). The Nigerian route passes through Mali and Algeria, its final destination being Morocco. This journey usually lasts up to two to three years, normally stopping in Tinzaouaten (Mali), then crossing the Sahara Desert and entering Algeria through the city of Tamanrasset (Women's Link Worldwide, 2014). From there, the criminal trafficking networks cross the Algerian-Moroccan border into the city of Oujda and the surrounding forests. Other destinations are Nador, Tangier, Rabat, Casablanca in Morocco, as well as the Spanish autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla (Khachani, 2006).

A second route runs between Nigeria and Libya through the city of Agadez (Niger), which lies in the Sahara Desert and is the zone through which most of the African migratory flows pass to Europe. Once they reach the Libyan coast, mafia groups take the women and minors in boats either to Malta or Italy (Women's Link Worldwide, 2014). As for Libya, it is currently one of the main transit points for women and girls who are trafficked for sexual exploitation in Europe. A third route used by these networks takes the women via Mali to Mauritania and from there, across the desert onto Morocco, where they wait to be transferred to Europe using the previously mentioned methods (Women's Link Worldwide, 2014). The networks sometimes use air transport and false documents to bring their victims to Europe from the Nigerian Edo State region, from which at least "80% of the persons trafficked in the country" come (Adebiyi, 2018, 6). In these cases, mafias send the women directly to the former Eastern European communist countries, thereby reducing the risks of border controls when entering the EU territory (Women's Link Worldwide, 2014).

As can be noted, there are many different routes, although the specific transit points and countries used are always the same: Nigeria, Niger, Mali, the Tamanrasset Desert, the Sahara Desert, the town of Maghnia in Algeria, the forests of Oujda in Morocco, and Libya. In all these zones, the number of sexual offences suffered by the women who pass through these places is extremely high (Castaño, 2015; Maleno, 2012; Doctors Without Borders, 2005, 2010, 2013). Among the border crossings along these routes, cities like Maghnia in Algeria and Oujda in Morocco are obligatory stops for most of those who want to reach Europe (Doctors Without Borders, 2013)<sup>10</sup>. Nador, Rabat, Tangiers, or Oujda are the Moroccan cities where women wait for the human traffickers to arrange their transfer to the Andalusian coast in Spain, as stated by the Spanish government's 2018 Annual National Security Report (Government of Spain, 2019, 125-135).

These enclaves are controlled by human traffickers, and a large number of violent crimes and sexual offences against women take place there (Doctors Without Borders, 2013; Castaño, 2015; Women's Link Worldwide, 2011, 2014). As we describe the routes involved in the Spanish Mediterranean migratory issue in Southern Europe,<sup>11</sup> we become aware of the sacrifice these women have to make, and of their courage, which is undoubtedly challenged on a daily basis, as if it were a continuous "tempestuous rising and falling,/One country after another" (Harjo, 2019, 35). It is important to highlight here that despite the degrading conditions in which these women have to undertake their migratory journeys, they still manage to keep going, travelling for kilometres in pursuit of their dreams. Their capacity to resist (Kobasa, 1979) throughout this challenging migrant journey, and also to learn (Becoña, 2006; Infante, 2001; Rutter, 1985) and grow from this experience (Cyrułnik, 2006, 2013; Manciaux, 2003) putting their whole agency capacity, resources, and strength into action (Kotliarenco

<sup>9</sup> In Spain, the *Defensor del Pueblo* ('Spanish Ombudsman') is responsible for defending Spanish citizens' fundamental rights as set out in the Spanish Constitution of 1978.

<sup>10</sup> As far as the arrival of migrants to the Spanish coasts is concerned, currently, mafia groups are mainly using the Algerian route, which has become the most travelled one, with this country being the main country of origin of migrants to Spain (Martín and Peregil, 2020).

<sup>11</sup> As we have explained, the routes described directly involve the southern Mediterranean borders and have a particular impact on the southern Mediterranean regions in Spain. Nonetheless, there are other trafficking routes in the world, such as the one that runs from Nepal to India, which affects very young women and girls (Kaufman and Crawford, 2011), and another route that involves Ethiopia and uses border crossings to Kenya, Sudan and Djibouti, through which women are trafficked to South Africa, the Middle East, and Europe (Gezie *et al.*, 2019). Fictional narratives also provide knowledge about this issue, as is the case of Isabel Allende's novel *Beyond Winter* (2017), which tells the story of the migrants trafficked from Central American countries to the United States.

et al., 1996; Wolin and Wolin, 1993), makes these women survivors before they even start their journey, then during the whole transit, and finally once they arrive in Europe<sup>12</sup>

## 5. The representation of trafficking in the cultural and literary spheres

The knowledge provided by these psycho-emotional perspectives motivates us to investigate other academic fields, where resilience can be also considered as a transversal element in the study of women trafficking. This implies looking more deeply into the entire machinery of sexual violence which affects the most vulnerable women, as well as exploring their personal resources, which enable them to move forward, as shown by the cultural representations that have drawn attention to this long-ignored population group (García Navarro, C, 2017; Mgbojirikwe and Okoronkwo, 2011; Rodríguez Murphy, 2016).

Moreover, because we found there to be a gap in the study of this area, we believe that it is necessary to increase the number of studies with an integrative academic approach to discover the resilient strategies of this population group. Consequently, in the narratives produced by English-language writers from around the world, there is still space to write about resilience from a transversal and transcultural perspective in this global language, focusing on the issue of violence (as caused by many different factors, including trafficking). We agree with Terry Eagleton when he states that culture is also a form of resistance (Eagleton, 2016/2017, 69). This has been demonstrated by various studies on the work of women writers from different parts of the world, such as Kate Atkinson (Domínguez García, 2019), Joy Harjo (García Navarro, C, 2019), Meena Kandasamy, and Anuradha Roy (Diego Sánchez, 2020), among others. Resilience is a literary subject in the works of all of these writers, either as part of the underlying plot of a fictionalized story, like in the works of Atkinson and Roy, or as an aspect on which the autobiographical narrative is based, as in Harjo and Kandasamy<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the fact that these writers are being studied in different regions worldwide from the resilience perspective, supported by various theoretical and critical approaches, illustrates the growing interest that this particular skill has also aroused in cultural and literary spheres. In this sense, the representation of vulnerable women, as reflected by the cited authors, must also be understood as a position taken by these writers to leave behind the mere recounting of violations and give way to discourses where resilience offers creative possibilities to interweave the resistance and agency capacity of women, their bodies and their subjectivity, in endless recreation (Butler, 2006, 22).

With regard to trafficking as a central issue represented in literature, the above described can be confirmed in *Trafficked*, a novel by the Nigerian writer Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (2008), in which the young character, Nneoma, cannot marry the man she loves and thus flees to Lagos, in search of opportunities to improve her life, but once there, she is captured with other young women and taken to Italy<sup>14</sup>. The account of the young women, who are groomed to become prostitutes for the human trafficking networks they are forced to live with, does not conceal Nneoma's mistreatment: her body is the target of constant aggression as a way to ensure her submission to those who commit the abuse and violent acts: it is assaulted, violated and put at the service of others on their way to the supposedly advanced capitalist societies, where it will become a commodity. The first-person narrative brings us closer to Nneoma, her fears and doubts, as well as to her gradual awareness of her reality (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2008, 128):

“I discovered I am trafficked. I have no say in the matter. There's a woman called Madam Dollar (...). She owns us and the man, whom we learn to call Captain (...). She keeps us prisoners in her flat. Madam raves at me, and Captain beats me up, but he makes sure he does not disfigure me, for this would mean loss of revenue”.

The turning point in the novel comes when, after six years with the trafficking network in Europe, Nneoma is then deported back to Nigeria, where she spends time in a rehabilitation centre. In the novel, the account of Nneoma's pain and suffering is as important as her story of resilience. Nneoma's vulnerability is exposed in that her human dignity is crushed beyond humiliation and guilt until she encounters a social and psycho-emotional support structure that helps her understand the logic of the capacity of resilience to achieve her own personal growth and to overcome terrifying events, such as those she suffered at the hands of the trafficking network. By building up resilience, the protagonist of this novel is able to gradually distance herself from victimisation (Afolayan, 2017).

Despite the trauma she experienced “in the roar of existence” (Cyrulnik, 2006, 12), a change towards another order of being takes place, an opening towards a future she has the right to, and which she begins to take charge

<sup>12</sup> These aspects narrated by the protagonists have been studied elsewhere. See García Navarro, C (2017).

<sup>13</sup> See *Life After Life* by Kate Atkinson (2013), *Crazy Brave. A Memoir* by Joy Harjo (2012), *When I Hit You, Or A Portrait of the Writer as a Wife* by Meena Kandasamy (2017) and Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2016). Although it would be impossible here to outline the plot of each of these works, it must be highlighted that these works have been studied not only for their literary value, but also for the significant weight given to violence and trauma, and how this is overcome by resilience, which is part of their literary subject-matter.

<sup>14</sup> The novel depicts one of the trafficking routes described in the previous section, namely the Nigeria-Libya-Italy route (see also Stop the Traffik, n. d.).

of. A year after *Trafficked* came out, Adimora-Ezeigbo published her book of poetry *Waiting for Dawn* (2009) about the kidnapping, torture, and murder of young Nigerian women by the Boko Haram group in July 2009. Although this book does not explicitly address the trafficking of women and young girls, it makes visible both the victims' situation and the appalling behaviour of the perpetrators of violence against the abducted girls. The same subject has also been addressed by the Irish authors Lisa Harding in *Harvesting* (2017) and Edna O'Brien in her recent novel *Girl* (2019). O'Brien, who is already over eighty years old, did not hesitate to travel to Nigeria to investigate for herself, specifically the violence perpetrated by the Boko Haram movement and its atrocities against the young Nigerian girls who were kidnapped by members of said movement (Mitchell, 2019).

Both the texts of Adimora-Ezeigbo and O'Brien do not hide the extent of patriarchal violence within the structure of the Nigerian society, and also show, as Adebisi (2018) has also recently pointed out, its existence in the globalised world, where regardless of women's origin and geographical location, the inequalities and degradation to which many women are subjected is very evident, since violence does not stop at the borders nor even at binary debates with West- and Non-West-type positions (Hundle, 2019, 39). Undoubtedly, the mentioned writers have awakened a need for both more research and creative examples that facilitate a stronger presence of transnational feminism, and where we are allowed not only to lean on the memory of those who preceded us but also to broaden the lines of theoretical research concerning issues that affect us, in a time that is our today and which will also be our own history too.

Although in this article, we focus specifically on sub-Saharan women, we cannot lose sight of other contributions dealing with human trafficking in the Spanish context, which is from where we write. In Spain, which is both a transit and a destination country for trafficked women, the short documentary film *El proxeneta. Paso corto, mala leche* (2019) and *Biografía del cadáver de una mujer* (2020), directed by Mabel Lozano, are also noteworthy. Clearly, visual arts are an expressive means to make this phenomenon visible. Both these films reflect upon the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation in geographical locations that are very near our own, although these situations are not always noticed or detected by us, as narrated in *Biografía del cadáver de una mujer*. This short film follows the story of a Colombian woman who is trafficked and sexually exploited for years before being murdered by her pimp in Irun (Navarre, Spain), after reporting him. As Lozano herself stated, making this reality visible is a way of defending all trafficked women since the film's protagonist is a woman, with a name and a surname, who is "shot dead. She looks at us. She speaks to us. It concerns us" (*asesinada a tiros. Nos mira. Nos habla. Nos concierne*) (Lozano, 2020)<sup>15</sup>

Also in the field of the audio-visual arts, but in a broader context, we must mention some network projects, like *Power Poetry*<sup>16</sup>, which serve as platforms for the creation of various artistic expressions, such as poetry, for rebuilding oneself, and for connecting with the public through non-traditional means and media that have a more significant outreach in the globalised society<sup>17</sup>. The texts in *Power Poetry* challenge us not only in regard to the new forms of writing and the outreach of the networked society but also, again, in their out reaching the globalised society. On this website, we find a section with sixteen poems on trafficking, in which, beyond any further considerations, we find texts that integrate the trait or skill of resilience.

The voice of one of those poems, entitled *Slowly, carefully, skimming beneath*, finds the courage to resist and uphold its dignity: "(...) Suddenly/Like a brick wall, you push Him away with an intermittent fear that if you/Surrender the entirety of your simple life, you'll merely squander away into/Nothingness" (EHoff\_13, 2019). Therefore, one has to resist to be able to rebuild oneself, as can also be seen in Ali Smith's story *The Detainee's Tale*, where on the one hand, the narrator describes a physical journey and, on the other hand, an inner journey of unbearable pain which is, however, gradually enlightened by an evocation of hope driven by the desire to move forward in spite of what has been experienced: "under all our journeys, the roads you walked between one place and another in the mix of fear and hope" (Smith, 2016, 62).

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

To migrate is a human right, and the ultimate goal of any migratory movement is none other than to improve one's life, in other words, to gain the legitimate right to live with dignity. Notwithstanding the latter and based

<sup>15</sup> In this regard, see CIMA (2020) and also González Harbour (2020, 10-11). Lozano was awarded the Goya Award for Best Documentary Short Film 2021 by the Spanish Film Academy. See <https://www.premiosgoya.com/pelicula/biografia-del-cadaver-de-una-mujer/>

<sup>16</sup> See <http://www.powerpoetry.org>

<sup>17</sup> The site's title is *The largest mobile/online teen Poetry community*, and it is divided into five sections: *Poems*, *Groups*, *Take Action*, *Resources* and *Scholarships*, each with its own menu. You can upload a poem of your own creation, participate in *Poetry slams*, sign up for a writing and reading group in your physical environment, or apply for a scholarship (funded by private donations and the sponsorship by three entities: *Do Something.org*, an organization that promotes solidarity actions, especially aimed at young people, the social network *Shine Text*, and *Foot Locker*, a subsidiary of *Do Something.org*, which provides scholarships to high-performance sports students). There is also a section for teachers, with teaching guides for bringing poems hosted on the site into the classroom. The texts highlight the creative dimension and pedagogical purpose of the site, which encourages young people to participate with their own poems as a means through which they can express their emotions about sadness, frustration, or loneliness: "Think of it as a form of therapy that's totally free. Plus, if you share your poem, you're likely to find that others will connect with your words and relate to what you're saying. That can help you feel less alone" (Power Poetry, n. d.).



on a review of literature, films and official documents published, we can assert that unfortunately nowadays, the migratory experience of a high number of women around the world very often results in them being trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Indeed, the lives of sub-Saharan women who are trafficked and transited through the African Saharan regions and eventually arrive in Spain by crossing the southern European Mediterranean borders very often become intertwined with a history of violence that begins typically even before they leave their own countries and continues throughout the entire migratory journey, and later during their exploitation.

But however bad these circumstances are, we still find women with enough strength and resistance to eventually become owners of their own growth processes, as well as the ability to learn from these experiences. These features added to others, such as perseverance and the ability to move forward and not to give up in the face of adverse circumstances. This led us to investigate this social problem focusing on the reality of these women who despite their dramatic migratory journeys, maintain the certainty that it is possible for them to achieve their dream, making decisions about themselves which surpass the limitations and roles imposed on them by patriarchal societies. To be able to understand this process, the paradigm of resilience is a useful framework with which to examine this reality and name it, by delving into the agency capacity of these women subjected to situations as we have described in this article.

The necessity to make these women visible comes to the fore because of the scarcity of empirical works that study this population group and their needs in depth, as well as the resources they use over the course of their lives. Through our research, we have broadened our knowledge about the traits and skills of resilience these women possess and thereby, we have overcome the usual approach of considering them only as victims who are not capable of developing agency. Our work emphasizes the need to address the reality of women trafficking from different viewpoints and incorporating other areas of knowledge, and therefore, we bring together contributions and representations from various works around the world and different academic fields that refer to this population group. Undoubtedly, by integrating these different perspectives, this study helps to enrich society's perception of this social problem and builds bridges and creates connections between academic fields, which results in a greater awareness of this phenomenon as well as greater openness towards it. In this sense, the legal perspective frames the crimes of trafficking committed into the field of law, whilst the gender approach specifically considers the migrant women's rights which are violated. In turn, the psycho-emotional perspective investigates the migratory experience of our protagonists themselves, whereas the paradigm of resilience shows the resources on which these women can rely to face violence in their migratory journeys.

Literature, together with other artistic and cultural movements, may be conceived as spaces where the social reality of human trafficking can be made visible and known given that they can be used for social and political debates about this phenomenon, contributing to its recognition as a current problem of our globalised society. Here, we propose a transdisciplinary, humanist and transcultural model by integrating different fields of knowledge, all of which are valid and necessary in order to attain an enriched, complete and unbiased view of the reality of trafficking and make it visible to a broader audience.

Our model, therefore, presents a certain perspective that should influence any social intervention for these women, leading to approaches that are based on their experience, by gathering the resources and strategies that these women themselves describe as necessary in order to continue with their migratory project, and that can be used as instruments for healing and building resilience. Hence, such interventions need to incorporate our protagonists' experiences and their narratives as tools that are essential to be able to further and refine our understanding of this population group. This will allow them to be supported in the process of becoming aware of their strengths, as well as in rebuilding the history of their lives, in that their stories of survival are transformed into narratives of resilience. Bearing in mind all of the above, we hope that this article will have helped to open up new perspectives and ways of researching this group's reality since it concerns us as female citizens from both an academic and a human point of view.

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