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Recruitment Strategies Used by Mexican Sex Traffickers

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Abstract

This article, based on a qualitative methodology that includes in-depth interviews with 43 Mexican sex traffickers, analyses the strategies used by sex traffickers to recruit women from Mexico and Central America demanded by the US illegal sex industry. We conclude that trafficking is a demand-led industry. Traffickers recruit vulnerable women from Mexico and Central America who fit with US procurers' requirements. Foreign girls smuggled into the United States should be young (in many cases underage girls), beautiful, slim and healthy. Mexican sex traffickers' job is to entice with salaries in US dollars impoverished Latin American girls who do not want to migrate or enter prostitution. Maintaining trafficked women captive against their will is more time consuming and less profitable than winning women's will with a salary.

Keywords: Sex traffickers; Migrant women; Mexico; United States.

Introduction

In the United States most recent research has been concentrated in the study of domestic minor sex trafficking, while sex trafficking of migrant women has been neglected. On the other hand, while the focus of attention has been on the victims of human trafficking, little research has focused on the facilitators of trafficking. Accordingly, most of our knowledge regarding sex trafficking relies on victim's description of interactions between themselves and sex traffickers, not from the standpoint of third parties (Serie et al., 2018; Hannem & Bruckert, 2017: 825). However, it is not possible to connect all the pieces of the puzzle if sex trade facilitators' voice is missing.

In US literature, the figure of the sex trafficker is mostly imagined as a man of colour, (Roe Sepowitz, 2019; Reid, 2016; Raphael & Myers Powell, 2010). Much of the research on this topic has focused on male traffickers. However, there is a common understanding that women are valuable recruiters in sex trafficking due to their easier access to other women, as it is easier for women than for men to develop trusting relationships with other women (Miccio Fonseca, 2017: 28). The role of women in sex trafficking recruitment appears prominent (Constantinou, 2019: 11; Broad, 2015: 1061; Brayley et al., 2011: 137). However, female participation in trafficking is initiated differently from their male counterpart. A woman becomes a sex trafficker from being victimised. Women were victims before becoming offenders, while men usually had prior criminal records. As a result, female traffickers are depicted having subservient low-level roles or acting under duress, under fear of violent reprisal at the hands of a male trafficker (Miccio Fonseca, 2017; Broad, 2015). By contrast, only a few studies portray male traffickers coerced into trafficking (Raphael & Myers Powell, 2010).

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Academic research on sex traffickers focuses principally on the recruitment strategies used by them. Most studies analyse the methods and techniques used by sex traffickers to persuade, entrap, or entice the victims to coerce them into prostitution. These studies conclude that traffickers entice young girls through the pretense of love (Montiel Torres, 2015 & 2018; García, 2014), psychological manipulation (Brayley et al., 2011: 138; Reid, 2016: 499), financial debt (Constantinou, 2019: 17; Roe Sepowitz, 2019), drug addiction or physical might (Acharya, 2013, Acharya & Salas Stevanato, 2005), to the point that traffickers leave women feeling that they have few alternatives to prostitution (Kennedy et al., 2007). Other studies examine what is called “techniques of neutralisation” used to minimise trafficker’s agency and responsibility by evoking socially acceptable justifications in order to defend their behaviour (Antonopoulos & Winterdyk, 2005; Copley, 2014; Montiel Torres, 2015 & 2018). Still other studies explore the connections between the recruitment process and sex trafficker’s control of their victims (Bouché & Shady, 2017).

Research on sex traffickers follow a double narrative: a narrative of oppression and a narrative that questions conventional stereotypes about sex trafficking. These narratives can be differentiated by their methodological approach; by their focus; by the way sex traffickers’ narratives are framed, and by their conceptualisation of sex procurement and sex trafficking.

Firstly, the methodological approach used to study sex traffickers frequently influences the results. Studies realised *ex situ*, based on social service providers or law enforcement official testimonials (Brayley et al., 2011; Reid, 2016), on post-arrest testimonials by traffickers in punishment institutions (Shively et al., 2017; Serie et al., 2018; Langhorn, 2018; Roe Sepowitz, 2019) or by victims in rescue institutions (Kennedy et al., 2007), tend to follow a narrative of oppression. By contrast, studies realised *in situ*, based on testimonials from active sex trade facilitators or active women in sex work are more prone to challenge conventional narrative of offenders’ trickery, brutality and coercion (Zhang, 2011; Marcus et al., 2014; Hannem & Bruckert, 2017). Interviewing individuals confined in law enforcement or rescue institutions is easier and safer than interviewing them *in situ*. However, drawing conclusions from retrospective accounts *ex situ* does not allow researchers to independently verify data (Marcus et al., 2014: 226)

Secondly, the narrative of oppression focuses on individual actors: on predatory traffickers who lure innocent girls into prostitution to control, exploit and brutalise them in a manner that renders them akin to enslavement (Kennedy et al., 2007; Farley, 2018: 101). Prostitution is believed to be a form of slavery since the prostituted girl lacks choice, and both the enslaved and the prostituted girl are potentially subject to the arbitrary will of another person (Farley, 2018: 102). This literature concentrates on the victimisation of trafficked girls, and frames sex trafficking as a form of violence against innocent victims of merciless organised criminal syndicates (Terwilliger et al., 2017; Langhorn, 2018). Therefore, this narrative demand increased use of anti-trafficking laws. By contrast, the narrative that questions conventional stereotypes focus on structural factors and complex social processes that put women into precarious situations and make them vulnerable to trafficking. This narrative challenge the treatment of prostitute-pimp relation as being largely based on entrapment, exploitation and violence (Marcus et al., 2014; Zhang, 2011), and contests the organised crime-human trafficking dyad (Zhang, 2011; Constantinou, 2019). As a result, this narrative expresses some concerns about anti-trafficking laws, as the excuse of saving innocent women becomes a justification to tighten borders (Agustín, 2020: 223).



Thirdly, the first approach always discredits third parties' narratives, framed as techniques of neutralisation. It is assumed that traffickers are aware that their behaviour is deviant. Therefore, traffickers' narrative is interpreted as evidence of justification of their behaviour to preserve a respectable identity (Antonopoulos & Winterdyk, 2005; Copley, 2014; Montiel Torres, 2015 & 2018). On the contrary, the second approach does not impute motives to traffickers' accounts of their own realities, quite the opposite; it gives credit to sex trade facilitators' voice, as it frames procurers' narratives as the verbalised evidence of their internal identity negotiations (Hannem & Bruckert, 2017: 834). Agustín (2007: 69; 2020: 224) points out that sex traffickers are ordinary people who form part of migrant's own networks.

Finally, the line dividing sex procurement from sex trafficking is difficult to draw. Anti-trafficking law is underpinned in opaque concepts lacking uniform understandings, such as "abuse of a position of vulnerability" or "consent". If there is consent sex procurement cannot be framed as sex trafficking. However, anti-trafficking law underlines that women's consent is invalid if a position of vulnerability is abused. Both narratives agree about one idea: the difference between sex procurement and sex trafficking is constructed rather than essential. According to the narrative of oppression, women cannot consent to prostitution because it is detrimental to their dignity. Therefore, the concept of voluntary prostitution is fictional: sex procurement and sex trafficking are indistinguishable. Sex procurement is understood as sex trafficking because procurers always exploit victim's vulnerabilities (Farley, 2018: 103). On the contrary, the second approach questions the dominant discourses of sex trafficking, because it understands that sex trafficking victims are compelled into the sex trade by a complex set of life crises (Hannem & Bruckert, 2017: 826). Moreover, relationships between women and sex traffickers are understood in many cases as instrumental for both (Marcus et al., 2014: 243). Therefore, sex trafficking is mainly understood as sex procurement. According to the second narrative, in most cases, sex procurement cannot be understood as sex trafficking because procurers do not use force or coercion. According to Agustín (2007: 30) "most migrants who work on the sex industry knew from early on that their work would have a sexual component".

Empirical studies published by Mexican scholars tend to follow a narrative of oppression, as they portray women as vulnerable and innocent preys who helplessly wait for their rescue. The focus of this literature is domestic sex trafficking since it is understood that Mexican traffickers obtain higher economic gains exploiting their victims in Mexico. Also, it is believed that surveillance in airports and frontiers disincentives international sex trafficking (Acharya, 2013: 238, Acharya & Salas Stevanato, 2005: 517). Studies focusing on traffickers' discourse implicitly discredit them, as third parties' narratives are framed as techniques to minimise/neutralise their responsibility (Montiel Torres, 2015 & 2018; Ruenes, 2018). Trafficking is presented as a family business, and the trafficker is depicted as a figure that preys on vulnerable women. The trafficker binds needy young girls to him by offering love and attention and isolating them (Montiel Torres, 2015 & 2018; García, 2014; Vargas Urías, 2016; Ruenes, 2018).

The objective of this article is to analyse the strategies used by Mexican sex traffickers to recruit women from Mexico and Central America demanded by the US illegal sex industry. The article proceeds as follows. First, the methodology is outlined and the sample is described. Next, the strategies used by sex traffickers to recruit women from Mexico and Central America are examined.

Materials and Methods

Due to the nature of this study, a qualitative methodology was used. The technique used to collect discursive data was in-depth interviewing. Interviews were guided by an interview protocol that consisted of open-ended questions related to recruitment strategies utilised by the interviewees. Interviews were conducted in an environment that was comfortable for the participants. In some cases, interviewees were interviewed at their homes, while others were interviewed in places where human smugglers gather. During the Easter Festivity many traffickers gather in specific points during several days to thank God for being alive. Most of them reverence Jesus Christ death and resurrection, and many worships the Holy Death. Therefore, Easter was the best period to interview them. Each interview varied in length from one hour to well over two hours. With the participants' consent we audio recorded each interview; recordings were transcribed, and all personal identifiers were removed.

Contact with interviewees was made via social networks and snowballing in a few different Mexican States: Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila, San Luis Potosí, Veracruz, Mexico City, Chiapas, and Tabasco. Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila were selected because are Border States with Texas, which is the main entry point of Central America women to the United States. On the other hand, Chiapas is the main entry point into Mexico of Central American women seeking migrant smugglers to help them reach the United States. Mexico City and Tabasco were selected because they are nodal points from which sex traffickers' networks spread across the country. Finally, the two main transit points of migrant-smuggling networks that operate along the eastern sector of the US-Mexico border were selected: San Luis Potosí and Veracruz.

Five strategies were used to attempt to corroborate the veracity of the stories collected: i.) Respondents were instructed not to provide names or details that would reveal the identity of the persons mentioned in the stories. ii) Respondents received no financial compensation for participating in this study. iii) Interviews were conducted with a guide that included dozens of questions, some of which we modified several times during the course of the investigation to exclude items that generated little heuristic richness and to include other more relevant aspects that surfaced in connection to the empirical reality. iv) Some sensitive questions were asked multiple times in varying ways to check the consistency of responses. v) In three cases we prepared a second guide, different for each respondent, to address in a second encounter inconsistent issues or discussions that were left unfinished during the first verbal interaction.

Forty-three sex traffickers were interviewed between November 2012 and December 2017. Interviewees performed a leading role in the sex trafficking network they belonged to; none of them had ancillary positions. All but one of them were men, and all had considerable experience in the business of sex trafficking, as they had spent between 3 and 17 years in this trade. Respondents had on average 5 years of schooling, and their low level of education was the result of needing to work from childhood to sustain the family financially. The age when they started working fluctuated from 6 to 22.

Texas, California, and Florida were the states where most Mexican sex traffickers operated. However, they also brought women to Louisiana, New York, Illinois, Colorado, Oklahoma, South Carolina, New Mexico, and Missouri (see table 1).

All study procedures received approval from the Ethics Committee of Tamaulipas University research group "Migration, development and human rights". Informed oral consent was obtained



from the respondents, and participants were provided with verbal information about the study purpose in simple language. Interviewees were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation in the study and were told that the information they shared would be handled confidentially and processed anonymously. Participants were assured that individual names would not be collected or used in any study findings. To ensure the anonymous and confidential nature of the data collected each respondent was assigned a code. Accordingly, the names of the participants in this study are pseudonyms. We also informed each participant of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point in time. Even no money was paid, many traffickers accepted to be interviewed, probably because we were able to build trust with them. Interviews were conducted within the span of 5 years. During this time, some traffickers knew other colleagues who participated in this study. Therefore, they could realise that the information they gave us was confidential and was not used against them. As interviewees did not consider themselves criminals, this research gave them the opportunity to get out their side of the story.

Table 1: States in the US where Mexican sex traffickers operated

State	n	%	State	n	%
Texas	30	69.8	Colorado	1	2.3
California	9	20.9	Oklahoma	1	2.3
Florida	3	7.0	South Carolina	1	2.3
Louisiana	2	4.7	New Mexico	1	2.3
New York	1	2.3	Missouri	1	2.3
Illinois	1	2.3	Total	43	100

Source: Compiled by the author from data recorded in the interviews.

Percentages sum up more than 100 because some sex traffickers transported women to several states.

Results

Commercial sex markets in the US are comprised of foreign girls smuggled into the country, as well as American women and legal permanent residents. The former are demanded because they are the most vulnerable and the most willing to fulfill clients' caprices (Izcara Palacios, 2017a: 35). However, recruiting foreign women to be employed in the US sex industry is not an easy task because most women who want to migrate do not want to work in prostitution. Accordingly, Mexican sex traffickers usually try to recruit women involved in prostitution in Mexico or Central America. Frequently, the owners of places such as bars, cantinas or brothels work as recruiters for sex traffickers (Izcara Palacios, 2018). The owners of these places generally have an agreement with a trafficker, who pays a fee for every woman he recruits (Izcara Palacios, 2017a: 37). The fee usually ranges from one thousand to three thousand Mexican pesos (from 50 to 150 USD) per woman. When a trafficker that does not have an agreement with the owner tries to recruit a woman, the former is rejected by the latter. In some cases, traffickers do not have to make an effort to recruit women because are the owners of these places the ones who convince the girls. However, in most cases traffickers are the ones who must convince them. In both cases the fees payed to the owners of bars, cantinas or brothels in Mexico are similar. According to interviewees, if a woman does not want to work in the US the owner of the place does not force her, and traffickers are not allowed to take girls by force from these places.

Women working in prostitution in their country of origin are not eager to migrate to the US; therefore, sex traffickers have many difficulties trying to convince them. As Alejandro (2012) pointed out: "It isn't an easy job to recruit them, I have to battle to convince them to go; some have

family, others are doing well in Mexico and don't want to go. I am battling in searching them and in convincing them to go (...) It is not easy to convince them to go, and I have people who help me recommending the women with me". Accordingly, interviewees used active recruiting techniques, a reason for engaging in prostitution being fabricated. Some respondents pointed out that when women said that they did not want to migrate to the US to work in prostitution, they tried to change her mind charming them with stories of fast money and exciting lifestyle. As Sergio pointed out: "I have *labia* (glibness) to convince them." Traffickers scrutinise women's economic needs and vulnerabilities and present themselves as the solution to all their problems. This was reflected in expressions such as: "I speak them nicely I tell them that there they are going to do better. I have my secrets to convince them" (Melchor, 2014); "I *las envuelvo* (wrap them) according to the needs they have" (Natalio, 2014) or "I try to convince them on the economic side. In this way I hit them², I speak of money and it is when they accept to go" (Pascual, 2014).

Sex trafficking is a demand-led industry. Mexican traffickers recruit only those women who comply with the standard set up by US procurers. Interviewees were salaried workers. They usually worked for a middleman between them and US procurers, who was called "patron" (the boss). In some cases the boss was a US procurer, while in other cases their boss was a former trafficker, like them; but after acquiring experience in this business, he became the leader of a sex trafficking network, and recruited other traffickers. None of the bosses mentioned by the respondents appeared to be members of drug cartels, as interviewees expressed very negative opinions about these organisations. According to interviewees Mexican drug cartels extort sex traffickers, but the former does not smuggle women into the United States (Izcara Palacios, 2017b: 21).

US sex industry only accepts women who fit with a specific profile: they must be young, beautiful, slim, and healthy. Mexican traffickers cannot bring any women, and many women who want to work in prostitution do not meet the requirements demanded by US procurers. Only a fraction of women with experience in prostitution fit the profile demanded by sex traffickers. According to interviewees US clients are very picky, and only the most beautiful and well-formed women satisfy their demands. As Natalio (2014) explained: "Those who want to go cannot go, because not all persons are eligible to be accepted there; the girls that I take are special girls for demanding men, very demanding". As can be seen from Table 2, age was the most important requirement, girls should be young. In prostitution, as the age of the women increases, the number of clients decreases due to client preference (Acharya, 2010: 32; Izcara Palacios, 2018: 7). Almost all (95.3 %) the traffickers interviewed had instructions to recruit women of a certain age range. On average this range fluctuated from a minimum of 15.8 to a maximum of 26.5 years old. Women who passed the maximum age limit were not transported to the US even if they were beautiful, because if sex traffickers did so, they were not paid for that. As Rogelio (2015) explained: "age is compulsory because after a certain age a woman cannot perform this job; well, she is able to do this job, but men who pay prefer young (girls), because of this the age is a requirement". Likewise, Paulino (2014) pointed out: "The boss doesn't like them if they are more than 20 years old because he doesn't make the same (money) with a 20-year-old girl than with a younger girl". Sex traffickers also must recruit well-formed, slim, and beautiful women. As Melchor (2014) pointed out: "There (in the US) they ask me to bring women almost perfect (...) This is a very delicate job and requires an almost perfect selection because the better the women are the most valuable they are". Being slim and having a shaped and curvaceous body was more valued than being beautiful. Three-fifths

² The interviewee used metaphorically the Spanish expression "Por ahí les doy el golpe".



(58.1 %) of the interviewees commented that women should be slim, while only two-fifths (39.5 %) mentioned that women should be beautiful. Eight respondents said that they only were requested to comply with the size; women should be small or medium sizes; on the contrary, women of large size were never accepted. Some interviewees said that if women were not beautiful, they did not carry them; while six of them pointed out that the age was the only basic requirement, as even ugly or fat women could be fixed with make-up or with a diet (see table 2).

A characteristic more important than beauty was women's desire to work in prostitution. According to almost half (46.5 %) of the interviewees trafficked women should wish to perform sex work, or if they did not like this job they should be in need, eager and happy to do a job that pays well. Four traffickers pointed out that at least women should be ambitious and tempted by the easy money. Respondents said that maintaining women against their will was not good for business because to force them was time consuming, and women retained by force did not give a good service, or did not perform a work well done, as clients who paid demanded. Accordingly, Malarek (2005: 236) quotes a conversation recorded by the FBI, where a pimp resident in California pointed out that the merchandise (women trafficked from Ukraine against their will) easily could escape.

One-third (32.6 %) of the interviewees pointed out that having a good temper, and being loving, gentle and friendly to clients was a compulsory requirement. Two interviewees said that women should have some communication skills, as they should be cheerful and talkative to attract the clients. One-fourth (25.6 %) of the respondents said that having experience in prostitution was an important or compulsory requirement. On the contrary, six interviewees (13.9 %) indicated that not having experience in prostitution or being a virgin was a desirable thing. Only one of the respondents did not make any selection (see table 2).

Table 2: Requirements that sex traffickers have to comply when recruiting women

	n	%
The age is the most important requirement, girls must be young	41	95.3
Should have a curvaceous body and must be slim	25	58.1
Must have a desire to work in prostitution	20	46.5
Should be beautiful	17	39.5
Should have a good temper, should be loving, gentle and friendly to clients	14	32.6
Having experience in prostitution is an important/compulsory requirement	11	25.6
The most important thing is the size	8	18.6
Shouldn't be minors, must be over 18 years old	8	18.6
Must be healthy	8	18.6
Not having experience in prostitution is desirable	6	13.9
If they are ugly or fat they can be fixed with make-up or with a diet	6	13.9
Should like easy money and be ambitious	4	9.3
Must be single and shouldn't have children	4	9.3
Should have communication skills	2	4.6
Should like to party	1	2.3
Doesn't make any selection	1	2.3
Total	43	100

Source: Compiled by the author from data recorded in the interviews.

Percentages sum up more than 100 because most sex traffickers had to comply with more than one requirement.

To fill the quotas of women that US sex industry demands, sex trafficking networks in Mexico have turned their eyes on Central American women. Central Americans are preferred by US procurers because they are more profitable as they stay longer in the US than Mexicans. This was reflected in comments such as: “In the case of women, Central American women are preferred over Mexican; but only in prostitution” (Valerio, 2017) or “Women from Central America are more preferred than Mexicans in prostitution jobs” (Vicente, 2017). On the other hand, interviewees commented that Mexican women were more reticent to migrate. Francisco (2013) affirmed: “Mexican women go and continue going; but they are going less for fear to organised crime; they think that something can happen to them or if they can’t come back; sometimes they put a lot of excuses and they don’t want to go”. According to respondents, Central Americans were more in need than Mexican women; therefore, it was easier to entice them to work in prostitution. As Paulino (2014) explained: “With women coming from other countries there is not much to talk about, because they are looking to pass to the other side. You invite them and they say yes because that is what they want. Because of this, I choose them from Central America to carry them. So, there is no problem”. Women from Central America in transit through Mexico desire so much to go to the US that sex traffickers do not have to make a great effort to convince them. According to some interviewees, in the case of Central Americans, the most difficult task was not to convince them but to find girls who complied with the standards set up by US sex industry. As Paulino (2014) pointed out: “I am battling choosing them, not searching for them”. Sex traffickers approach Central American girls who meet the above criteria and try to entice them speaking about the high salaries paid by the sex industry. As can be seen from table 3 three-fourths (76.7 %) of sex trafficking networks studied recruited women from Central America; while, only two-thirds (67.4 %) carried Mexican women.

Table 3: Place of origin of the women transported by sex trafficking networks

	n	%
Only from México	10	23.3
Only from Central America	12	27.9
Mexico and Central America	13	30.2
Mexico, Central America and other Latin America countries	6	13.9
Central America and other Latin America countries	2	4.6
Sex trafficking networks that transport women from Central America	33	76.7
Sex trafficking networks that transport women from Mexico	29	67.4
Total	43	100

Source: Compiled by the author from data recorded in the interviews.

Conclusion

The recruitment of women from Mexico and Central America to be employed in the US illegal sex industry is a time consuming endeavour because most women who want to migrate do not want to work in prostitution, and women working in prostitution in their country of origin are not eager to migrate to the US. To change women’s mind traffickers, do whatever necessary to win them over. They scrutinise women’s economic needs and vulnerabilities and present themselves as the solution to all their problems. The lack of a promising future in their country of origin creates the necessary conditions and facilitates the ease with which traffickers recruit women. However, sex trafficking depends principally on the demand from US sex industry. The pull of demand was stronger than the push of poverty, although both were at play.



According to interviewees some women (especially migrant women from Central America) are willing to work in prostitution in the US; however, most women do not want to. Women trafficked to the US do not choose to be recruited by sex traffickers, the former are chosen by the latter. Mexican traffickers are not allowed to recruit any women they find. If trafficked girls do not comply with the standard set up by US procurers, traffickers will not receive any payment. Therefore, Mexican traffickers only recruit migrant women who are very young (in many cases underage girls), beautiful, slim, and healthy, and are gentle to clients. As women who fit this profile usually do not want to migrate or enter prostitution, sex traffickers' job is to entice with comparatively high salaries vulnerable Latin American girls. Central American women are more vulnerable than Mexicans; as a result, the former are more frequently trafficked than the latter.

On the other hand, Mexican traffickers declare they do not use force or coercion to recruit migrant women, and relationships between the former and the latter are not violent. As a result, interviewees did not consider themselves as engaging in a criminal activity.

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678 *Recruitment Strategies Used by Mexican Sex Traffickers*

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Annex: Interviews quoted in the manuscript:

ALEJANDRO	Sex trafficker from Tamaulipas interviewed in 2012
FRANCISCO	Sex trafficker from Tamaulipas interviewed in 2013
MELCHOR	Sex trafficker from the State of Mexico interviewed in 2014
NATALIO	Sex trafficker from Chiapas interviewed in 2014
PAULINO	Sex trafficker from Tamaulipas interviewed in 2014
PASCUAL	Sex trafficker from Tamaulipas interviewed in 2014
ROGELIO	Sex trafficker from Chiapas interviewed in 2015
SERGIO	Sex trafficker from Tabasco interviewed in 2016
VALERIO	Sex trafficker from Nuevo Leon interviewed in 2017
VICENTE	Sex trafficker from California interviewed in 2017

All names are pseudonyms.
