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# DARK SIDE OF LOGISTICS: AN OPERATIONAL SUPPORT FOR HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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## ABSTRACT

*The human trafficking is a societal phenomenon that is gaining ground in many countries. This fact has been studied for several years from various angles, most often using sociological or legal approaches. The research note opts for another point of view: the analysis of supply chains which can be considered as the “back office” of prostitution as human trafficking. This is a sensitive topic for management research, which may offend the general public, but it also raises a key question: should we refrain from tackling issues that are morally reprehensible, but which nevertheless refer to an indisputable social reality? The juvenile prostitution relies on an efficient organization of logistical activities handled by a multitude of stakeholders, who coordinate to satisfy the demand from clients. Based on secondary data and studies conducted by various academicians specialized in legal sciences and the humanities, this research note proposes a framework for analysing the supply chains associated with juvenile prostitution in the French context. The reflection offers promising perspectives on a central theme, but one that is too rarely addressed in academic work.*

**Key words:** France; Prostitution; Sensitive topics; Supply chain management; Underage girls.

## บทคัดย่อ

การค้ามนุษย์เป็นปรากฏการณ์ทางสังคมที่อยู่ในความสนใจในหลายๆ ประเทศ ในช่วงหลายปีที่ผ่านมามีข้อเท็จจริงในเรื่องนี้ ได้มีการศึกษาในหลายแง่มุม โดยส่วนใหญ่จะใช้วิธีทางสังคมหรือทางกฎหมาย งานวิจัยเบื้องต้นนี้เป็นการเสนออีกแง่มุม โดยการวิเคราะห์โซ่อุปทานซึ่งเป็นเสมือนหนึ่งหลังบ้านของการค้าประเวณีซึ่งเป็นการค้ามนุษย์ในรูปแบบหนึ่ง ทั้งนี้มันอาจเป็นหัวข้อที่อ่อนไหว อาจนำมาซึ่งความไม่พอใจต่อสาธารณชน แต่มันก็ก่อให้เกิดคำถามว่า เราควรจะเดินที่จะกล่าวถึงประเด็นที่เสื่อมทรามทางศีลธรรม ซึ่งเป็นข้อเท็จจริงทางสังคมที่ไม่อาจปฏิเสธได้เช่นนั้นหรือ การค้าประเวณีเด็กต้องพึ่งพาการจัดการกิจกรรมลอจิสติกส์อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพของผู้ที่เกี่ยวข้อง ซึ่งร่วมมือกันเพื่อสนองความต้องการของลูกค้า งานวิจัยเบื้องต้นนี้ใช้ข้อมูลทฤษฎีภูมิและการศึกษาของนักวิชาการในสาขานิติศาสตร์และมนุษยศาสตร์ เพื่อเสนอโครงการวิจัยเพื่อวิเคราะห์โซ่อุปทานของการค้าประเวณีเด็กในบริบทของฝรั่งเศส เป็นการสะท้อนมุมมองซึ่งแทบจะไม่ได้มีการกล่าวถึงในแง่มุมวิชาการมาก่อน

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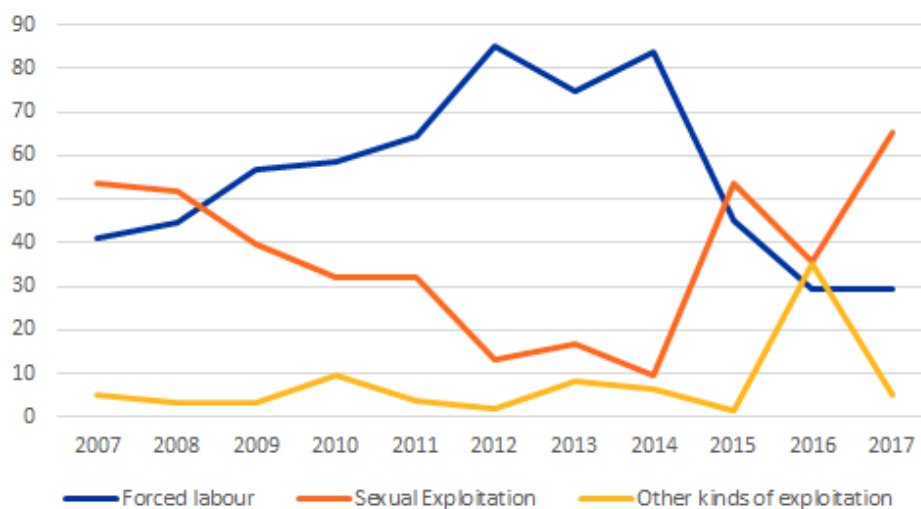
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## INTRODUCTION

Among the major societal problems encountered in Europe throughout the 20th century, juvenile prostitution holds an important place. Many academic works have been devoted to this sensitive topic. We can mention the special issue of the *Revue d'Histoire de l'Enfance Irrégulière*, coordinated by Machiels and Pierre (2008), which suggests different insights into juvenile prostitution based on the institutional, religious, medical and philanthropic responses that have been provided over time, particularly in Belgium and France. On the other hand, very few articles have so far been devoted to the prostitudinal activity, trying to understand its organisation and, more precisely, the logistics that it requires for sex trafficking to function. It is clearly a “dark side of logistics” that cannot be ignored, just as it is impossible to ignore the forced child labour involved in certain supply chains (Cho *et al.*, 2019).

Thus, an official report, published in 2021, estimates that 7,000 to 10,000 teenagers are involved in prostitution in France (Champrenault, 2021). It mainly affects underage girls (85%), between 15 and 17 years old on average, with an increase in the number of victims of more than 340% between 2016 and 2020, which corresponds to a global trend noted by The Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative regarding sexual exploitation (see Figure 1). The report of Champrenault (2021) indicates that prostitution of underage girls come from cities in crisis affected by poverty. Moreover, while social networks are massively used by underage girls to get in touch with their clients (johns), recruitment is primarily organised by pimps who also use the Internet, even prostituting underage girls aged 14 or younger. Champrenault (2021) adds that about a quarter of underage girls in prostitution suffer from emotional and/or educational deficiencies linked to dysfunctional family contexts, with divorce/separation situations. Finally, nearly half of the underage girls say that they were subjected to violence during their childhood, mainly sexual, before entering the prostitudinal system.

**Figure 1: Exploitation Types among Identified Victims of Human Trafficking (percentage)**



Source: The Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (2019).

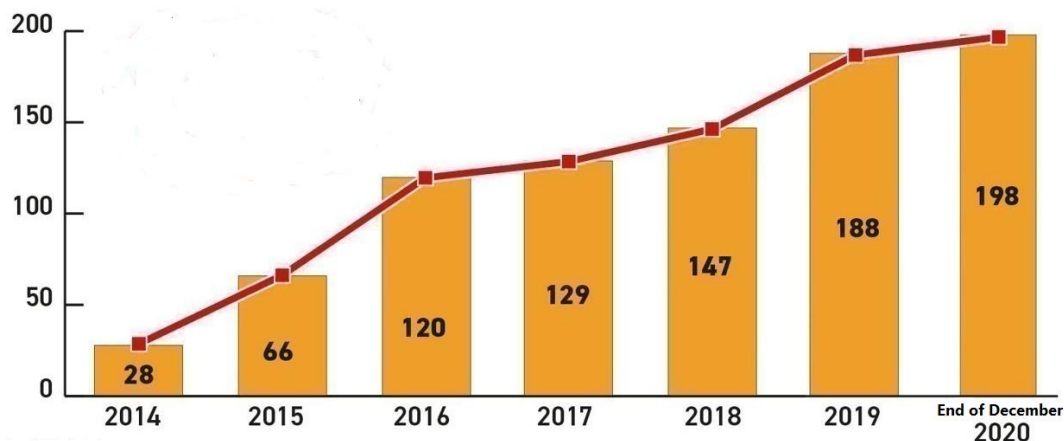
Juvenile prostitution is confusing because it is more diffuse and elusive than conventional street prostitution, as Martin Scorsese captured in 1976 in his movie *Taxi Driver* with the young Jodie Foster. It is a taboo subject, especially in Western Europe, and most often causes adults to be amazed. Moreover, the new form of juvenile prostitution is very difficult to fight

because of the lack of training of educators and parents, and the denial of the underage girls who refuse to consider themselves as victims. Most often, they refer to a discourse based on freedom of choice and on the exploitation of a “capital of seduction” in order to benefit from the consumer society. In brief, it is a morally reprehensible phenomenon, but one whose existence as a component of the “sex market” cannot be denied (Thompson, 2017). As with any market that brings together supply and demand, there is a logistical dimension whose mission is to facilitate exchanges.

## FROM SOCIETAL TO SUPPLY CHAIN REALITY

Studying the societal reality of juvenile prostitution in France, Lavaud-Legendre and Plessard (2021) adopt a “supply chain” analysis of the prostitutional activity of underage girls. Their argumentation is based on a rigorous investigation derived from an in-depth study of ten criminal proceedings conducted in 2019 and 2020 in France. These proceedings resulted in the criminal judgment of facts qualified as procuring (with an aggravating dimension: the presence of an underage girl). The research is justified by the fact that the number of underage girls involved in a pimping network is constantly increasing in France, as shown in Figure 2. Step by step, Lavaud-Legendre and Plessard (2021) construct an original framework that places logistics at the heart of the analysis, in a double aspect: (1) the presence of logistical resources of a physical nature; and (2) the importance of information systems as a tool for “monitoring” the activity. We find here the foundations of business logistics and supply chain management as developed for more than thirty years, and of which an application to sexual exploitation has been proposed by Stapleton *et al.* (2012) and Thompson (2017).

**Figure 2: Evolution of the Number of Underage Girls involved in a Pimping Network in France**



Source: French Central Office for the Repression of Human Trafficking (2021).

The presence of logistical resources of a physical nature is clearly identified by Lavaud-Legendre and Plessard (2021) in their in-depth survey. The “bosses”, in other words the pimps, need to have facilities to practice prostitution, whether they are hotel rooms or rented apartments, when they are not squalid wastelands out of sight. Research conducted in 2021 in the United States by the McCain Institute among 950 underage prostitutes indicates that hotel rooms are the main places where prostitution takes place (Roe-Sepowitz *et al.*, 2021) (see Table 1). The figures are comparable in France. The “bosses” also need to organise the transportation of underage girls without driver license by mobilising the most suitable –and least expensive– means of transport. To do this, the “bosses” turn to “service providers”

responsible for making physical resources available, while ensuring their security in the face of potential police intervention. In brief, the logistical aspect of sex trafficking is the process by which underage girls are “prepared”, “packaged” and “delivered” to meet the demand of clients (Stapleton *et al.*, 2012).

**Table 1: Juvenile Prostitution Venues in the United States**

Trafficking location	Percentage
Hotel rooms	56.6
Outcall locations	21.4
Houses	13.8
Streets	12.3
Apartments	10.4
Clubs	2.2

Source: Adapted from Roe-Sepowitz *et al.* (2021).

As far as information systems are concerned, the emphasis is on the revolution represented by the use of the smartphone. The smartphone plays a major role at three complementary levels: (1) bringing the “boss”, the “service provider”, the prostitute and the client into contact with each other; (2) the actual organisation of prostitutional activity (recruiting underage girls, reserving places for prostitutional activity); and (3) the control of prostitutional activity by the “bosses” (real time tracking and tracing of underage girls). Lavaud-Legendre and Plessard (2021) add that the use of the smartphone makes it possible to establish a climate of “well-being” (?) around the prostitute, as it becomes a privileged logistical tool for placing orders for food products, intimate hygiene products or psychotropic drugs. For the “boss”, it is more about reducing perceived risk through continuous control of behaviours; as we know, efficient risk management is a pillar of traditional supply chain performance (Elliott, 2015).

Digitalization is then a major trend in prostitution around the world. Charpenel (2019) underlines the misappropriation of new technologies for the benefit of a “prostitution 2.0”. A survey conducted in 35 countries leads to alarming findings in the widespread use of smartphone applications. Thus, the “bosses” use WhatsApp to communicate with each other and with underage girls, they find their preys on Instagram and they attract customers via ads on the Internet. This new form of digital prostitution has succeeded in supplanting traditional prostitution in the street, and all countries are affected, regardless of their legislation. In France, underage girls are spotted on Snapchat or Instagram, before being prostituted in apartments rented on a platform and transformed into “ephemeral brothels”. Digitalization facilitates concealment, anonymity, and discretion that allow illicit activities to be developed discreetly (Charpenel, 2019).

Farley *et al.* (2013) reach a similar conclusion from an investigation in the US context. They find that smartphone use is a key component of juvenile prostitution, both for clients, pimps, and underage girls. By analysing several court cases, Farley *et al.* (2013) underline the presence of a logistical invariant: the use of the smartphone is at the heart of prostitutional activity, both to organise it more efficiently, and to increase the income of the various stakeholders, mainly that of the “bosses”. The authors note, however, that this evolution should not be surprising if a long-term perspective of the sex market is used. Indeed, since the beginning of the 1990s, first generation cell phones have been massively used by escort girls and call girls to manage their appointments with –wealthy– clients. In brief, information technology has been at the service of human trafficking for decades, which also knows how to

rely on a multiplicity of management tools to improve its performance (Shelley & Bain, 2015).

## FROM THEORETICAL TO TANGIBLE

It is possible to concretely describe the elements constituting the supply chain of a prostitution network from the dismantling of one of them, in 2017, in the surroundings of Paris (Constant, 2017). The investigation conducted by the police forces, followed by the hearings of the main stakeholders in court, thus highlights three major points: (1) recruitment of clients from escort girl sites; (2) communications between the “boss”, the service provider and the prostitutes with phones used under assumed names; and (3) room rentals and cab reservations by a service provider. The service provider organised the activity in Airbnb apartments in Paris, facilities paid for with fraudulent credit card numbers recovered on the darknet. The network thus constituted had succeeded in “industrialising” prostitution by using the resources of 10 underage girls at a time, in 10 different apartments.

Another significant example is the dismantling of a prostitution network in the South of France in September 2019 (Diesnis, 2019). It highlights how a “boss”, relying on three efficient service providers, can manage the prostitudinal activity remotely, including from a prison cell. In this case, the “boss”, incarcerated for serious offences, had two women acting as a “tout” (or “*rabatteuse*” in French) to identify and retrieve underage girls in family breakdown. The underage girls were then supervised by three service providers, who took care of the logistics, namely transport, “security” at the prostitution places, money collection and the provision of false papers. The prostitudinal activity took place by appointment in apartments rented via platforms, and if an underage girl did not behave as expected, she was subjected to physical violence dictated by the “boss” (using his own smartphone) and administered at the same time by the three service providers.

However, most of the juvenile prostitution structures observed in France correspond to the *adhocracy model*, as stated by Bennis and Slater (1964). The implementation of the activity is based on a rather entrepreneurial approach, with a product, a service and associated logistics. Kloep (2020) emphasizes the importance of communication with customers in an entrepreneurial approach requiring an efficient supply chain. By assimilating the customers’ needs, the entrepreneur knows whether he is meeting the expected standards of service quality. This observation is in line with that of Dobele *et al.* (2016), who insist that achieving a maximum level of service must lead the entrepreneur to make deliveries within the specified deadlines, in particular by finding partners who guarantee maximum performance in the management of logistical operations.

The underage girls are exploited by small, “ephemeral” and highly mobile teams, in which the individuals in charge of logistical support (the service providers) are almost systematically young men, with a criminal record, particularly in relation to drug trafficking. The analysis conducted by Lavaud-Legendre and Plessard (2021) on procuring cases underlines the lack of perceived involvement of service providers in human trafficking. For example, several verbatims from the criminal proceedings indicate that the individuals in charge of logistical support are only “helping out” the pimps, or “doing a favor to an old buddy”. However, service providers have no difficulty accepting to manage logistical operations as long as the “boss” is considered an efficient entrepreneur. This confirms numerous academic studies that underline a strong link between entrepreneurial orientation and logistics performance (Cortes *et al.*, 2021).

As we know, one of the key elements of the supply chain approach is ultimately to deliver value to customer (Hammervoll, 2011). Moreover, as Dow (2018) points out, a customer centric supply chain is the “only holy grail to success”. Unfortunately, a similar philosophy can be found in the case of juvenile prostitution. The “bosses” have perfectly understood that the efficient use of a set of facilities –transport, communication, prostitution places– is essential for the success of their “business model”. It is not only a question of making available to clients –on social networks or the Internet– young girls to satisfy their deviant impulses, but also of guaranteeing them satisfactory material conditions: secure places for sexual relations, transport of prostitutes without driver’s license, rapid communication with “bosses” to arrange appointments, etc. The objective is explicitly to reduce the uncertainty that could threaten the survival of the organization, as in the case of any supply chain (Lawrence & Wayuparb, 2018).

### **A BETTER KNOWLEDGE FOR AN EFFICIENT POLITICAL ACTION**

The exploration of this dark side of logistics could provide useful information for policy makers to better understand the driving forces of criminal systems, and how to identify them, not only by referring to the most visible mechanisms (sex exploitation), but by studying their back office. As noted by Stapleton *et al.* (2012, p. 19), it is essential to implement a policy approach “in which sex trafficking is analysed and addressed as an integrated supply chain system”. The operational knowledge of the flow monitoring will then allow political authorities and the police forces to better act in situations of juvenile prostitution. This is an important theme, but paradoxically, unlike the work conducted on the presence of slavery in supply chains (Burnson, 2015), and the implementation of codes of conduct to eliminate unethical behaviour, little attention has been paid to understanding the supply chains of prostitution. This is probably because it is a sensitive topic, but one with dramatic social consequences.

The lack of knowledge of the supply chains of juvenile prostitution certainly explains why the logistical dimension is not addressed in the official plans to combat it, either at the national or regional level. In France, for example, the government focuses on three aspects: (1) prevention among underage girls and their families, by informing them about the dangers of prostitution and how pimps recruit their victims; (2) identification of situations of sexual exploitation in the school environment, in order to take care of victims as early as possible; and (3) better protection from exposure to pornography and social networks. However, it would be essential to train police forces in a better understanding of the supply chains of juvenile prostitution, particularly with the recognition of the main “logistical nodes” of this specific human trafficking. Two types of logistical nodes seem particularly important, one related to physical facilities, the other related to human competences:

- The first logistical node concerns prostitution places, which no longer correspond to conventional street prostitution. The new forms of juvenile prostitution are in fact based on the model of uberisation and “super-circulation” (Felix, 2020), in particular with the use of Airbnb apartments, whereas conventional street prostitution uses no-tell motels (the famous French “*hôtels de passe*”), which are known and strictly tracked by the police. It is therefore necessary to implement a control of apartment rental platforms, some of which are used for the operation of juvenile prostitution. A partnership between

police forces and apartment rental platforms to unmask illicit activities should easily be put in place in a win-win perspective.

- The second logistical node concerns the service providers, without which it will be impossible for the “bosses” to organise their procuring activity. It is hoped that the identification, filing and tracing of these individuals will make it possible to know in real time their activity, often associated with illicit operations (Champrenault, 2021). In other words, the main objective is to paralyse the human capital associated with the logistical support of juvenile prostitution. This is not a surprise, as numerous academic studies have long shown that business networks are highly vulnerable to logistical failures, and this reality became even more apparent during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

To study a topic such as juvenile prostitution with reference to a logistical analysis may appear surprising, and even shocking, because it is a social deviance rightly condemned by our democratic societies, even if prostitution is the world’s oldest profession (the earliest known data on prostitution dates back to 2,400 BC in ancient Babylonia). However, it is about the organisation of a human trafficking that cannot be under-estimated. Should academic research act as if it did not exist? The answer is obviously negative. The management science is experiencing a darker side in many areas, and logistics is no exception. For several years now, manufacturing, retailing, and wholesaling companies have been developing supply chain tools that improve their performance, particularly in terms of service quality. These tools are well known, and as such, it is not surprising that they are used by the organisers of prostitution networks. It is the responsibility of the researcher to explain the process.

Another sensitive topic involving a strong logistical dimension concerns drug trafficking. Many papers have been published on the theme and they do not hesitate to use supply chain concepts to better understand the reality of certain illicit markets. One of the most interesting examples is the contribution of Dittus *et al.* (2018), which uses the well-known last mile management perspective to shed light on the darknet market of cocaine. These articles do not advocate drug use; they only seek to understand its mechanisms. The same reasoning can be applied to juvenile prostitution: exploring the logistical support does not mean that the researcher is indifferent to this human trafficking. On the contrary, the researcher must contribute his/her scientific knowledge in order to participate in the construction of a more respectful society for human beings. The progression of research on corporate social responsibility testifies to profound changes in the way organisations are managed, and as such, no topic should be considered taboo when it comes to working for a more ethical world.

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