

## **No victim too vulnerable: the global market in trafficked people**

Human trafficking is a modern form of slavery. Human trafficking is, by definition, the use of violence, threats, coercion or fraud to aid in the recruitment, transportation or harbouring of a person, with the intent of exploiting that person. Human trafficking is a growing global problem and is increasing at a rate of about 10 per cent a year. It is becoming a more attractive crime to criminals throughout the world.

Human trafficking is a global issue and almost nowhere is untouched by its effects. Most victims are taken from poorer, less developed regions, to richer places where their labour is needed. Sometimes this can happen within a country, for example the USA, where people are recruited in poorer areas and trafficked to work in American factories. In other instances, people are taken from developing countries in Africa, South America, Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe to work in more developed countries in Western Europe and North America.

The volume of trafficking has increased due to the world's changing geopolitical situation. Population has increased rapidly, increasing the supply for traffickers. Borders in some regions, especially since the end of the Cold War, have become easier to cross, whereas those of many Western countries have become less permeable (both physically and legally), reducing the alternatives of would-be migrants and strengthening the hand of the traffickers. Transportation routes have improved internationally, as have communication links. Access to telephones and the internet allow traffickers to plan and carry out their activities from different parts of the globe far more easily.

It is extremely difficult to gauge the scale of human trafficking around the world. Criminals go to great lengths to keep trafficking secret and the way trafficking statistics are compiled varies greatly from place to place. Many court cases which involve human trafficking have been prosecuted and recorded under laws concerning immigration, prostitution and fraud. It is particularly hard to tell the extent to which children are trafficked for use in the sex industry.

Consequently, estimates by reputable bodies of the number of women and children trafficked globally each year vary widely, between 700,000 and 4 million. UNICEF puts the figure at around 2.4 million, and believes that half of these people are children. The organisation also estimates that annually about 45,000 to 50,000 people, mainly women and children, are trafficked to the US, and about 1500 women and children to the UK.

It is important to distinguish between trafficking and smuggling of people. In cases of trafficking, the criminals are moving people with the intent of exploiting them further down the line and the victim is forced, tricked or otherwise pressurised into travelling. However in cases of smuggling the person being moved colludes with the criminal and may benefit from the venture. By its nature, people-smuggling always traverses borders, whereas trafficking can occur within a country. Sometimes the distinction becomes blurred. In both cases the trafficked and smuggled individuals may leave their homes willingly, and smuggled individuals may end up working for the smugglers or their associates to pay off a debt, but as long as they have not been forced or coerced into this labour it is not considered trafficking.

## WHY TRAFFIC?

Human trafficking is seen as a low risk crime, yet with the potential to make as much money as through drugs trading.

Trafficking is a low risk crime for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is hard to notice. Most cases of trafficking arrests are based on victims' complaints, but victims' circumstances generally hinder them from making a complaint. The victims often do not know their rights and have been told to be scared of the police. When they are discovered or come forward they may not be recognised as victims of trafficking, they may not be believed or they may simply be deported.

Because trafficking is often international, encompassing politically unstable or undeveloped jurisdictions, it is usually difficult to gather evidence about trafficking. Sometimes the traffickers, who may themselves be illegal immigrants, are deported rather than prosecuted. Key figures involved in the criminal enterprise are often in a different country to that of the investigating authority and are rarely arrested or convicted.

The penalties for human trafficking are often lower than those for other crimes (such as drug dealing) and enforcement is not a priority in many countries, such as Japan and China. Poor enforcement is also characteristic of Thailand, where the sex trade is a significant element of the country's tourist industry, and corruption and bribery from brothel owners is rife throughout the police services.

But attitudes are slowly changing. In recent years, as the issue of human trafficking has risen to the world's attention, many countries have increased their efforts to combat trafficking by introducing new laws and policies.

Human trafficking is also seen as a high profit crime. In most cases, the traffickers demand large fees to transport their human cargo. They may take the trafficked person's passport and documents and then charge the victim a great amount to have them returned, an ostensible debt worked off through forced labour or prostitution. Also human trafficking has fairly low costs and does not require a large initial investment on the part of the traffickers. An Asian smuggler, for example, may be paid \$13,000 – \$15,000 (US) for each woman he smuggles into the USA. After paying for documents, paying the recruiter and the escort around \$1000 each and covering other costs, he will make around \$7500 – \$9000 per woman. A Mexican crime family forced deaf Mexicans to pedal trinkets in the USA and made around \$8 million over 4½ years.

It is common for organised crime to attempt to supply anything for which there is an unmet demand, where not enough of the commodity is being supplied through legal channels, whether drugs, protection, firearms etc. For the traffickers, human beings are simply another commodity, and one for which there is a constant demand.

## EASTERN EUROPEAN PROSTITUTION RING IN LONDON

This is the case of X (name undisclosed) who occupied a central position in a well organized international criminal enterprise which dealt with the illegal trafficking of women into the UK. X helped to bring 7 girls into England. He was Albanian by birth but is now a British citizen, and when the case came to court in Nov 2003 he was in his mid-20s and had no previous criminal record. The

case came to light when, on 29th October 2002 in Green Lanes, London, one of these victims, a girl called Claudia E, waved down a passing police car and claimed to have been raped.

She and her sister Arabella had been 24 and 17 respectively at the time, when they were approached in Romania by a man offering bar work in England. They were taken to Prague where they met X who took them to Italy. Then they were driven by car to England by two men, until they eventually arrived at X's house in London. Here they were assaulted by X and Arabella was told that she would be working as a prostitute, and threatened that food and drink would be withheld until she complied. They were then separated from one another.

Arabella was sold to a man called Plummi. She was told to have sex with various men. When she refused she was locked into a room and when she refused again she was threatened: X told her that she would be beaten and left for dead if she did not comply. Eventually she was forced to submit.

Claudia was taken to another address where she was told that she would have to have sex with clients the next day. But Claudia escaped and waved down the police car.

The police headed to X's home and found him there. After a phone call from X to Plummi, Arabella was released on to the street. The police searched X's home and found the paraphernalia of prostitution, such as hundreds of condoms and lubricants. They also found three other girls, Andrea S, Alina B and Alexandra L.

Andrea and Alina were cousins. They were both illegal immigrants from Romania and carried false Italian passports. They had initially left Romania to work as waitresses in Italy. Alina had come to England where she was forced into prostitution, yet she agreed to go to Italy to collect her cousin and bring her to England for the same purpose. They were driven to the UK where they met X.

Alexandra was Moldavian girl who, in July 2000 when she was only 16, with the help of X among others, had left Moldavia. First she was taken to Romania where she was joined by another 16 year old girl, Natasha B. Then they met with X in Yugoslavia before finally being brought to England. Once they arrived X told them that they would have to repay him for bringing them into England by working as prostitutes

For at least 2 years Alexandra worked as a prostitute, and in March 2001 she married X. However she describes how she felt coerced and forced into both the marriage and the prostitution. She pooled her finances with X and in this sense X lived off her earnings.

Natasha was sold by X to a pimp in a large provincial city, for £7000. She was told that she would have to repay that money by working as a prostitute at the brothel, which she did for a time, before being moved back to London and working as a prostitute for X until she eventually escaped. While she was working for X she was mistreated, assaulted and closely watched in everything she did. She would earn from £600 to £1000 a day but all of this went straight to X, with Natasha receiving only pocket money.

The seventh girl, Alla O, was a Moldavian who had been brought up with Alexandra. X helped arrange her entry to the UK. She first attempted to travel on a false Czech passport. When that failed, a false Belgium passport was used and Alla successfully entered England through the Channel Tunnel in July 2002. Then X told her that she would have to repay the £7000 that it had cost to bring her to England, and forced her work as a prostitute. She lived with him and Alexandra.

X himself benefited greatly over the three years that this all took place, making more than £200,000. He lived extravagantly, wore designer clothes, owned a Ferrari and a BMW and travelled extensively. X pleaded guilty to 7 cases of assisting unlawful immigration, and was also found guilty on various counts of living on immoral earnings, kidnapping and incitement to rape. He was sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, but this was referred in 2004 by the Crown Prosecution Service and a sentence of 23 years proposed.

## THE TRAFFICKING PROCESS

The process of recruitment, transportation and forced labour that is trafficking has, across the globe, many common features.

## RECRUITMENT

Traffickers tend to target poorer people in areas of limited government control, but many other factors affect their choice. Ill and malnourished people and the old are all unlikely to be targeted because, as a commodity, they have less value. Women are favoured by traffickers, because of their value for prostitution. In less developed countries it can be extremely difficult for disabled people to find employment and provide for themselves. Traffickers exploit this and may pressurise disabled people into forced labour or begging in richer areas where they are more likely to receive alms.

Poverty and conflict create circumstances where people may be easy prey to traffickers. Faced with scant economic alternatives, people are susceptible to traffickers' illusory descriptions of opportunities abroad. Impoverished parents are often persuaded to sell some of their children – especially girls, who are valued less in many parts of Africa – to traffickers, to support themselves and their family. The chaos created by conflict enables the traffickers to operate more freely, and often makes it easier to abduct lost or orphaned children. Traffickers rush to exploit the disruption caused by conflict and natural disasters. In Iraq, where there was previously little human trafficking, thousands of women and girls have been kidnapped and trafficked throughout the UAE in the last few years. Large numbers of orphaned children in South East Asia were likewise abducted in the aftermath of 2004 Boxing Day tsunami.

Sometimes traffickers recruit orphaned children by legally adopting them, in the guise of would-be parents. Inadequate adoption procedures, including a lack of social workers, poor training and a weak legal framework, contribute to the prevalence of this method of recruitment. Africa suffers from an epidemic of human trafficking. People are trafficked throughout the continent, and from Africa to destinations throughout the world.

The traffickers make contact with their victims in various ways. They may set up business fronts. In some cases these are illegal -- unlicensed and unregulated -- employment agencies which offer jobs abroad, although recruiters may use otherwise apparently legitimate travel agencies and matchmaking companies to find and entice their victims. Similarly, recruiters may advertise in newspapers or on the internet, promising well-paid jobs or education opportunities and a better life abroad.

Some traffickers pick out and approach their victims in an informal social setting. They frequent discos or cafes and offer people they meet jobs abroad. The traffickers may rely heavily on the grapevine to broadcast their offers more widely.

The traffickers may also persuade people to travel on the understanding that the trip is short-term, or only a holiday. They may befriend their victims and then ask them to come travelling. Many girls trafficked from Eastern Europe were befriended by a 'boyfriend' who offered them the chance to go abroad, for travel or education, but once they arrived, were held captive.

The traffickers' success relies partly on using a persuasive recruiter. They often hire somebody female to lure women for prostitution, to make the false job offers more convincing. Recruitment is particularly effective when the recruiter is either a previous victim of the traffickers who has been persuaded to try and recruit others, or if the recruiter is related to or already knows the victim. For this reason traffickers are frequently found to have returned to their home towns to recruit.

In other cases the victim is simply abducted. This is more common with trafficked children, who are easier to abduct and control than adults. For example, two young girls were kidnapped in Albania by Albanian gangs and forced to become prostitutes in the UK.

The criminals who mastermind the trafficking may not directly control the recruitment themselves; often they subcontract.

## TRAVEL

Criminals traffic from where there is a supply of victims to where there is a demand for human labour. Although this will generally involve trafficking internationally, traffickers also choose their victims based on their ease of transportation to the destination. This may tally with proximity, for example, a study in the US found that in a third of cases of US trafficking, victims had been recruited within the US itself.

Traffickers take people across borders either openly or clandestinely. If openly, their victims travel either through the use of false documents, or the fraudulent misuse of genuine documents. This can range from getting the trafficked person a tourist visa with the intention of overstaying the length of the visa to arranging a so-called 'marriage of convenience' with a resident of the country, and thereby gaining permission for the trafficked person to enter the country.

The victims can also be smuggled across borders without knowledge of the authorities, hidden in the backs of lorries or slipping on foot into a country at an unguarded point. Sometimes this smuggling relies on corrupt border guards turning a blind eye to the criminals.

Fake passports can be bought relatively cheaply. A BBC reporter managed to buy twenty European passports within months, some for as little as £250. The price of a passport can vary enormously depending on the ostensible issuing country and the quality of the forgery. Fake British passports are more expensive; an illegal immigrant arrested in Cyprus claimed to have paid £2,800 for one in Tehran as part of a fee to be smuggled to Britain. Belgium passports have been sold for as much as \$7,500. Experienced traffickers can produce or obtain the passports more cheaply.

Traffickers may bribe local officials, security guards and anyone in a position to help them smuggle people into the country. Human traffickers have even been caught bribing security guards at Heathrow Airport, where airline security guards, who are supposed to check passports, received bribes of up to £4000 to allow people to pass unchecked. Bribery is often the traffickers' greatest single expense. Nevertheless, large profit margins remain. A Chinese gang smuggling people into the USA by bribing officials both in the USA and in several transit countries was found to be reaping profits of around 90%.

## **CONTROL AND EXPLOITATION**

Traffickers use various means to control their victims. They may confiscate their passports and papers, use threats, violence, lies and their victims' fear of the authorities to keep them in their power.

Violence is common, and victims are often beaten or raped. This may be accompanied by threats of further violence, injury, death or violence towards family members back home. They may be kept isolated and locked up, physically unable to escape. This is the primary method of controlling the victim when the victim has been kidnapped, is employed especially when the victim is a child, and is more common in less developed countries. This is what happened to Marlena.

## **DOMESTIC SLAVE**

Marlena was promised \$200 a week by an employment agency, to travel to the Persian Gulf to work as a domestic servant. She decided to make the trip to earn money for her family. But when she arrived, her employer's wife took away her passport and forbade her from ever leaving the house – and Marlena was locked inside the house whenever the family went out. She was made to work twenty hours a day serving the family, and was physically and verbally abused when she did not work hard enough. She was made to sleep on the floor and was never paid anything for her labours.

Marlena tried to run away but her captor stopped her and told her that if she left she would be arrested for leaving the house without permission - and this is what happened. When eventually, after 8 months, Marlena escaped, she was arrested by the police for running away from her employers and spent the next two years in a deportation centre.

Typically, traffickers will offer to advance the money required to smuggle their victims. They charge the victims huge amounts to be smuggled to these 'better lives'. Once they arrive at their destination, the victims are told that they cannot leave and must follow their traffickers' orders until they work off their debts. They are forced into 'debt-bondage', ignorant of the fact that their unfair debts are not legally binding. Their passports and documents are usually confiscated as collateral.

The work that the trafficked individual is made to do, driven by the greed of the traffickers, often means that the victim will suffer greatly. Many victims are forced to live and work in appalling and unhealthy conditions. In some industries in developed countries, there is still no culture of asking suppliers questions about the labour conditions of their workers, leaving exploited labourers open to great risk.

Being in a foreign country illegally, the victims have no idea how to contact the authorities and are scared to do so. The traffickers encourage their victims to be more scared of the police than of the traffickers.

## ENSLAVED FRUITPICKERS IN FLORIDA

Ramiro Ramos and his brother Juan Ramos were illegal gangmasters, exploiting people trafficked to the USA from Mexico. By the time of their arrest in 2000, between 700 and 800 people are thought to have passed through their hands. The people were sold to them as debt-slaves by Mexican traffickers, who had smuggled them over the border. The Mexicans handed over their cargo at the Ramos' ranch at Marana, Arizona, who transported them to Southern Florida, where the Ramos brothers owned land.

In Florida, the trafficking victims were told they would have to work off the debt they incurred to the traffickers who brought them into the USA, which had been bought by the Ramoses, by working on the land, picking grapefruit and oranges. The length of their captivity varied from four months to four years, and the hard picking work lasted for 8 to 10 hours, all week long. Living conditions were appalling. The workers were forced to live in poor housing, packed five to a room and forty to a house, sleeping on mattresses. They were paid poorly. The Ramos brothers deducted over half their wages to cover their so-called debts and made further deductions for rent, food, and various other expenses. The laborers were left with \$40-\$50 per week's work. For his part, Ramiro Ramos made around \$3 million in 18 months.

Ramiro Ramos used threats of violence and constant surveillance to control his victims. One worker described the situation:

"He told us that if anyone took off before paying he'd beat the fuck out of us. He didn't say it like he was joking... I couldn't have gone elsewhere. I owed the money to them. If I refused, what was I going to do?"

None of his debt-slaves doubted the force behind his threats. On the isolated farm, it was easy for him to prevent their escape, and he made sure they knew it. Ramos employed enforcers with cell phones to oversee the workers in the field, and kept them under constant close watch.

In the end, it was Ramiro Ramos' violent temper that proved his undoing. He got into an argument with the driver of a small van hired to transport the farm workers, accusing the man of conspiring to steal his workers. Ramos and his henchmen, armed with pistols and a 4 foot metal pole, pulled the driver from the van, beat him up, and smashed up the van. The owner of the van, who was also present, tried to intervene, and was beaten unconscious.

Rumour of the assaults brought the Ramos' farm to the attention of a local charity for workers' rights and they got in touch with the police. The police were slow to appreciate the seriousness of the information, and, badgered by the charity, sent marked police cars out to have a look at the farm from the road outside, thereby alerting the Ramos brothers to the fact they had come under suspicion. A reluctance to act swiftly or treat potential cases seriously is a common criticism of law enforcement responses to trafficking. A bungled raid on the farm followed in which the Ramos brothers escaped, but eventually both were arrested and each sentenced to at least 12 years in jail.

Their cousin, Jose Ramos, who was also involved, was handed a 10-year sentence. Their victims were moved to better accommodation and given temporary residency in the USA.

In many cities in Africa, there is a constant demand for labour. This is often met by trafficked children. Children are also in demand as the rank-and-file of criminal gangs, as they are easier than adults to manipulate, control and train as a loyal gang member. Some gangs are notorious for abducting, brutalising and indoctrinating children. Italian criminals sell many children from the former Yugoslavia to the Sicilian mafia, for example. Children as young as 11 are then taught how to assemble a gun, how to ride a motorbike and how to kill. Sometimes traffickers force their victims to beg or fight for a guerrilla militia. Children are favoured for such roles because they are easier to control.

In addition to their vulnerability to trafficking for prostitution, girls are often forced into marriages – the AIDS epidemic means that there is a growing demand among older men for young virgin brides. There are other common destinations for trafficked children. Some children are trafficked to Arabia to become camel jockeys. These children are half-starved to keep them light and often abused.

The child traffickers exploit the most vulnerable section of society. Street children are desperate, and fall victim to traffickers, who simply offer to take them off the streets. A study of male child prostitutes in Thailand showed they were street children who had been recruited in this way. Their traffickers had encouraged them to smoke and use drugs, to increase their dependence.

Occasionally, cases of trafficking are one-off kidnaps, for the benefit of the trafficker.

## **ABDUCTION OF MARIA CHOZ**

In 1999 Jose Tecum kidnapped 19-year-old Maria Choz from her parents' home in Guatemala. She was trafficked, via Eloy, Arizona, to Tecum's house in Florida. Tecum then destroyed her identification cards and kept the girl under his control through violence, threats and debt blackmail.

Maria lived with Tecum and his wife for the next five months. Tecum told his wife that Maria was a relative who was staying as a domestic worker. During the day Maria was forced to pick tomatoes with other labourers, bringing her wages home to Tecum, and to do domestic chores around Tecum's house. At night she was often sexually assaulted by Tecum.

Eventually Tecum's wife discovered Tecum with Maria. The resulting fight led a neighbour to call the police, who visited the house and, in standard police practice for domestic disputes, returned the following day to interview the protagonists. The investigating officer filed the following report:

“Usually with domestic violence cases I do follow up home visits... So when I went the next day to visit Mrs. Tecum, as she opened the door I immediately noticed this female sitting by the window. She was dressed in her native clothes and she appeared very sad – a very sad female. So I immediately remembered what I had read in the report and I identified or saw that she was the same female that was talked about in the report. Then after I spoke with Mrs. Tecum she pointed at that point at Maria and said that it was all her fault – for sleeping with her husband. And so at that point I took Maria outside – Mrs. Tecum was kind of hesitant for me to talk to Maria, but then I told her I had to interview everyone. And I had talked to her [Mrs. Tecum] about, you know, how many kids she had, you know, the ages and things like that. So then I went outside and I was talking to

Maria and Maria starts crying. Then Maria was telling me that she felt like a slave, that she was working all the time and that she was not getting paid any money but that she owed – she couldn't leave because she owed Mr. Tecum 8,000 quetzal. And that she felt like a slave, she wanted to go back..."

The police were unsure what action to take. An officer was sent to the house to rescue Maria, but she was too scared to go with him. He referred the case to his superiors, who told him to arrange for the girl's deportation. But, as Maria had claimed she was only 15, the immigration authorities were reluctant to deal with her. So he telephoned the government Children and Family Services, who arranged for Maria to be collected and taken to a care home.

Further complications ensued, as the children's home soon established Maria's true age, and refused to house her any longer. The authorities wanted her to remain in the country while they prepared to prosecute Tecum, so she was placed in a secure shelter and given special temporary leave to remain in the US. Eventually Tecum, who had a previous criminal record of domestic violence and assault, was successfully convicted on charges of kidnapping, immigration violations, slavery, and conspiracy to manufacture false documents, and sentenced to nine years in prison.