

The Traffickers: gangs with cruel purpose

Human trafficking is perpetrated by a carefully organised group of people with specific roles. This ring has been likened to that of a business operation, where communication is tight and hierarchy is defined.

At the centre is somebody responsible for managing and organising the whole trafficking process. Other roles include recruitment, escorting and transporting, guiding and navigating, supporting and supplying of the basics like food and safe houses, debt collecting, and exploiting.

Even the smallest organised groups are likely to have somebody who is organising the smuggling, someone else paid as a recruiter, someone to escort the victims, and a seller who takes care of the exploitation and debt. Large criminal gangs are organised like large businesses.

SMALL CRIME RINGS

The investigations of most cases of human trafficking have revealed rather small loosely-associated groups of criminals, who are frequently related to one another. Typically there is a principal organiser, who uses contacts in different countries to arrange aspects of the trafficking. The traffickers may control the victim's eventual forced labour, or will simply sell the victim on, to brothel-keepers, for example. These traffickers are generally young (in their twenties or thirties) and have no previous criminal record.

They have rarely been found to be involved in crime other than that relating to human-trafficking – but there is controversy among analysts about how accurately such crime figures depict the true face of traffickers. It is not disputed though that many small-time traffickers who have neither the capital, contacts or logistical sophistication to arrange, for example, the more complex trafficking of arms or drugs, are able to undertake human trafficking successfully. Equally, without a doubt, a significant attraction of trafficking is the perception that it is a fairly low-risk crime, and is entered into by those who would be neither willing nor able to take the risks associated with other forms of serious crime.

These small crime rings make enormous profits, often selling their victims for thousands of pounds. Otherwise, they hold on to the women (in most cases) they traffic, paying them nothing or very little and forcing them into prostitution, indefinitely or until they pay off an ostensible debt for the cost of their journeys to the traffickers.

SMALL-TIME TRAFFICKERS IN LONDON

Roci and Ismailaj were two Albanians who were involved in trafficking prostitutes from Lithuania to the UK. They were both young (Roci was born in 1982 and Ismailaj in 1977) and neither had any previous convictions.

At least four women were trafficked by the pair between November 2003 and September 2004. The case, which is not atypical, illustrates the challenges for authorities in confronting trafficking.

The four women were recruited in Lithuania and agreed to come to England to work as prostitutes. They variously flew to Heathrow or arrived at Victoria after a long coach journey, and were met by Ismailaj, who had paid for their travel in some of the cases.

The first two women reached the UK in November 2003. Shortly after their arrivals, it became clear the conditions were nothing like what they had been led to expect. They had expected to be well-earning prostitutes, but Ismailaj and Roci had tricked them. When it became clear that their traffickers intended to retain three quarters of their earnings, the women tried to walk out. Ismailaj and Roci locked them in. The women were trapped.

Physically and psychologically vulnerable, they were forced to have sex with several men a day, five or six days a week. They were mistreated and threatened by their traffickers/pimps, who confiscated their passports and kept them under tight control, only occasionally allowing them out of the house in which they were held, for short trips to the shop. The Albanian pair insisted they have sex with drunken, abusive clients and forced them to work while menstruating. They women were deliberately kept disconnected from the outside world, driven by Roci to brothels in London and Birmingham. They were given a quarter of their earnings, Roci and Ismailaj shared the rest.

One of the women had two cousins, also prostitutes in Lithuania, who, she learnt from Ismailaj, he had lured into coming over as well. She was determined that they should not share her fate. On a brief trip alone from the house in which she was held to a nearby shop, she darted into an open phone booth and called the police. Desperately, with very limited English, she tried to explain her predicament to the police operator, but she couldn't say where she was – she didn't know – and made little headway. Fortunately for the woman, a passer-by happened to overhear her pleas, saw her evident distress, and intervened, and the police arrived and took her to a police station. With the aid of an interpreter, she made a statement, and an operation was launched to catch the traffickers.

The woman's two cousins were due to arrive in the country on the 29th of September 2004. The police began a surveillance operation and observed Ismailaj meeting the two girls. The sisters were alarmed when they arrived as they had received a telephone call during their journey saying that their cousin had run away, but when they met Ismailaj he assured them that she was simply working elsewhere.

Ismailaj dropped the sisters at a flat where two other prostitutes and an Albanian man were waiting for them, and Roci arrived shortly afterwards. The next day at around 5pm, Ismailaj turned up again, followed by Roci, who brought them food. Then a bald man arrived, and told the girls that he was now their boss, and that the girls had been sold to him. He wanted to separate the sisters, but they refused and an argument ensued. The surveillance of Roci and Ismailaj continued during the first days of October and both were seen driving women to various brothels.

On the 11th of October, Ismailaj was arrested. He was found in possession of three £20 notes that had been paid out in a brothel by an undercover officer. It was vital evidence linking him to the control of prostitutes. A subsequent search of his house led to the discovery of £4,315 cash, as well as banking documents showing large amounts of money being transferred to Lithuania and Albania, bogus employment references, work records of the prostitutes and correspondence showing that Roci, Ismailaj and a third man, Qata, rented a flat together. The police also discovered a gun and ammunition.

Roci was arrested on 29th October, carrying £400 cash. In Roci's home similar papers were found detailing large cash transfers and the work records of prostitutes.

The painstaking investigation by the police that followed indicated that Ismailaj had made £160,000 through the forced prostitution racket, Roci £87,000 and Qata £46,000. In the ensuing trial, the men pleaded guilty at the last moment to charges relating to trafficking and prostitution. Ismailaj was sentenced to 11 years in prison, Roci 4 years and Qata 18 months. All three men were recommended for deportation on completion of their sentences.

Traffickers inevitably become involved in other crimes related to the underlying trafficking activity, notably money laundering. This is used to conceal the fruits of their crimes. Traffickers, especially of prostitutes, routinely use drugs and alcohol to make their victims dependent on their captors. As in the case of Ismailaj, many traffickers carry illegal weapons.

LARGE CRIMINAL GANGS

At the other end of the scale, large, powerful criminal organisations also vie for a slice of the lucrative market in human trafficking.

Criminal gangs are usually formed along ethnic or national lines. Their origins may often be traced to a disadvantaged or impoverished group in society, who have few legal ways to sustain themselves.

In their nascent stages, gangs like the Afro-American or Hispanic street gangs in the USA are successful in recruiting members for an inter-related array of reasons, including, but not limited to, economic ones. The gangs can confer on individuals a sense of respect and belonging, providing them with a substitute family, as well as excitement and status. In the case of terrorist/guerrilla groups, there are also strong political and religious motivations. Such groups are less likely to traffic for monetary gain but many snatch people to bolster their combat ranks. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, for example, are notorious for their use of child soldiers in the frontline of their military campaign.

Unlike the small-scale traffickers, large criminal gangs that traffic humans are generally already involved with many other types of criminal activities. These may include drug production and trafficking, arms trafficking, extortion, insurance fraud, identity theft, production of counterfeit goods or money, video and DVD piracy, prostitution rackets, trading in human organs, murder, bribery etc.

Large gangs undertake operations similar to their smaller competitors but are more frequently involved in human trafficking for non-sexual forced labour, including begging.

The size, experience and power of large gangs give them many advantages. They have a greater operating capacity, and can undertake more complicated and expensive operations. Chinese gangs had established networks smuggling goods from China illegally before they became so heavily involved in people trafficking.

Large gangs use the same routes to traffic humans as contraband goods. So, a boat used to traffic women across the Taiwan Strait, between mainland China and Taiwan, was also found to be used in

drug smuggling. Likewise, Bedouin criminal rings in Israel have been contracted both to smuggle prostitutes from Russia and weapons into the country.

The Russian mafia has similarly put to use its experience money laundering and smuggling goods around Eastern Europe through bribery and threats to traffic people on a huge scale.

Large gangs can also control their victims more easily. Their reach means that they can make more realistic threats regarding re-capturing and punishment of victims if they escape, or of their families back home. For example, a woman smuggled from China to America by a large Chinese gang, was killed in New York because her family members in China did not keep up the repayments demanded for her passage.

RUSSIAN TRAFFICKERS – ENTREPRENEURIAL FREELANCERS OR THE MAFIA?

It is often hard for investigators who have found a trafficking victim to pinpoint whether the traffickers were freelance entrepreneurs or cogs in a larger criminal gang. Russian trafficking offers a prominent example of this problem. While the Russian mafia is thought to have a deep involvement in people trafficking, few individual prosecutions have been able to provide evidence of any links to large criminal organisations.

Russian organised crime gangs that are active today date back to the Brezhnev era, when they came into existence supplying black market luxuries as the Soviet economy stagnated. The organisations mushroomed in the power vacuum that followed the collapse of communism, providing huge wealth opportunities for the ex-military and KGB men who moved into their upper ranks, while widespread unemployment meant an abundant source for footsoldiers for what quickly became known as the Russian mafia. Organised crime in Russia is now integral to the country's political system and economy.

Russian groups of all scales, ranging from small-time entrepreneurs to large organised crime syndicates have been involved in cases of people trafficking, mainly of women for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The women are typically tricked into believing that they will get decent jobs and a better life, then they are forced into prostitution, their documents and passports taken, violence and threats used to coerce them, and they are made to work off huge ostensible debts to their captors. Usually the Russian criminals sell their victims to pimps as soon as possible, leaving the new owner to recoup his debt.

In Israel, where the authorities are trying to get to grips with the extensive trafficking of Russian women, most of those prosecuted have been men in their 40s, formerly of the Soviet Union, who have no previous record or convictions. There is little evidence demonstrating links with larger criminal organisations; nevertheless Israeli officials believe that Russian organised crime is responsible.

RUSSIAN PROSTITUTES IN ISRAEL

Seventeen-year-old Lyubov came from a Russian coal mining town. A man in her hometown told her that he could get her a plane ticket and a visa to work abroad. She arrived in Israel with a tour group and was met by a hotel owner, who was friendly to her. He showed her around, introduced her to

people and taught her some basic Hebrew. She worked in the hotel as a cleaner in exchange for a room. After a few weeks, the hotel owner told her to come with him for a drive, but wouldn't tell her where they were going. They stopped in a quiet road far from the hotel and waited. Another car drew up. The hotel owner told Lyubov to get into the other car, then drove away. The driver explained to Lyubov that she had been sold to him for \$9000 and henceforth she was to work for him as a call girl.

Lyubov was billeted with 8 other women in 2 apartments. All these girls were owned by the same man who owned Lyubov and all had been forced to work as prostitutes. They were never paid, and were instead ostensibly repaying their expenses ranging from their flight to Israel to their haircuts. Lyubov was transported under guard and made to have sex with about 6 men a day, for \$75 an hour, 7 days a week. The girls were kept in harsh conditions and there were days when they had nothing to eat. There was a police station across the road from Lyubov's apartment, she could see it from the window. But Lyubov never tried to attract the attention their attention; she was too scared, both of her captor, and of being arrested and deported. Eventually the police caught Lyubov and indeed deported her as an illegal worker.

CHINESE TRAFFICKERS TOLERATED FOR ECONOMIC GAIN THEY BRING?

In some cases, trafficking is very obviously the work of a large organised gang, as in Albania, China and Japan, where the Yakuza, the Japanese mafia, entice women from Thailand and the Philippines and force them to work in brothels.

The Chinese Triads have a long history, but became powerful in modern times as China relaxed the central control of the economy, and the Triads emerged to fill the gap. They are responsible for a wide spectrum of crimes in China and are alleged to have influence at high levels of governments. But the Triads are far more heavily involved in voluntary people-smuggling than trafficking, though they extort large fees. Their unfortunate customers are primarily males from poorer agricultural areas of China, and are taken to Western countries, especially the USA.

The Triads then are not major traffickers themselves, but, individually, some of their members are. The Chinese traffickers invest their profits in China's ever-growing economy. And those profits can be huge. French police investigating a Chinese trafficking gang estimated that it was banking profits of £500,000 a day. The gangs rely on the corruption of officials both in China and abroad.

These Chinese gangs are the primary traffickers of women and girls to the UK. They also traffick many people to Italy, Malaysia and within China itself. The victims are held prisoner and made to work off ostensible debts, through prostitution or other forced labour.

The authorities in South East Asian countries, like Japan and China, have been sluggish and ineffectual in taking measures against trafficking, even more so than in the West. It is still not perceived as an important issue.

Public and official sentiment towards the Chinese people-smugglers is ambivalent; there is great demand for their services, which result in wealth returning to China. They are widely viewed at worst as a necessary evil and people are reluctant to pay attention to their more unsavoury trafficking activities.

In this, China differs from Russia, which is underpopulated, and where trafficking has a negative economic effect.

UK CANNABIS FARM SLAVES

Many Vietnamese children have been trafficked into the UK to work cultivating cannabis for gangs. On average the police rescue one Vietnamese child every week in raids on cannabis farms. Once again the potential profits for the criminals are large. A three bedroom house converted into a cannabis farm can make a profit of £300,000 a year.

The children are trafficked to the UK by Chinese or Vietnamese criminal organisations. Here they are forced to tend the cannabis plants grown in converted suburban houses, and live in cramped conditions in lofts or cellars. The plants are kept under bright lights powered by makeshift electrical connections, which often put the children at great risk of electrocution. Occasionally, when the police raid the cannabis farms, these young children are convicted of drugs offences and jailed, the conditions of their forced labour overlooked by the authorities.

TUAN NGUYEN

Tuan Nguyen was abandoned by his parents in Vietnam and brought up by an old woman who he called 'grandmother'. When she died, Tuan had nowhere to live and was forced onto the street. As a street child, he was vulnerable to traffickers, and was abducted by criminals linked to the Chinese triads, and trafficked to England. He was made to work as a guard in a cannabis factory in Swinton, Manchester. He tended the plants and was brought food by his captors.

Police raided the farm in June 2007 and Tuan was put into care. At the time he was only 14. He subsequently went missing from care, and was thought to have been re-abducted by the gangs. He was found a month later at a property in Oxfordshire.

THE PRICE OF TRAFFICKING

Trafficked people are often forced into work which is dangerous, dirty or demeaning. Trafficking can have a hugely negative effect on its victims, damaging them physically and psychologically. Victims are at risk of beatings, permanent injuries, diseases (particularly sexually transmitted ones) and even death. Many of those rescued suffer long-term psychological trauma, drug addiction (deliberately-induced by their captors) and depression and may have great difficulty, especially if they were snatched as children, fitting back into society.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

In recent years, the issue of trafficking has attracted intense public interest and finally emerged on the international political agenda. This has led to the introduction of counter-trafficking measures, including the UN Protocol to Prevent Suppress and Punish the Trafficking in Persons in 2003, which provides an international framework to combat trafficking.

The European Union has also tried to harmonise the approach to trafficking of member states. European law distinguishes between less serious and more serious offences of trafficking. The latter include cases that have endangered life, subjected the victim to very inhumane or degrading experiences, or when the offence has been perpetrated by an EU-listed criminal organisation. EU guidelines set a minimum sentence of 8 years for serious trafficking offences.

The UK has tried to tackle trafficking by establishing, in 2004, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA), which regulates the sector where forced labour (other than prostitution) is most likely to occur. Gangmasters who supply labourers, in any industry, must now register with the GLA. It is illegal to employ workers supplied by an unlicensed gangmaster.

The length of prison sentences handed down to traffickers vary greatly in different places and circumstances. In the UK the maximum sentence for trafficking itself is 14 years, but longer sentences have been imposed when the crime is serious and other counts were involved. UK law also allows courts to make compensation orders against traffickers (although so far none have been imposed).

In other countries in Europe, penalties for trafficking are often less severe than in the UK. Italy overhauled its skeleton trafficking legislation in 2003, to give the courts more rein to crack down on traffickers. The offence now carries a sentence of between 8 and 20 years, with longer sentences imposed for cases involving trafficked children. Italian policy has now been formulated in consultation with anti-trafficking charities, and is governed by humanitarian ideas of protecting the victim and providing shelter and support.

Australia was one of the earliest countries to recognise the phenomenon of modern trafficking, and in 1999 a maximum sentence of 25 years was introduced for exercising any powers of right of ownership over a person.

The US Senate passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000. It increases the maximum penalty for slavery and involuntary servitude offences from 10 to 20 years, with life sentences possible for more serious cases, involving death, kidnapping or aggravated sexual abuse. The typical length of sentences for trafficking vary from state to state. California's TVPA guidelines on human trafficking for forced labour recommends sentences of 3 to 6 years, or 4 to 8 years in cases involving children.

Many countries are lagging far behind international efforts. Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and Venezuela, for example, have gravely inadequate legal frameworks for dealing with trafficking.