

BUILDING GENDER EQUALITY IN URBAN LIFE

PROTECTING THE VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Bianca Jagger

It's not often that one takes the time to think about what is really going on behind a typical high-street massage parlor, sauna or walk-up brothel in a typical town in Britain. The chances are that behind the one-way mirrors and smoked-glass partitions, at least one deeply traumatized and profoundly terrified young woman from eastern Europe, south-east Asia or west Africa is living a miserable life of sexual slavery.

Women such as "Stef", a 19-year-old Nigerian woman tricked by a trafficker into coming to the UK for an "education" after her parents died. Beaten and threatened, and told that her grandmother and son in Nigeria would be killed if she refused, Stef was forced to work as a prostitute to pay off a 40,000 British pounds (US\$70,000) "debt" incurred in bringing her to London.

Other women are regularly duped into believing that well-paid jobs in bars or hotels await them in rich cities such as Rome, Paris, or London. Desperately poor women and girls are typically stripped of their passports and other documents by their new "employers", and taken to secure flats and beaten and raped by their "owners" to "break them in". After that, it's a soul-destroying treadmill of dehumanizing servitude, providing sex for 20 to 30 men a day, according to the Metropolitan police.

The level of entrapment around these women and girls is profound. Scared and abused, without a passport or other documents, many lacking a good command of the language, and told by their traffickers that what they are doing is illegal and could lead to imprisonment, they are truly caught in a web. Even if they escape the imprisonment of their owners, the route home is often barred anyway, as traffickers will threaten to expose them to shame there or even threaten their lives or the lives of their families.

Three years ago, I went to India to support and learn about Sanlaap, an organization working in the red-light areas in and around Calcutta. Its work includes preventing the trafficking of children for sexual exploitation. At one of its shelter homes, called Sneha, I met 48 girls aged between 10 and 18 who had been rescued from enforced prostitution. An estimated 400,000 children are being trafficked and forced into prostitution for sexual exploitation in India. Typically, they suffer unspeakable levels of violence, cruelty and betrayal — they are beaten, burnt by cigarettes, repeatedly raped, and forced to endure sex without condoms. Many contract HIV/AIDS and die. A few are offered a lifeline.

Sneha, meaning affection, is exactly that lifeline. At the shelter, the girls receive healthcare and counseling. They are taught skills to equip them for work away from the violence and servitude of the city's brothels. I firmly believe that the Sneha project has something to teach the west, not least Britain, about dealing with the trafficking of women and children into prostitution, slavery and even death.

Britain needs to stop treating women forced into prostitution as criminals. They are automatically criminalized. They are seen as "illegal immigrants" first and victims of crime second, if at all. We need to start seeing them as deeply vulnerable victims of a global "trade" that is reckoned to earn the criminal underworld more revenue than any except drugs or arms. It is a vast money-spinner and the commodities are female bodies.

On one level, the UK government recognizes the problem. A few years ago, Home Office research estimated that 1,420 women were trafficked into the UK in 1998 in order to be forcibly prostituted. The expert consensus is that the scale has significantly increased since then. There are now certainly thousands of women and girls trapped in a horror-filled existence that the attorney general, Lord

Goldsmith, has said is the "worst kind of degradation". He calls it a "pernicious trade", and he is right. The cost is measured in human misery.

Bleak as the situation is, efforts are being made to fight the traffickers. As Calcutta has its Sneha program, London has the Poppy Project, a safe house for trafficked women. It was here that Stef was helped. Funded by the Home Office and with assistance from the Met, women are given specialist support to help them put their lives back together. But here is the catch. The project is the country's only dedicated safe house for trafficked women, but it has places for only 25 and is always full. And, shockingly, the UK has no dedicated shelter for girls rescued from trafficking.

So what happens to the vast majority of the women or girls who risk their lives to escape their captors or are found by the authorities? They are criminalized by a system that is almost as hostile to their needs as it is to the traffickers themselves. Currently, protection from reprisal or forced return to danger is conditional on women "cooperating" with the authorities against their traffickers. There is a strong chance that a woman will be pressured into criminal proceedings or treated as a criminal herself — branded an illegal immigrant and sent back to her country of origin.

Let's be clear on the facts: it is a criminal offence to traffic women and girls into the UK for prostitution. Earlier this year, for example, a court in Yorkshire convicted three men for trafficking and selling a teenage girl from Lithuania. The men, jailed for a total of 40 years, stole the girl's passport on her arrival at Heathrow and trapped her in the sordid underworld of Britain's sex industry. She was raped, bought and sold repeatedly, forced to work as a prostitute in Birmingham and Sheffield and, in the words of the trial judge, generally treated like a modern-day slave. And an Albanian group of men went on trial at Southwark crown court this week for trafficking women for sexual exploitation.

But the problem is not just one of punishing the traffickers; it is a matter of protecting the victims. In May, a new European treaty established fresh guidelines for this. The European Convention Against Trafficking, the world's first international law specifically for protecting trafficked people's rights, puts victims first. It guarantees that trafficked people should receive a breathing period ("reflection period") of at least 30 days, during which they can receive support to aid their recovery, including safe housing and emergency medical support. And it specifies that women such as Stef should get temporary residence permits if they would be in danger on return to their homes, or if it is necessary to assist criminal proceedings, or both.

Organizations such as Amnesty International are backing the convention and calling on the UK to sign up to it, but the government is stalling. Why, when Home Office minister Paul Goggins has said that the government "fully supports" the aims of the convention? Could it be that the government is afraid of criticism from anti-immigration lobbyists that the convention extends rights to women and girls who could fabricate a story of sexual slavery to gain access to the country? You could be forgiven for thinking that protecting some of the world's most terrorized and vulnerable people ought to cancel out these peripheral concerns.

And it is actually in the interests of the authorities as well. A reflection period would help the authorities to secure prosecutions against traffickers. This is the case in Italy, where reflection periods have helped to secure 3,000 prosecutions involving 8,000 traffickers in a four-year period. And rather than the UK's single shelter, Italy has 200.

The government's attitude is unforgivable when you remember where the demand for trafficked women and girls is coming from. Prostitute-user sites reveal that there is a strong appetite for foreign women from men who pay for sex in Britain. The sites tell a story the government apparently doesn't want to hear: home-grown demand for foreign women and girls, no questions asked. Plenty of information on prices and customer satisfaction, nothing on whether "Natasha ... about 18 years, from Russia" may have been brutally inducted into her "willing" posture.

It is time for the government to sign up to the new convention, commission new research into the scale of trafficking into the UK and ensure once and for all that local authorities stop turning a blind eye to what goes on behind the doors of the "saunas" they license.

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