

SEX TRAFFIC

THE HIDDEN SLAVE TRADE

Each year, a reported 1420 women are trafficked into Britain from Eastern Europe and Africa to work as sex slaves. Raped, beaten and forced to have sex day and night, the grim reality is happening on our doorsteps

FEATURE Louise Hall PHOTOGRAPHS Nikki Crisp/Getty Images/John Ferguson: The Mirror/Corbis

was his property. He said, that by buying me, he had the right to beat, rape and starve me, and force me to have sex with his clients.' Mia*, 19, was trafficked into the United Kingdom from Thailand 13 months ago. 'I was told my flight and accommodation would be paid for, and that I'd get a job as a waitress in a hotel when I arrived, but when I got there, he took me to his flat and told me I had to repay the costs for getting me here. He said I owed him £20,000 and that if I didn't work as a prostitute, my family back home would suffer.'

'I was locked up and kept in darkness, unable to see the men who entered the room to have sex with me. Sometimes I was forced to have sex 20 or 30 times a day, every day.' Mia endured a terrifying year of abuse, even being held at gunpoint to make her comply.

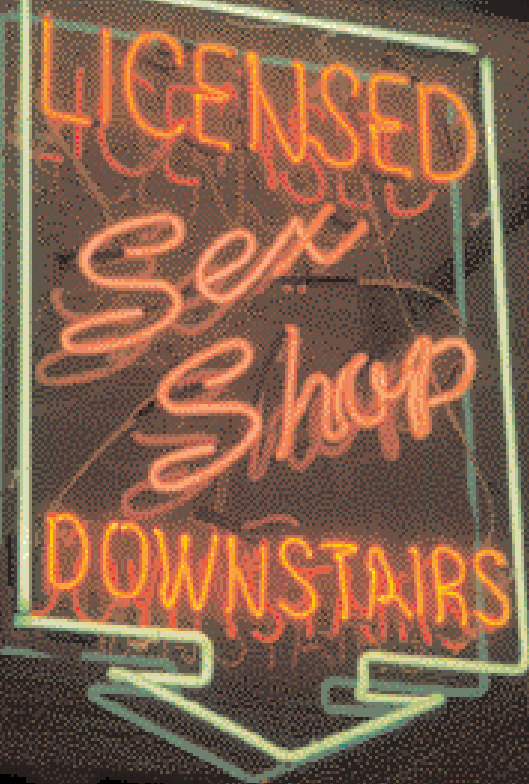
Having been trafficked into the United Kingdom for sexual exploitation, Mia was one of the lucky few to be picked up by police and introduced to the POPPY Project – a Home Office-funded initiative to help women escape enforced prostitution, and provide accommodation and support to vulnerable, trafficked women. Mia was allocated one of only 25 available places – there's currently a waiting list of almost double this number. Many women desperately need help, fast, because even if they do manage to escape their captors, unless they are given

sanctuary immediately, they will almost certainly be picked up again by their pimps and re-trafficked.

Mia has been in safe-housing for four months. Thanks to the POPPY Project, she's been given counselling, translators, English lessons and help finding work. Slowly, she's rebuilding her life. After a long struggle, her asylum bid was successful and she has been relocated to a different part of London. She lives in constant fear of being found and punished by her pimps.

Mia's story is typical. These women and girls are lured overseas with promises of paid work, high wages, and an escape from poverty and dire situations at home. Once duped, they may be transported abroad, stripped of their documents, isolated, and blackmailed into prostitution. With nobody to trust and nowhere to turn, they face a future of fear: of beatings, rape, sexually transmitted disease, arrest and retribution against their families.

'This is an illegal trade that works by deception,' explains David Bull, chief executive of UNICEF UK. 'The traffickers behind it are everyone from petty criminals to organised criminal gangs. They identify vulnerable people, who may be as young as 13, but are more likely to be 16 or 17 – children who might have grown-up in orphanages, be unemployed, single mothers, poorly educated or impoverished. Someone approaches them, says they could have >



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a great job in Europe, and these people don't understand what will happen to them. It's widely recognised that the real number of people trafficked certainly seems to be in the thousands.'

The United Nations' Children's Fund (UNICEF) UK, which focuses on child trafficking, is campaigning to approach the problem at the source, through education in schools and communities, by offering vocational training in the tourism industry, and working with police, social services and other authorities, to make people aware of the problems they may face abroad. The organisation is also lobbying to ensure that the new European Convention Against Trafficking, which provides an opportunity to establish minimum standards for support to trafficked people, guarantees adequate protection to women and children across Europe.

'It's time for countries to stop treating trafficking as a form of "illegal immigration" and see it as a particularly vicious form of human rights abuse,' says Kate Allen, director of Amnesty International UK. She explains that a lot of these women are warned-off turning to the authorities because they're living in the country illegally. 'We need to realise that the women involved aren't

criminals, but the victims of human rights abuse.'

THE BLACKEST OF MARKETS

Globally, this modern-day slave trade is a three-and-a-half-billion-pound industry. The trafficking of women is the third largest 'black market' income-earner after drug trafficking and the arms trade. It's a hugely profitable, organised, international business, where girls and women are bought and sold as commodities.

The United Kingdom is widely regarded as an 'end destination' of trafficking, which takes place across 157 countries. Typical places of origin include Romania, Thailand, Moldova, Albania, Nigeria, Kenya and South Korea. In Romania, a young girl might be bought for sex trafficking for anything between £30 and £120. When they get to their final destination, the selling figure can be as much as 10 times this amount.

Apart from money-making, the sex-slave trade is fed by vulnerable girls at source and a growing demand at the final destination. As UNICEF UK's David Bull says: 'We're seeing a horrifying amount of trafficking into London. We need to recognise that it's men in the UK who are creating the demand. If British men weren't interested in paying for these young women, there wouldn't be the trade.'

'Women's bodies are being bought and sold, and the UK sex industry is alive and growing,' agrees POPPY Project consultant Julie Bindel. 'There's big money involved and very little deterrent.' Julie warns that we need to stop looking at individual cases and start recognising the bigger picture – 'that human rights abuse is happening on our soil.'

Julie works directly with the trafficked women and is under no delusion as to how brutally these women are treated. 'I've seen women who have been raped, anally and frontally, beaten-up and burnt with cigarettes,' she says. However, it's the psychological effects that are the worst and the longest-lasting. 'The damage to the women is akin to torture victims, and we have to recognise that,' Julie continues. 'The damage is even worse to women who are re-trafficked.'

It's common practice that the traffickers know the names and addresses of the girls' relatives. 'A problem that a lot of these women share is that if a woman escapes her captor, the traffickers turn up at her family's house,' explains POPPY senior support worker Anna Johansson.

Last year, POPPY produced a shocking report, 'Sex in the City: Mapping Commercial Sex Across London'. ➤

I WAS BETRAYED

Single mother Aiwa*, 19, from Lagos, Nigeria, was held captive in a London flat for a year, having been lured here with promises of a better life. She was sold by her late mother's friend – whom she called 'Auntie'

My parents died when I was young. Following their deaths, a friend of my mother said she would help me get an education in Britain, but when I got there, things changed. She totally changed.

She simply told me, 'You're not going to college'. It was a total shock to me. There was nothing I could do. I had no money. I just cried and cried. She said I had to pay her £40,000 for bringing me to the UK, so I asked her, 'How can I get the money to pay you? I'm not working. I don't even know how to get the money.'

She said she knew a way of getting the money, so she taught me how to make money, prostitution. She insisted that was what I was going to do to get her the money I owed her. I couldn't go back home because I didn't have any money. My mother's 'friend' also told me that my passport was illegal and said that if I went to the authorities, they would imprison me for possessing it. I just cried and cried and was very frightened.

I felt so terrible and disgraced. Prostitution's not a good thing to do at all because you come across so many people, so many different types of bodies. I really hated it. I felt in danger – even with condoms I was afraid of AIDS and other diseases. The sweat would come out of their bodies and it was dirty sweat. For many months, my life was like this. It was really disgusting.

'Auntie' kept telling me that if I didn't work to pay her the money she would kill my grandmother and son. She hit me every day, and each day things got worse. I knew I had to run away, but how could I? I was a prisoner. I expected to die.

I managed to escape from her but had nowhere to go. A man said he would help me and let me stay the night at his place. I was sleeping in his living room when he tried to rape me. I hit him and ran away with my bag, but he had stolen £200 – the only money I had.

I resorted to begging on the street – so many people just passed me by, not realising how desperate I was and what I had been through. One woman stopped and gave me £1, but she later came back and gave me some more money. She sat with me and I told her everything. She took me back to her house and I started living with her. After some time I told her I needed to work, but she said I didn't have the right papers, so I couldn't.

Like me, she was a prostitute and was working in her flat, so I went out to other places to work. That was when the police and immigration service found me and I was arrested. I was one of the lucky ones and was taken to a safe-house.

Now I want to speak out about what happened to me so people will know what the risks are. So many women are facing the same thing, with no-one to help them. Trafficking doesn't just happen to eastern Europeans. It's happening to western girls and it's happening in Africa. There are so many women and girls out there who need help.



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SEX SLAVES IN THE SUBURBS

Last year, Sherry*, who has a two-year-old son, was trafficked from Thailand and imprisoned as a sex slave in a flat in Essex. She told her terrifying story to POPPY's Anna Johansson

Sherry was working as a secretary in Thailand and was struggling to support her son, when she was approached and offered a job in London, working as a nanny for a family. She was given a contract by an agency, which she signed.

All her flight details were arranged for her by the agency. She had to hand over her passport to get her visa and was told she had a six-month working visa. When Sherry arrived in England, it turned out she hadn't got anything of the sort. She was told she could pay them back once she started working in London. Sherry's passport was taken away from her.

“ON HER ARRIVAL, SHE WAS TOLD THERE WAS NO JOB AND THAT SHE WOULD HAVE TO SELL HER BODY”

On her arrival, she was told there was no job and that she would have to sell her body. She was taken to a flat, raped and beaten repeatedly. They hit her with their fists and sometimes a bottle. They told her that if she didn't work, her baby would be hurt; she felt she had no choice. Terrified and alone, she didn't know what to do.

Sherry didn't stay at the flat for long – about two months. There were plenty of other girls in the flat, who had been there longer. One girl was stabbed with a knife. Expected to work all through the day and in the evening, Sherry saw 10 to 15 people a day. One evening, she jumped out of the window and was taken to the police by a kindly woman.

After being tipped-off, the police raided the flat. They picked up three Thai girls and arrested one of their pimps. The case went to court. The middle-aged man, who had previously lost his job, would drive the women to and from appointments, keeping them locked up in his flat, and advertising them in local papers as escorts or a massage service. He was jailed for eight years for running a prostitution business from his flat, although it was acknowledged that he was only 'a very small cog' in the international organisation.



ROBBIE SPEAKS OUT

In July 2003, Robbie Williams presented a gritty three-minute film – *More Precious Than Gold* – in which he highlighted the horrors of child trafficking as part of UNICEF UK's End Child Exploitation campaign.



'Every year, over a million children are trafficked, transported across borders and exploited on their arrival,' he said. 'UNICEF wants to end child exploitation and is tackling the problem at source, but we need your help. I sincerely hope that you join UNICEF's campaign to end child exploitation.'

■ Visit www.endchildexploitation.org.uk

The result of a six-month investigation, it's the first research to provide a snapshot of off-street prostitution across all London boroughs. The report showed that women tend to be trafficked into 'off-street' prostitution – flats, massage parlours, saunas and other businesses that advertise personal services in local papers or have been recommended on websites and Internet guides.

While POPPY provides invaluable insight and support, it's not without limitations. 'The only women to be accepted by the Project must have been in prostitution within the last 30 days of being taken in, so it's good, but limited,' says Sandra Dickson, POPPY's Counter-Trafficking Development Officer. Likewise, any women who have been trafficked for any other form of exploitation, such as domestic, agricultural labour or illegal adoption, cannot access the Project and have no means of support. Trafficked children are also exempt

from the Project. 'We have no safe-house for children nor for any girl destined to work in prostitution. It's of great importance that provision is made for the special needs of these girls and more provision is made for women,' says Sarah Green, a spokeswoman for Amnesty International. 'They need 24-hour attention, counselling and treatment. It's very, very important that this level of care is provided in safe-houses.'

Annually, the Government allocates up to £150,000 to POPPY – funds that will support only one or two per cent of young women trafficked into the United Kingdom each year. 'The women who meet the criteria, but have been turned away because of lack of room will have no means of support and assistance,' says Sandra Dickson.

POPPY is lobbying hard to increase the allowance, which is due for review in March. Along with Amnesty International and UNICEF UK, it's also calling on the



Government for a tougher legal stance on people who allow the prostitution of these girls. They fear that the United Kingdom's fight against trafficking is being hampered by a Government agenda focused on forcing down the number of successful asylum claims. 'We need to recognise that people who run saunas and massage parlours are providing the infrastructure for sex-trafficking to happen,' says POPPY consultant Julie Bindel. 'The Government needs to be very robust about criminalising the men, by this we also mean the organisers and middle-men, and decriminalising the women.' Amnesty International campaigns director Stephen Bowen agrees: 'The trafficking industry brutalises women and girls and destroys lives all over Europe on a daily basis. We must turn the system around so that they are recognised as the victims and not the perpetrators of crime.'

* Names have been changed

USEFUL CONTACTS

■ **Amnesty International** is a worldwide organisation campaigning for human rights. www.amnesty.org.uk

■ **UNICEF** works specifically for children, running emergency relief and development programmes for areas such as health and child protection. Call 020 7405 5592. www.unicef.org.uk

■ **The POPPY Project** aims to help trafficked women escape prostitution and also provides accommodation and support to victims of sex trafficking. Call the 24-hour hotline on 020 7840 7129. www.poppo.yk.com

■ **Anti-slavery International** is a human rights organisation working against slavery and related human rights abuses. Call 020 7501 8920. www.antislavery.org