

# 1 The characteristics of traffic

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'My brother had warned me against traffickers in women. I never imagined that I myself was going to have to deal with them. I had heard about women who were sold to Japan, but I didn't realize it also happened in Europe.' Before Fatima, who comes from Indonesia, became a victim of the traffic in women and found herself in the Netherlands she had considered trafficking to be a marginal phenomenon, as most people do.

The idea of trafficking in women is associated in many people's minds with the 'white slave trade', with European girls being kidnapped and taken to harems in the Middle East. In the 1960s and 1970s the stories were numerous. Paris and Brussels were considered dangerous places for young girls: they would be lured into expensive shops, from where they would be whisked through a trapdoor in the floor into the cellars and never seen again. Or an elderly woman would ask girls to help her up the stairs, only to lock them up. Not unnaturally these reports were treated with scepticism. It comes as a shock therefore to realize that traffic in women for prostitution by professional criminal gangs is happening here and now.

Women are trafficked not only to Europe but worldwide, not only from south to north, but from Latin America to southern Europe and the Middle East, from south-east Asia to the Middle East and central and northern Europe, from South America to North America and Europe, and from eastern Europe to western Europe. To traffic women means to work upon their desire or need to migrate, by bringing them into prostitution under conditions that make them totally dependent on their recruiters in ways which also impair their rights. It exists where poverty has forced women to seek different methods of survival for themselves and their families. And it takes different forms for the women involved, not only prostitution but also domestic slavery or mail-order marriage.

with whom the women get involved have to buy their release. One punter had to buy a second victim at half price. In one criminal case the suspects were charged with the offence of slave trading, but the case was dismissed.

The idea that traffic in women is a matter of sexual violence has also been abandoned, although forced prostitution is still considered to be sexual violence because women don't have sexual autonomy. However, even when women don't object to working as prostitutes they may be victims of economic exploitation. Sexual violence may be involved because some women have been raped or forced to work without a condom.

Since violation of physical or sexual autonomy is involved, traffic in women is also a human rights issue. It violates articles 4, 5 and 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Trafficked women don't have freedom of movement or freedom of speech and in some cases are forced to migrate, for example when they are abducted.

Transporting women is a reflection of the role migration and organized crime play in trafficking. Most modern traffickers have developed their criminal activities from current major political issues: the tension between the desire of the Third and Second World peoples to migrate to the First World and the restrictions western countries place on immigration. Traffickers exploit the political void at the heart of migration issues.

The crime of trafficking arises from political expediency.<sup>4</sup> Criminals take advantage of the fact that politicians don't deal effectively with controversial problems. This political dimension is absent in 'ordinary' serious crime. Criminality arising out of political expediency presupposes a flexibility that is only feasible in organized groups. Traffickers need to make contacts with the legitimate world. They do so, for instance, by replacing a failing administration in the women's home countries with their own systems for forging documents. Trafficking women is labour intensive. The women have to be brought to the target country, distributed, watched over and housed by the traffickers, who can't operate without contacts in the women's home countries. The gangs use other methods characteristic of organized crime: they work with corrupt authorities, launder money, have contacts in both legitimate areas and the underworld and form a hierarchy in which there is a division of labour. Only small-scale trafficking, for instance trafficking for marriage, cannot be described as organized crime. Among their other activities, most organized crime

groups – the Italian and Russian mafia, the Japanese yakuza and Chinese triads – all traffic in women.

Recruiting with a false promise of marriage is the oldest trick in the book. Another classic trick is to promise a job through personal contacts. Other methods include abduction, or promises of a holiday, a student grant, political asylum or a visa based on a phoney job offer from a company. Leen Pieterse of the Criminal Intelligence Unit in the Netherlands said, 'We are alerted when one company invites a few hundred Russian girls to work with them as secretaries.' Brazilian and eastern European women especially are led to believe they can combine a holiday with a job. Large-scale recruitment is done by agencies which promise women jobs or a career as an entertainer. Some women really believe they are going to be trained as ballet dancers. In one case the traffickers followed an eastern European ballet company which was touring Europe, went to the performances and kidnapped one of the most beautiful dancers.

The number of abductions is increasing. Before 1991 there were none, but since then six cases were recorded in 1994.<sup>5</sup> Leen Pieterse said, 'Sometimes these girls are offered drinks laced with drugs and they are then raped in a hotel room. Pictures are taken to blackmail them with afterwards. Maybe these men don't intend initially to force the woman into prostitution, but she has to be disposed of and they aren't kill her. The easiest way out is to make her disappear into the underworld of prostitution. It is also possible that a girl has slept with a guy and he has paid for her drinks; she felt sorry afterwards and didn't dare to go back home to her parents.'

All nationalities, black and white, men and women, Bosnians and Serbs, eastern and western Europeans, work together to traffic women. Traffickers are all ages and come from all professions. Some are better educated than the police – one suspect, for example, had graduated in theology – others are virtually illiterate. He or she may be a player in a national football team (which has happened), a grandmother, a small-time criminal or a well-dressed manager. It is difficult to talk to suspected traffickers because the nature of their profession makes them hard to track down. The one person suspected of trafficking whom I managed to interview talked a lot without saying much.

The women they have trafficked could provide first-hand information about them. The victims of small-scale gangs in particular could give the details of their daily, usually violent, contact with

the traffickers. In general the women who have escaped from large-scale traffickers had little to do with the big bosses, but had more contact with their staff. However, something about the motives of the traffickers, their frame of mind and their personalities can be gleaned from trials where they have had to defend themselves, though it should be remembered that in the court room they are in a strange environment.

One sex-club owner who was accused of trafficking women wouldn't even admit that he was involved in the sex industry. He said that he provided a social service. The judge was not convinced. Some other traffickers presented their activities as development aid, saying they only wanted to help the women. The excuses traffickers find are usually very lame: one Yugoslavian suspect said at his trial that the women were conspiring against him because they wanted another pimp. Another could not believe that he had done anything wrong. 'Why do my girls always go to the police?' he asked. He was convicted.

Thousands of documented cases of traffic in women in Europe now exist. Since 1992, however, there has been an increase in the traffic of eastern and central European women in the Netherlands. For example, in 1993, 75 per cent of STV's clients came from eastern European countries, which increased to 80 per cent in 1994. For the English edition of this book, which has been revised and extended, I talked to some of these eastern European women. Through STV's contacts abroad I was also able to speak to some victims and informants in Belgium and Britain. Most of the women interviewed in the Netherlands were clients of STV. Kalayaan (Freedom), an organization of migrant Philippine women, also introduced me to women who were traded as mail-order brides and domestic workers.

In Germany the traffic in mail-order brides and domestic workers is well established; in the Netherlands and other European countries, however, it is a relatively new phenomenon. Because household labour is not formalized, organizations have been able to abuse women's rights and trade in them as domestic helpers. Mail-order brides are expected to work as unpaid domestic helpers and to deliver sexual services for free. Both these areas are defined as trafficking in women because they exploit women in the areas in which they work traditionally but which are not recognized, let alone formalized, as labour.

Although the trafficking in males and children is outside the scope of this book, it should not be thought that it is only women

who are trafficked. Recently a ring trafficking Czech boys was discovered. Brazilian transvestites are also trafficked. Trafficked men have the same rights in the Netherlands as female victims, but as yet there are no shelters for them. A social worker in Rotterdam, Door Malkus, who works with male as well as female prostitutes, said to me, 'Traffic in boys may occur in large numbers. And in children too for that matter.' However, most traffic in children takes place for the illegal adoption market. Occasionally the papers report traffic in boys from eastern European orphanages, usually for paedophiles or for men and women who hope that sex with minors will decrease the risk of contracting AIDS. There is also a market for child pornography, which people who are so minded can easily make in their own homes with camcorders. Millions of children are supposed to be abused worldwide. Unfortunately stories of child trafficking are usually sensationalized. Reports of satanic child abuse, that is to say unverified accounts of children being abused by rings of satanists in isolated houses in the countryside, do much harm. They distract public attention from the many real victims of child trafficking.<sup>6</sup>