

6 Colombian gangs: they see everything

'It was a scandal. You should have seen me, lying there delivering my baby without help. I had cut the umbilical cord by myself. Then the police arrived and took me and my baby to the hospital.' Maria from Colombia was still upset when she recalled the birth of her baby several years later.

It all started because Maria badly needed a steady job. 'In Colombia I met a girl at a party, who knew a very rich woman. My friend invited me to go with her to this woman's house. I was curious, so I went along. The lady lived in a big house and of course I wanted to know how she had paid for it. She told me she had earned it all as a babysitter abroad. I said I wished I could go to Europe. To my surprise she assured me that it could easily be arranged. A friend of hers would send me a ticket as soon as I had saved enough money to pay the expenses.'

It took Maria a year to save the necessary amount for the broker, a woman who had left for Greece in the meantime. Every now and then the broker would write to Maria to keep her informed. At last Maria heard from Greece that a Dutchman wanted her as a domestic worker. The broker promised to take care of everything from Greece. After a few weeks Maria received her ticket. 'My mother implored me not to go. She thought it was all so dubious. But I turned a deaf ear because I had gone to so much trouble already. Besides, I had nothing at all in Colombia.' Maria did not know that she could not get a normal job on the tourist visa she had been given. She arrived at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam in good spirits. She began to realize that something was wrong when the immigration officers asked her to show them that she had the necessary money for her stay. When she couldn't she was immediately sent to the airport police.

Nowadays traffickers avoid this problem by lending the women so-called showmoney, which has to be returned as soon as they have passed through immigration control. Maria, however, only had an air ticket and the telephone number of her future employer. In the office of the airport police a further surprise was in store. 'There were more Colombian women with a note with my employer's telephone number scribbled on it. I had seen these women on the plane, but I hadn't talked to them. At last the police let me call my future boss. A Dutchman answered the phone and wanted to speak to all of us. "Stay there tonight. Tomorrow you will all be picked up," he told us.'

The next day the employer arrived and paid £900 guarantee for Maria. The man, who was a complete stranger to her, told the police bluntly that he had lived with her in Colombia. Apparently he had lived there years before and spoke the language. Later the other 'Colombianas' were picked up by different men.

It was some weeks before Maria learned their fate. 'I met one of them in the sex club where I had to make money for him. The guys who came to meet them were probably associates of my so-called employer. I don't really know; at the time I had other things on my mind.' They might also have been in touch with the woman in Greece who had procured Maria for her employer. There were other Colombian women who lived with him. On the very first day the man confiscated her passport and told her that she would only get it back when she had paid him back the guarantee. Maria began to doubt his intentions, but thought he must return her passport. She only had to brace herself for a few months of hard work.

On the very first night he forced Maria to sleep with him. 'Of course I didn't have the pill with me since I never expected to have intercourse. Next he told me he wanted to live with me. I said, "What the hell do you mean? I don't even know you. I came here as a cleaning lady and nothing else." "No señora, tomorrow you are going to work in a bar," he said.' By now Maria knew that she was trapped.

The bar the Dutchman sent Maria to was a sex club where several Colombian women worked, including some of the women who lived in Maria's employer's house. She felt them watching her. Maria said later, 'What could I do? I had no money and no passport. Besides, I was afraid of this man.'

After a few months Maria realized to her dismay that she was becoming heavier and heavier. 'I was hardly up to my work, but

I didn't want to admit that I had become pregnant as a result of the rape. But the other girls noticed my physical changes and warned me, "You look like you could do with a doctor." That started me thinking.'

Maria had no health insurance and could not pay for the doctor herself. She still had to give all the money she earned to the Dutchman. 'I was afraid he might kill me if he found out that because of my pregnancy I couldn't work any longer. Then I heard that you could rent a prostitution window in The Hague with no questions asked about papers and legal status. My tourist visa had expired long since, so I went to The Hague secretly. I didn't want the other Colombians who worked in the club to know where I was going. I thought they were all in league with my employer. Going to The Hague was a big step, since he had taken not just my money but my clothes as well, to stop me running away.

'I managed to get a room where I could hide. I took enough customers to be able to pay the rent. I had to, because under no circumstances did I want to go back to that man. I slept in the room where I worked and never went out on the streets. Once in a while the other girls would bring me some food. They thought I was crazy. They tried to be friends with me, but I turned my back on them because I was afraid they might contact the man to tell him where I was.

'In The Hague I still didn't dare see a doctor. Yet I wanted to because I was afraid working with clients might hurt my baby. Then I caught an infection which made me very ill. I was afraid to go to hospital since I could not pay the bill and I thought they would throw me in jail. I decided to deliver the baby all by myself. In the meantime I tried to distract my mind by reading the magazines the other girls gave me. I was afraid too much worrying would harm the baby.'

Maria managed to satisfy most of her customers by giving them massage, but in her seventh month she had a client who wanted more. When Maria refused he became so angry that he kicked her in the belly. At that moment contractions started. The customer bolted out of the room because he didn't want any trouble. A passing colleague saw that Maria was in labour and couldn't believe her eyes. Maria said, 'Though I begged her not to, she went out to call the police. She didn't want to leave me like that. The police came to take me to the hospital. I felt ashamed because I had nothing, no nightgown, no baby clothes, nothing. Several people came to my bedside, but I refused to speak to anyone.

Everybody was quite nice and helpful but I was terrible,' she said, still embarrassed after all these years. 'But now everything has changed.'

Indeed it has. The child is healthy and well. Maria is married to a Dutchman and now really works as a cleaner. After her baby was born she went to the police, but there was insufficient evidence to convict the man who trapped her. The police did nothing about the woman in Greece. Not until a few years later were they alerted to the 'Greek connection' (see chapter 8).

Manuel

Marcia was one of many Colombian prostitutes working in Europe. In Colombia she was a so-called *prostituta reservada* with a choice of customers, especially tourists. These women are relatively independent and work without pimps.¹ Then Marcia met a man we will call 'Manuel', who cajoled her into leaving the country with him. Later she and four women from the Dominican Republic found themselves in the Netherlands being exploited in Dutch prostitution.

Marcia told me, 'In Colombia there are no pimps as there are here. Only my family lived off my money. Prostitution in Colombia is much better than here: there is a doctor, you are paid during holidays and you are tipped well when you drink with customers or wait on their tables. I am so sorry I left all that behind for just an illusion.'

Marcia had met Manuel in a discothèque in Bogotá. As he had with his other victims, he promised to marry her, which Marcia thought would give her the opportunity to make a fortune in Dutch prostitution. He took her to Belgium, where at the time visa regulations for Colombians were less strict than in the Netherlands. From there she was taken to the Netherlands, where, much to her surprise, she became an illegal immigrant. She said, 'That was not agreed on. He said he would give me money to buy myself a forged passport in Spain. I said no, I didn't want to work to pay for plastic surgery to get my face adjusted to the one on the passport. You can change my name but not my face. When he told me I had to hand him all my money, I didn't understand what he meant. He can't do that, I thought.'

At the house of the customer with whom Marcia was living when I met her, I also talked to Ana, her partner in misfortune. The two

women had become close friends when they had to work in the same brothel for Manuel. While Marcia did Ana's hair, they both spoke at the tops of their voices about the reign of terror Manuel had exercised over them. For instance, he told them they would be killed if they got too fat: they were so afraid that they hardly ate at all. There was no time to take a rest, and Ana was locked up and beaten several times. She didn't even know what city she was working in. 'You know, it was in the town where there was a tobacconist,' she said helpfully. At intervals the women forgot their hairdressing activities to act out their conversations with Manuel and his many accomplices.

In the meantime Marcia took pictures of Ana and me. Like many other amateur photographers she could not get our heads in focus. 'Never mind, that way Manuel can't recognize you,' she said to laugh away her fear. Both women were terrified that Manuel might appear on their doorstep. A few months before he had smashed up the shop of the man who had rescued Marcia.

Manuel had a reputation for extreme violence. Marcia told me, 'He had married an Argentinian woman in Germany. We heard he had maltreated her and had set her house on fire. She went missing, but to ward off suspicion he kept on sending money to her family. Rumour has it that he killed her.' The body of a dark woman was found around that time in Germany, but she was so badly burned that she could not be identified. Marcia and Ana have always been convinced the dead woman was Manuel's Argentinian first wife.

Ana had met Manuel in much the same way as Marcia. She remembered vividly her first meeting with him. 'He came to a rendezvous house for women who were looking for a husband. I was divorced and wanted to start a new life. I fell for him instantly. He even introduced himself to my parents as their future son-in-law. Later on I realized that he only did this to find out my parents' address so he could threaten them.' The marriage between Ana and Manuel was supposed to take place in Europe, but never happened because shortly after they arrived Ana discovered he was already married. This was a big shock to her because she really was in love with him. Much to her distress, her beloved threatened to kill her if she did not start working as a prostitute straight away. The couple went to Italy, where Ana had a bad time living in brothels. Next Manuel and she went to Spain, where she made a fruitless attempt to escape with a client. An associate of Manuel's, Julio, tracked down the customer and

intimidated him. Ana was returned to Manuel, who gave Julio the task of guarding her.

Julio, Manuel and Ana went to the Netherlands, where she soon discovered that Manuel had several former fiancées working for him. She also found out that Manuel had a number of associates. Julio, whom she knew already, had to guard the women. He was helped by a bankrobber, who was ordered to marry one of the victims to keep her in the Netherlands. This man was considered very dangerous. There was also a madam in Utrecht, who employed the women and married off her own son to a victim in a bogus marriage. One of the gang members posed as a lawyer and collected the money from the women. He was at home in Colombian criminal circles and advised other traffickers. In the Italian mafia he would have been called a *consigliere*, an adviser. Ana said, 'All these scumbags knew each other. They said, even if you don't know us, we know everything about you. We keep an eye on you, even if you don't see us.'

Manuel had his own special ways of inspiring fear. One of Ana and Marcia's fellow victims had reported him to the police, but unfortunately one statement was insufficient to keep him in jail. He took this particular woman to a solicitor to make her retract her statement, but the solicitor refused to have anything to do with it. Manuel was furious. He took it out on the woman by putting her in the charge of a female Colombian killer, who sat by her all day, knife in hand.

For the women every escape route was blocked. Ana especially was threatened. Manuel put a flick knife to her throat several times and on one occasion killed her pet.

One day Marcia escaped with a client. She phoned Ana at work: 'Surprise, surprise, I escaped. Are you coming to congratulate me?' Ana didn't dare because Manuel would kill not only her but her family as well if she tried to run away. She didn't even dare to telephone for help. When Manuel heard Marcia had got away, he was so angry that he beat Ana up even more frequently than before. He also threatened to hurt her children. After a few months she could take no more. One day when he was out at the doctor's she called a taxi and went to Marcia, who put her up for a while.

Beyond the reach of the law

Though Manuel was originally from Colombia, he also had Spanish and German nationality. He had girls working for him in Germany and spoke German fluently. He owned a Porsche and

had a Swiss bank account in which he deposited his takings. His group operated in a number of countries: Colombia, Germany, Argentina, the Dominican Republic and Italy.

It was a long time before Marcia and Ana dared to go to the police. They were deterred by the flood of threats coming from Manuel and his gang. When Marcia first talked to the police, Manuel was not under arrest and escaped to Colombia. He called Marcia from her parents' home to make it clear that he was quite prepared to carry out his threats. Marcia's mother came to the phone too, but Marcia didn't dare to warn her. When the women finally talked to the police they didn't have the courage to name all the group members involved. It was another few months before they were ready to bring everything into the open but the court decided there was a lack of evidence to have the case reopened.

Manuel is still globe-trotting. When Ana saw the documentary about Lisa's case, she wanted to organize a televised search for Manuel. This never came to anything because she had successfully started a new life. She now has a good job and is happily married. Marcia does social work as a volunteer. The other girls who were involved were less fortunate. One of them underwent years of psychotherapy to help her recover.

Maria, Marcia and Ana were following in the footsteps of other Dominican and Colombian women, who had left their home countries in the 1970s and 1980s to seek their fortunes in the nearby wealthier Antilles. One of the Antillean islands had a reservation for prostitutes, Campo Alegre, where at first Colombian and Dominican women worked. After an influx of foreign prostitutes, Campo Alegre became too small. Those who wanted more space took to the streets or went abroad. Many of the women found Antillean men who had Dutch passports and were prepared to go through a marriage ceremony with them for payment. By this means the women became entitled to Dutch passports.² At the time such marriages were big business on the Caribbean island of Curaçao, a former Dutch colony, where their price was 15,000 guilders.³ One Dutchman became rich by arranging 500 marriages.⁴ After the wedding ceremony the women travelled to Europe, often accompanied by their husbands. The Colombian ex-prostitute Josephina, who came to Europe in the 1980s, said, 'When I arrived in the Netherlands, some ten years ago, there were already many Colombian women in Holland. Quite a few men forced their wives into prostitution and pocketed the proceeds.' Some women

with Dutch passports also moved on to Germany or other European countries.

After 1985 the law on Dutch nationality was changed to prevent foreign women who married Antillean men from obtaining Dutch nationality. It then became cheaper for brothel-owners and potential traffickers to import Latin American women directly from the Dominican Republic and Colombia.

Dominican women are also trafficked to Panama, Venezuela and other Latin American countries. In the early 1980s many people were illegally transported from St Maarten to Puerto Rico and the United States. This ended tragically in 1985 when a number of women hidden in containers were found dead from asphyxiation.⁵

Cocaine

Whenever traffic in women by criminals from Colombia is discussed, the question of its relation to the drugs trade also comes up. One of the first cases of trafficking in Colombian women to the Netherlands, which occurred in 1984, involved cocaine. The main suspect was a transsexual who combined trafficking with trading in coke. He had promised some Colombian women jobs in a biscuit factory. According to his lawyer the transsexual trafficked in women and drugs to prove himself in the male-dominated drug scene. Women are sometimes trafficked by gangs who are also active drug dealers and occasionally Colombian prostitutes are forced to take part in the drugs trade. A former social worker, Ester Rios, said, 'I know a Latin American prostitute who met a gorgeous Argentinian at a dinner party. She liked him and was pleased when he invited her to visit his apartment in Spain. She went but he never turned up. Instead the police raided the place and found large quantities of cocaine. She was busted, not the Argentinian.' Three Colombian clients of STV who refused to co-operate in drug dealing were threatened. Prostitutes are often offered drugs to keep them going, but of STV's 500 clients over the last five years only two became addicts during their time as prostitutes. Finally, there are the women who are already addicts in their homeland who can easily become the victims of traffickers.

Manuel also made money from drug trafficking, but was never convicted of it. Marcia did not dare to bring this sideline of his to the police's attention. 'When Colombians talk too much their

tongues are cut out. One telephone call to Colombia will do. What was I to say to the police? In Colombia there are gangs who traffic in both women and drugs. I know because my ex-husband in Colombia was involved in a gang. I could not talk about it there or here. My ex-husband's friends were mafiosi who were even worse than Manuel.'

Prostitution-related drug trafficking does not occur only in Colombia. Drugs, especially cocaine, are often part of sex clubs' trade. In some places doormen traffic drugs. If business is slack, some club managers make the women run drugs. Nowadays window brothels are centres for both the arms and drug trades.⁶ Potential buyers pretend to be clients. The police are powerless because they are meant to respect the privacy of prostitutes and their clients.

At first the Dutch community was startled by the frequent occurrence of violence in Colombian circles, which is always the case when a new group appears on the scene. The Turkish gangs, which arrived next, were reputed to be extremely violent, but were soon surpassed by the sheer terror exercised by eastern European criminals.

7 Keeping it in the family¹

One ingenious system used to traffic women from South America to Europe involved the creation of 'artificial families'. In the Netherlands, for example, a number of women had gained Dutch nationality by marrying Antillean men. Many of them were approached by traffickers to see if they would be willing to claim 'daughters' who had been given forged birth certificates and who would then qualify for Dutch nationality. A number of women agreed to take part in these 'artificial families', as they were called by the police. While some of the 'mothers' co-operated fully with the traffickers, others felt guilty and tried to help their 'daughters'.

Until 1987 children aged under 21 who had an Antillean parent with Dutch nationality could themselves opt for Dutch nationality. To obtain a Dutch passport they simply needed to produce their birth certificate. A Dominican gang exploited this law by providing women with false birth certificates and 'mothers', with the sole aim of taking the women to the Netherlands to force them into prostitution. The women's dates of birth were often falsified – in some cases the 'daughters' were actually the same age as their 'mothers'. By this method ten women could create 100 'daughters'. Their husbands, who had given them Dutch nationality, were not involved. The gang's operations worked so successfully that later on they also sent women to work in Germany.

Conchita's story

Conchita was one of the first women I met who had fallen into the hands of this gang. She told me about the scale of their fraud. She came from the Dominican Republic and became pregnant when she was 27. Neither she nor her family could take care of a baby. Her mother was in hospital and her deaf father already had to feed her ten brothers and sisters. She would have to give up her office job, so her problems were serious.