

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.

'One day I went to visit a friend who was going to a meeting to discuss job opportunities in Europe. I went with her and met a schoolteacher, who knew someone called Juan who could get me a job in the Netherlands. When I went to see him, his associates told me I would easily find employment in a beauty parlour. I asked whether my pregnancy posed a problem. "If you're having a baby you really should go, because in the Netherlands the queen and the government lay great value on the welfare of pregnant women," they told me. I thought Holland was a woman's paradise where no prostitution existed. Only later did I find out that most Dominican women in Europe were hookers.'

Juan recruited women in the Dominican Republic for the Belgian and Dutch prostitution markets, helped by his two sisters, who lived in the Netherlands. He was associated with a travel agency which lent tickets to women, which they used when applying for a visa at the Belgian embassy in Santo Domingo. He would also lend them showmoney. They went into the embassy on their own, but when they left he would immediately take the tickets and money back. For this he charged them £1,000. Juan was reputed to have excellent relations with the embassy: in 1994 the Belgian consul in the Dominican Republic was fired because he had contacts with a travel agency which helped women to go to Europe.

Conchita had to find her own showmoney and struggled to save the necessary amount. Next she was told she had to pay a large sum for the ticket, which her brother advanced to her on the assumption that she would come back a rich woman. 'I'll never dare to tell him why I can't pay the money back. Maybe he'll be discreet, but you never know. I don't want the rest of the family to know what happened to me.'

Finally Conchita set off for the feminist paradise on the North Sea. 'A woman whom I had seen at the meeting collected me from Brussels airport. I trusted her completely. After all, I thought she was the respectable owner of a beauty parlour. That's why I wasn't surprised when I had to pay £150 extra for the trip to the Netherlands.' This was far more than the normal price for a train ticket. However, Conchita could not use normal methods of transport because she was an illegal immigrant. She had to use the industry which has mushroomed to smuggle illegal immigrants over the so-called green borders, the unguarded crossings.

'With other people we went by car to the Netherlands. By then I had been travelling for days on end. I was exhausted. I told the

others that because of my pregnancy the journey was very tiring. "What?" they cried. "Are you pregnant? If that's true, you are in for a whole lot of trouble." I told them that Juan had assured me my pregnancy wouldn't be a problem. But that was not the case. "When you have to go hospital, the doctors are bound to ask for your papers, which you don't have. They'll send you back home, pregnant or not." I was left feeling very disturbed.

'The evening I arrived in Amsterdam they showed me around the red light district. "This is the place where you'll have to work," they said. I began to cry, "My God, do I have to do this kind of work?" After that walk, at one o'clock at night, we went to the flat of the woman who had collected me from Brussels airport.

'I went straight to bed, but I couldn't sleep. When they thought I couldn't hear, they made jokes about my pregnancy. Even now they still hurt. I cried all night. The next day they said, "You'll have to make a decision. Either way you have to pay your debt, and you owe us money for your housing as well." I didn't know of any debt and I wanted to go home. I felt bad because it had cost me so much and I didn't even have a return ticket. If necessary, I thought I would pay my return fare myself. By then I knew I had paid them far too much for their so-called services.'

Fearing that she would run away, the women kept her under lock and key. 'In the Dominican Republic they never told me I could not go home. I felt cheated. I threatened to write a letter to the Dominican Republic to expose the fraud. They just laughed.

'I sat brooding for a couple of days. I thought, "I have been cheated, that is a fact, but what can I do? The Dominican women who live here won't report me to the police. I will endure it for a few months and then go home."

'It went against the grain, but after two days I went to the window they had arranged for me. The manager of the brothel, a Dominican woman, said, "Now that you are here, you have to sleep with the customers, otherwise you can't pay for the room." She looked after everything for the owner. She conned the proprietor of the windows because she only told him the earnings of three women, but she had eight girls working there. The proceeds of the other five went into her own pockets.

'I still remember my very first customer. Whatever he wanted, I refused. I cried my eyes out and told him I had never done that kind of work before. I also admitted to being pregnant. He left, but the next customers didn't buy this argument. I was scared to death, because another pregnant girl was beaten up by a client in the very same place.'

Conchita was not successful behind the windows but not knowing what else to do, she stayed on. Soon two other women came by and made her an offer she couldn't refuse. They sent her to another part of the country, where Conchita was told she would be working as a cleaner in a bar. 'When I arrived I started to clean the place. The manager said, "What do you think you are doing?" and made it clear that cleaning was not expected of me. I took to drinking that vinegar-like champagne.'

Conchita's new colleagues told her, 'You were a fool to leave the windows. Here you also have to work with men, but you make less money.' Conchita had hoped she would only have to drink with customers. Once again she didn't attract many customers and was fired.

She was now free but alone. She was pregnant, she had no money or return ticket and she knew nobody. She drifted until eventually she met a Latin American woman, who took her to a social worker who helped her. Her baby was born in a hospital after all. After a long time, she finally went to the police. No one was ever brought to trial.

Conchita found herself a husband and a nice flat. 'What more could I desire?' she said to me on one of the last times we met. She was to be denied her peace: one day in 1992 a Boeing crashed on the flat where she lived. She survived, but had to be rehoused. The crash was a major disaster and the queen came to inspect the damage. At last Conchita saw the queen, who was unaware of the abuse traffickers made of her reputation as the fairy queen of a feminist paradise.

Artificial families

The two women who took Conchita away from the windows to the club were friends of the manager. They collected Conchita's money and carried a knife, to make the situation quite clear. One of them was rumoured to have killed a man in the Dominican Republic. Conchita said, 'This woman had obtained Dutch nationality with a paper stating she was a daughter of Dominican and Antillean parents. That paper was a forgery.' Conchita was right. The woman had entered the Netherlands illegally through the system of 'artificial families'.

The gang which organized this scam was headed by two elderly Dominican sisters, helped by a son and daughter-in-law. So far

they have trafficked over 100 women. One of the sisters, señoras as they were called by their victims, organized the forged papers in the Dominican Republic with the help of a corrupt civil servant. In the Dominican Republic the authorities don't keep exact records of birth certificates and it is relatively easy to obtain false documents. The señora who ran that end of the operation was so good at organizing the paperwork that she was nicknamed the consul. The other sister, who ran the business in the Netherlands, befriended Dominican women who had obtained Dutch nationality by marriage and were willing to pretend to be 'mothers' to the 'daughters'.

The elderly señoras managed to recruit a lot of women because they were able to convince them of their good intentions. They concentrated on women they already knew, indeed some of their victims had been acquainted with the señoras for years: they were only too ready to believe the elderly ladies when they said they could arrange jobs in a Dutch factory. One girl had been a domestic worker for the señora, who had kindly given her the job when she fled from her violent husband. Another woman was asked to join the señoras by an old schoolfriend. A few girls were promised other employment. Victoria, aged 27, was told she would qualify for a student grant in the Netherlands. 'The señora said she would see to it that I could finish my studies. I already knew the señora when I was a child. She lived with one of our acquaintances. Before taking me abroad, the señora had a long talk with my father. But she refused to say where I was going to live. That's why at first my father didn't want to let me go. But in the end she convinced him she had contacts in high places.' Victoria told me all this the first time I spoke to her at her hide-out, which was a small room with only a bed.

Victoria saw no reason to mistrust the señora and so went to the Netherlands with her. 'When we arrived there she suddenly seemed a different person. I felt frightened, and with reason. I had to get a passport on which I was somebody else, with a new name and a different age. A few days later the señora told me I had to pay her £15,000, which was an enormous amount of money for me. She also said I could only earn that kind of money behind the windows. She said if I didn't comply I would be in big trouble and she pointed out that I didn't have papers showing my own age and name. She was right. I knew I was in the wrong and it had a bad psychological effect on me. I didn't know who I was any more. Would I have to live under another name for the rest

of my life? I was afraid that I would never have my own passport again.' Victoria didn't think of going to the police, who would inevitably expose her fake identity. 'But I found it reassuring that there were other Dominican women living under a false name who were saddled with debts like mine.'

There seemed to be no way out and Victoria headed for the red light district. She had never been a prostitute, which was true of many other artificial daughters. Some of them were planted behind the windows on the day they arrived, but not Victoria. 'My first few days in the Netherlands I was ill with the flu. I had to start work a few weeks later. I only had Sundays off. The señora's niece taught me the tricks of the trade. It was the other girls who told me about AIDS. I didn't need AIDS on top of everything else, so I always made the clients use a condom. The work was difficult: even if you had a headache or felt out of sorts, you still had to be nice to the punters to get your daily ratio.'

'There wasn't a telephone in the studio space, so I couldn't call anyone. I never went out on the streets because I was afraid someone would recognize me and report me as an illegal immigrant.'

Victoria only worked in one city. Other girls had to commute between several red light districts. Members of the gang accompanied them to the brothels or arranged for other people to take them. One woman only found out afterwards where she had worked. 'Have I been to Rotterdam?' she asked. She never knew for sure. According to Victoria the señoras had many helpers who prevented the women from running away or speaking to anyone. Members of the gang collected the women's earnings and checked up on them daily. The women had to pay for everything, including unpacking their own suitcases. The señora even charged them for the use of a bed in her home. Part of this money disappeared into an informal banking system called the *san*. *Sans* are quite common in the Dominican Republic and are a method of avoiding official banks. The funds of the *san* are controlled by rotating chairpersons: both legitimate and illegal money can be invested in them and relatively cheap loans are available. The señora used the *san* for loan-sharking. A minority of the women who didn't earn enough money were forced to borrow from the señora's *san*. The longer it took them to pay off their instalments, the higher the interest they owed. One girl even had to pay 50 per cent interest, while others were paying 10 per cent. For the gang this was just a little side earner; the big money came from

prostitution. When everybody was 'working', the señoras were making at least £1,000 every two hours, a witness told me. The gang was making millions of pounds, but its members were not conspicuous consumers. They lived in a council house in the Netherlands and didn't even own a VCR. According to one of the girls, they took a suitcase crammed with bank notes to the Dominican Republic every week. The police have never been able to trace this money.

Victoria broke down after she had paid back £1,500. 'I told the señora that I was not going to pay £15,000 for a false name and a false passport. In her turn the señora threatened again to tell the police that I had stolen passports. But by then I had come to realize the señora wouldn't dare because her part in the affair would inevitably come to light.' Instead of reporting Victoria to the police, the señora sent her son to beat her up, which he was unable to do. 'I could avoid him, but the other girls were less fortunate.' Talking about the other Dominican women in her group, Victoria became indignant. 'When they failed to pay up, their clothes were taken away and they were turned out in the cold.' One girl was left naked in the bushes after a row with the son.

None of the girls was said to have been raped and one 'artificial mother' even prevented her 'daughter' from being sexually assaulted. However, another 'mother' forced her ready-made 'daughter' to have an abortion because she would not attract enough customers if she were pregnant. The girl didn't want to give up the baby; because of an illness she had had it was her last chance to become pregnant. But there was no one she could tell. The señora went with her to the abortion clinic, which was legal, to make sure she kept her mouth shut. The girl even had to pay the clinic's fees herself.

The women were threatened all the time. When one woman said that she wouldn't mind dying, a member of the gang told her, 'Then we'll kill your parents and your children in the Dominican Republic. We'll set their house alight. And don't think you will ever be safe when you go home.' That was sufficient to frighten the women. Because of these threats and because they had false papers, the women did not dare to go to the police. A few of them had already paid for the false papers in the Dominican Republic and they were afraid that they would be accused of being accomplices.

The investigation and trial

The gang had become too greedy. To make the enterprise more profitable, the señoras invented a number of pairs of twins. This overcame the problem that an 'artificial mother' could only claim to have had one daughter every nine months. The statistics showed that 40 per cent of the young people who had opted for Dutch nationality were twins – an unnaturally high percentage, which alerted the police. By then some 70 'artificial families' had been created in the Netherlands. As a sideline, the gang also produced some 'artificial sons', by taking money off young men who wanted Dutch nationality.

Victoria was persuaded to go to the police by an Antillese boy who sold illegal lottery tickets and she only dared to come out of hiding because he gave her a place to stay. He also bought food for her and never took advantage of her. He was a true friend. Still, it took Victoria a long time to take the final step. 'I was afraid I would endanger my colleagues who had children and who were in an even more difficult situation than me.'

'Just after my arrival I was on friendly terms with the other girls. But as soon as they realized I didn't intend to pay the rest of the £15,000, their attitude changed completely. At first we all had our meals together, but after my first contact with the police I had to avoid the others, who were too close to the señora. I had to eat all by myself.' Victoria didn't dare go out on the streets because the gang knew she had made a statement to the police. 'It was a nuisance, but as soon you poke your nose outside, they know where to find you. Except with my Antillese friend, I had no contacts with outsiders. After I had been heard by the examining magistrate, I only spoke to the officers at the police station, where I was put up for my own safety. I couldn't meet my former colleagues any more.'

During their investigations, the police did not act solely on the evidence of the large numbers of twin births, but worked from tip-offs as well. Previously in trafficking cases they had not listened to criminal informants, but had waited for women to come forward. Chief Inspector Van Loon and Detective Kroos, who at the time were in charge of the investigation, said, 'In the technicalities of policing, traffic in women comes between rape and drug trafficking. In cases of rape we only have the stories of victims who confide in the police. In drug cases, on the other hand,

an addict never gives evidence against a dealer. In policing traffic in drugs we have to rely completely on signals coming out of the milieu. Unfortunately, this method of network investigation is very expensive. This case has cost more than half a million pounds.'

Victoria, together with nine other girls, gave the police more than enough evidence to bring a case. The outcome was that one middle-aged lady and some gang members were brought to trial in 1989. They were sentenced to two to three years in jail. The other señora, the sister who took care of the business in the Dominican Republic, could not be extradited to the Netherlands. The court case took place with many of the trafficked women muttering angrily in the public gallery. They took turns to take care of their children, who were playing on the court house stairs. Because he knew the victims were present, the son of one of the señoras played to the gallery. He kept turning round to eye the women from the dock, while flaunting his indifference to the judge. When the judge asked him what he did for a living, he answered, 'I was remanded in custody, so the state provided for me. I was also paid to help move the girls from one place to another. I hustled on the side and I was on the dole.'

Judge: 'You also travelled to the Dominican Republic and our rogatory commission by now knows how expensive these trips are.'

Son: 'I paid with the money the girls had given me to keep in a safe place.'

Judge: 'You mean prostitution money?'

Son: 'I have so much esteem for you and the respectable married women present in the court room that I dare not answer this question in public.'

This remark provoked much laughter in the public gallery.

Judge: 'Let me ask you again whether you lived on prostitution money.'

Son: 'You might logically conclude that.'

Judge: 'Did you tell the women they could only work in the sex industry?'

Son: 'I just told them that all women work in prostitution.'

The judge then asked what had happened to the woman who was left stark naked in the bushes.

Son: 'You shouldn't overdo it. It wasn't a fully fledged wood, just a small shrubbery.'

His mother, the señora, defended herself. 'My sister in the Dominican Republic advances the money for the tickets. She is a smart woman. I am falsely accused by these girls. One of them was a qualified seamstress and could have worked as such. They are just jealous because I live quietly on my own money.'

The judge said, 'You have real estate in the Dominican Republic.' The women in the public gallery hissed, 'Bought with our money.' The señora refused to admit that she had taken the money from the women and denied threatening them. As a woman and mother herself, she would never do that, she claimed. The group were also charged with being members of a criminal organization. This charge failed because the judge would not equate family relationships with organized crime.

After the trial

As soon as the gang leaders had been sent to prison, some of the women went back to work as prostitutes. They didn't dare to go home penniless. After all, they had come to Europe to support their families and prostitution was the only profession open to them. They worked 'illegally' because their temporary permits didn't entitle them to have a normal job. As Conchita had found, some of the women became traffickers themselves.

Victoria eventually overcame her fear of going out in the street alone, but she never returned to prostitution. She found herself a regular job because she had a permanent residence permit. Soon after the trial she married. Unfortunately her husband abused her and spent the money she had to work for so hard. She divorced him and he was deported to the Dominican Republic soon afterwards, where he was killed in a quarrel between criminals.

Victoria's new life didn't last long. In 1994 I received the sad news that she had died in a traffic accident. Her death was investigated thoroughly and the police concluded that she had not been murdered. Nevertheless, her misfortune fed rumours that she had been killed. Word travels fast in Dominican circles.

While he was in prison the son managed to write a threatening letter to one of the women who had pressed charges against him. For this he was refused parole. For all the gang members their prison sentences were only an interruption to their criminal activities. The señora's son is reputed to be continuing his business in Germany with a Spanish partner, an outsider to the family.

After the señora was released it was rumoured that she specialized in the marriage racket. 'She is recruiting women in the Antilles. In the meantime she still draws social security as in the old days,' Josephina, the independent prostitute from Colombia, told me. Some gang members are trying to set up in business in the United States, which they enter by way of Mexico to avoid the obligatory visa. Some women in the Netherlands are being forced to pay for the lawyers the gang have hired to legalize their stay in the United States.

Most of the 'artificial mothers' were let off and some started a business on their own. One woman recruited a girl who had to use her false passport to become her 'daughter-in-law'. One 'artificial daughter' was made to use her illegally obtained passport to marry a relative of the señoras, so he would obtain a residence permit. One 'artificial mother' forced her real goddaughter to get a false birth certificate which showed her as the 'mother'. The girl didn't dare to oppose her own godmother, who was middle-aged and paid a lawyer in the Dominican Republic to arrange everything. When her 'artificial daughter' went to the police some time later, no case could be brought because too much time had elapsed. This also happened to other women and the police expelled most of those who had false papers.

Former 'artificial daughters' kept surfacing until 1994. They had to. They had been on the dole for years and had used their false passports to apply for social security. They were uncovered by detectives investigating fraud. In most cases the social security money went straight into the pockets of the gang members and their associates. Now many of the women are sorry they didn't come forward earlier. Others have disappeared, like Clarita, who had to hand her social security money over to her 'artificial mother'. Moreover, Clarita had to pay off the loans her 'mother' had taken out in her name. She was terrified of this woman, who had reputedly killed two men in the Dominican Republic, and didn't dare to give evidence. Clarita had also heard that women who had pressed charges had found themselves in a lot of trouble. She preferred to go back to the Dominican Republic.

The loophole in Dutch law by which artificial families were created has now been closed, but these families are not exclusively a Dutch problem. According to the London lawyer Jean Gould, there are Latin American groups in the United Kingdom who pull the same trick. It is unclear whether or not their 'artificial kin' are exploited in prostitution.

Other artificial families

Fraud in family relations is not new. In 1987 two men from Rotterdam were arrested because they adopted foreign people. They 'helped out' illegal aliens without passports with hand-typed false adoption papers, drafted by non-existent solicitors. They arranged for paid adoptive parents. They conducted their business in pubs, but it was never established that this was done for the purposes of prostitution.²

Leslie Roberts of the London branch of the International Anti-Slavery Society said, 'In Britain there is the odd example of false adoption. Local authorities don't have the services to vet the adopted children. I am sure people come in on false invitations, but we don't know whether that is a ploy to manipulate women into prostitution.'

It is still theoretically possible to set up fraudulent families by falsely claiming children. A European tourist can easily go to the Dominican Republic and claim to have fathered a girl many years before on holiday, in order to bring her back to Europe and turn her out on the streets.

Leen Pieterse of the Criminal Intelligence Unit said, 'In those cases an alleged father has to go to great lengths to prove himself. We know of these methods, but we haven't heard of any cases. I would have known if it occurred frequently, and by frequently I mean four or five times a year. The embassy personnel are alerted. Besides, it would attract the attention of other authorities.'

8 The Greek connection

Greece has a tradition of trafficking in women. In the 1960s men were leaving the countryside for the cities to find employment. To meet an increasing demand for prostitutes, girls were recruited in rural areas, often with false job promises, and forced onto the game. The number of girls arriving in urban centres was matched by the increase in the number of pimps. Unemployment in Greece then forced many men to look for work in western and northern Europe. A minority of them were criminals.¹ Among other things, they became involved in trafficking women from South America and eastern Europe.

In the Netherlands Greek traffickers were helped by the ease with which an entertainer's visa could be obtained. The Dutch authorities handed out these visas liberally to anyone who wanted to hire artistic performers. For years Greece had been an important distribution centre for go-go dancers, and in the 1980s both Greece and Cyprus played major roles in the international trade in such dancers, who had entertainers' visas. Before 1987 abuse of this system was unknown, but by 1992 the Dutch police were saying, 'We don't know if they are being used for trafficking in women, but there is certainly a massive transfer of prostitutes.' The authorities have become more careful about who they issue the visas to since this method of recruitment received bad publicity.

Ester Rios, a social worker in the Netherlands who helped trafficked as well as non-trafficked South American prostitutes, said in 1991 that among the 150 regular visitors to her centre there were at least ten dancers who had been exploited by traffickers and pimps in Greece. Three of them, Celestina, Hermana and Viola, describe their odyssey through the Greek underworld later in this chapter.² Among the first women to come to the authorities' notice as being trafficked by Greeks were Tonia and Natalie.

In 1992 two Greek brothers reported to the Dutch police the theft of two Bulgarian girls by a Dutchman. This strange complaint