

# Human Trafficking: twenty-first century slavery

by Síle NicGabhann

But this is a people all pillaged and plundered,  
trapped in caves, hidden in dungeons.  
They are looted, with no one to rescue them,  
robbed, with no one to say, 'Give it back!'  
which of you listening to this,  
will pay attention and mark it, against the time to come?  
(Isaiah 42:22).

These words of the prophet Isaiah eloquently describe the plight of victims of human trafficking. This is now recognized as a global phenomenon, a crime against humanity and a fundamental violation of human rights. It degrades and diminishes the whole human family and undermines the dignity of the human person made in the image and likeness of God. Trafficking for sexual exploitation is a particularly abhorrent aspect of this trade in human flesh and one that is closely linked to the worldwide growth in commercial sex. It has recently been given considerable publicity by the religious and secular press in Ireland. In this article I would like to draw attention to some of the issues that need to be addressed if the problem is not to escalate. I will begin by giving a brief account of what trafficking involves as well as some of the factors that make it possible. I will then discuss what pastoral response there might be to deal with it.

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING: AN OVERVIEW

Trading in human beings or slavery has existed from the earliest times. For most people, the word 'slavery' conjures up stories of the Transatlantic Slave Trade abolished in the early 1800s and consigned to the darker periods of history. Yet, slavery is wide-spread in the twenty-first century in more hidden and clandestine forms such as bonded labour, early and forced marriage, forced labour, child labour and sexual exploitation. This is so, in spite of the fact that for more than fifty years international instruments have been created to set out and regulate the rights and duties of individuals and society.

Human trafficking, as the modern practice of slavery is called, affects people of every age, race and sex. It is one of the largest criminal activities in the world, together with arms and drugs, and the fastest growing. Huge profits can be made quickly and over a long period of time from the same human commodities, unlike drugs that can be used only once. Despite its criminal nature, the risk of prosecution is usually negligible as there are insufficient penalties against traffickers. Figures for the numbers of people trafficked, as well as the profits generated, vary greatly. Because of its clandestine nature most bodies concerned with the problem admit it is impossible to know how many victims of trafficking there are. They suggest a figure from 600,000 to 800,000. It is also estimated that the trade generates from US \$5-7 billion each year.

## DEFINITION

Definitions of trafficking have varied according to countries and laws but the following UN definition is now generally accepted internationally:

'Trafficking in persons' shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs...<sup>1</sup>

Every continent and most countries of the world are impacted, with people being trafficked within and across national borders. Countries are designated as either places of origin, transit or destination but there can be overlapping. It happens that a country might export people abroad, temporarily harbour arrivals from other countries, and be the destination country for other people. There is also domestic trafficking.

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<sup>1</sup> Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (15 November 2003).

Thailand, where there is extreme poverty in remote hilly areas and a highly developed tourist industry in coastal areas, is an example of a country where trafficking occurs within its own borders.

Traffickers may belong to global criminal networks but can also operate within small-scale informal networks. They can also be individuals or even families. In some regions parents sell their children, and partners or relatives sell women

## HUMAN TRAFFICKING FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is one of the most lucrative sectors of the trade in human beings. The most prevalent forms are for prostitution, sex tourism and mail-order brides. While men and boys are also trafficked for this purpose it is acknowledged that the majority are women and girls. The Coalition against Trafficking (CATW) in women defines sexual exploitation as:

... the sexual violation of a person's human dignity, equality, and physical or mental integrity and as a practice by which some people (primarily men) achieve power and domination over others (primarily women and children) for the purpose of sexual gratification, financial gain, and/or advancement.<sup>2</sup>

## HOW SEX TRAFFICKERS OPERATE

There is ample recorded evidence to indicate that the methods of recruitment and entrapment used by traffickers are similar world-wide. Vulnerable women and girls answer advertisements in newspapers offering lucrative employment in foreign countries for low-skilled jobs such as waitresses, nannies, or domestic workers and also for attractive young women to work as dancers or hostesses in bars or clubs. Much of the recruitment is, however, informal. Young girls may be approached by a friend, or a friend of a friend, with attractive proposals for work abroad.

The recruitment procedure may be made quite complex in an effort to reassure the women that the job offer is genuine. In some cases, so desperate are they for employment that they do not enquire too closely into the details. The recruiters undertake to arrange travel documents and visas, often under assumed names, or they may use the women's own legal documents if they have any. Once in the destination country they discover that the promised job does not exist. Their documents are confiscated and they are forced into prostitution. Their earnings go to repay the cost of their journey, accommodation, food and any item the traffickers may designate.

Then begins a cycle of violence that includes beatings, rape, captivity, forced prostitution and the possibility of being sold many times over, even across borders. Often the only escape is through police raids on clubs and brothels or street round-ups, in which case the women are treated as criminals or illegal immigrants and imprisoned to await deportation. Even if they manage to escape or are released by their traffickers after paying off their debt they find themselves utterly alone in a strange country without money or friends, suffering from physical injuries and emotional and psychological trauma. They are in no condition to return home. The stigma attached to prostitution also makes them unwilling to go back to their families who, in any case, do not have the means to support them.

While it is true that some women do know they will be in prostitution when they accept a job abroad they find their expectations to be far from the reality. They do not know that they will be virtual slaves, that they will have no control over their lives, and that they will be allowed to keep very little of the money they earn. The misinformation and deception they experience make any distinction between 'free' and 'forced' prostitution meaningless.

## FACTORS FACILITATING TRAFFICKING

There are many, complex, interconnected factors that make the trade in human beings such a global criminal enterprise today. Globalisation, poverty, lack of information and other legal, social, economic and cultural situations are usually mentioned as major contributory causes. Increasing low-cost transportation makes it easy for traffickers to travel to and from countries of origin and destination countries. The internet and mobile phones facilitate communication making it all the more difficult to detect. Racism, sexism and the disregard for the fundamental human values shared by all cultures and peoples play a large part. Added to all this is the lack of legislation and law enforcement resources directed at the traffickers and buyers of sex. Extensive corruption among officials in the police and at border controls is also cited.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.uei.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/mhvslave.htm>

Although poverty is given as one of the major causes leading to trafficking it, in fact, only creates the necessary conditions. Trafficking will appear when criminal elements take advantage of people's desire to emigrate to improve their standard of living. Women are the first to suffer when there is economic or societal collapse, hence the term 'feminisation of poverty'. The example closest to us is what happened in the countries of Eastern Europe. The high unemployment rate left women marginalised and vulnerable. The feminisation of poverty has led to a new phenomenon, the 'feminisation of migration'. With little chance of economic survival for themselves or their families at home women are now taking untold risks to try to find employment abroad. In a climate of restrictive immigration practices and laws they have resort to networks of smugglers who seem to offer the most feasible opportunity for migration. Women from Eastern bloc countries seeking jobs often have much less access to information about migration, recruitment procedures and rights and are at higher risk of being trafficked than men.

Another cause of trafficking for sexual exploitation is the phenomenal growth in the 'sex industry'. Economic growth in many countries has led to the rise of a large middle class. Men with disposable income have a greater capacity and apparently a greater incentive to buy sexual services. Society, too, has adopted a more tolerant attitude to it. Like any industry, prostitution is based on supply and demand. 'In this gendered system of supply and demand, little or no attention is paid to the legitimacy of the demand. The ultimate consumers of trafficked and prostituted women are men who use them for entertainment, sexual gratification, and acts of violence.'<sup>3</sup> The demand side of sex trafficking remains the least visible and the least mentioned. It is thus easy to forget that people are trafficked into the sex industry not to satisfy the demands of the traffickers but of the buyers. It is this demand that makes the trafficking trade so widespread and lucrative.

Further study would demonstrate how gender-based discrimination, patriarchal values and attitudes, the low status of women in many societies and the constant demand for sexual services on the part of men in every region are among the basic causes for the growth of the sex industry and sex trafficking. Globalisation, war and poverty that make migration necessary are contributory factors that tend to increase women's vulnerability. But sex trafficking is more than an issue of criminal activity arising from poverty and migration.

## EFFECTS OF TRAFFICKING

The crippling moral effect that comes from acceptance of a situation in which humanity as a whole is degraded – victims, aggressors, buyers of sex and those who passively stand by – must count as one of the gravest results of trafficking. There are other very serious health, social, legal and societal effects.

Victims suffer severe mental and physical distress. There is a high risk of their contracting and passing on STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and the HIV/AIDS virus. In many cases victims of trafficking are treated as illegal immigrants and deported. Women who have been in prostitution risk being stigmatised when they return home and try to take up a normal life. They have limited opportunities for employment and it may be impossible for them to marry. They will have difficulty in building trusting relationships.

## THE EUROPEAN PICTURE

There seems to be no doubt that trafficking has increased dramatically in Europe since 1989, the year that saw the fall of the Berlin Wall. While women from Asia, Africa and Latin America continue to arrive in Western Europe, most now come from former communist countries in Eastern Europe. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that around 500,000 women are trafficked into Western Europe each year, a significant number of whom are forced into prostitution. The *European Parliament Working Paper on Trafficking in Women*, while admitting 'it is almost impossible to measure the volume of migration', says trends are clear. In a sample of 108 women in prostitution who contacted a non-governmental organization (NGO) only 27 knew they would be doing this work when recruited.<sup>4</sup>

## IRELAND IS NOT EXEMPT

According to the Irish Refugee Council<sup>5</sup> there is some evidence that both human smuggling and trafficking do occur in Ireland but concrete documentation of it is sparse. Five years ago when asked by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women to provide information on legislation and policy with respect to trafficking in women, the Irish Government responded by saying, 'there

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<sup>3</sup> Donna M. Hughes, 'The "Natasha Trade": The Transnational Shadow Market of Trafficking in Women'. *Special issue of Journal of International Affairs*. 'In the Shadows: Promoting Prosperity or Undermining Stability?' (vol. 53, no. 2, Spring 2000), pp. 624-651.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7

<sup>5</sup> Irish Refugee Council: *Information Note on Smuggling and Trafficking* (December 2001), p. 18

is no evidence available to date that women are being brought into Ireland to engage in prostitution'. The Government's response might not be the same today but evidence is still hard to obtain. For there to be 'evidence' in the strictly legal usage of the term complaints would have to be made to the Gardaí and sufficient information made available to enable them to start a prosecution. So many factors militate against this happening – not least the fear of the women that they will be criminalised and deported back home where they may again fall into the hands of the traffickers or reprisals taken against their families – that researchers have to look to other sources.

Prostitution is a fact of life in Ireland although no detailed, scientific research has been done on the full extent of it. In his book, *Sex in the City: the Prostitution Racket in Ireland*,<sup>6</sup> Paul Reynolds, crime correspondent with RTE, reveals a seamy, disturbing side to the sex business. An article in the *Sunday Independent* of 2 October 2005 states that Dublin is quietly being transformed 'into one of the lap-dancing capitals of Europe'. Lap-dancing is not, as some would have us believe, just 'harmless fun for men'.

Ruhama, the Dublin-based organisation jointly established in 1989 by the Good Shepherd Sisters and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity to work with and for women caught up in prostitution, has reliable data about what happens on the streets of the city. Ruhama and Women's Aid have encountered a number of actual cases of women who had been trafficked into Ireland for sexual exploitation. Ruhama has been able to assist them<sup>7</sup>. The organisation has now become increasingly involved in the trafficking issue, doing research, working to influence policy development around prostitution and lobbying for the enactment of UN and Council of Europe protocols on trafficking. It was also instrumental in establishing the network, Ireland en Route<sup>8</sup> to give a co-coordinated response to the problem and encourage research. The Justice Desk of the Irish Missionary Union (IMU) has also taken up the matter. In spite of the difficulty and near impossibility of getting information there is a conviction among those working with abused women that there is a serious problem in Ireland and that it could worsen.

## COMBATING TRAFFICKING

Trafficking cannot be checked, either globally or nationally, as an isolated issue. If the problem is to be solved a strategy — economic, political, social and pastoral — that combats the root causes needs to be put in place. Governments, civil society and Churches all have a role to play and need to pool their resources. Awareness is the first condition for prevention. The information required is more than figures about numbers and facts about how traffickers operate. It is important to ask what it is that makes sex trafficking and commercial sex such profitable criminal activities.

## WHAT PASTORAL RESPONSE FROM THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH?

In the Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council referred to slavery and prostitution as violations of the integrity of the human person, deploring them as 'a supreme dishonour to the Creator'<sup>9</sup>. It is only recently, however, that the Vatican has spoken out specifically against trafficking of women for sexual exploitation. Pope John Paul II sent a message to the International Conference, 21st Century Slavery — The Human Rights Dimension of Trafficking in Human Beings (Rome, May 2002), in which he denounced the trade in human beings as a 'shocking offence against human dignity and a grave violation of human right'<sup>10</sup>. He went on to add that

the sexual exploitation of women and children is a particularly repugnant aspect of this trade ... The disturbing tendency to treat prostitution as a business or industry not only contributes to the trade in human beings, but is itself evidence of a growing tendency to detach freedom from the moral law and to reduce the rich mystery of human sexuality to a mere commodity.

The Instruction, *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, produced by the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travellers (2004) draws attention to the danger women migrants in particular face of becoming 'victims of

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Reynolds, *Sex in the city* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> An article posted on ireland.com and broadcast on the national radio on Tuesday, 12 July 2005, states that the latest Report from Ruhama (2003-2004) says it had encountered 91 women who had been trafficked by criminal gangs to work in the sex trade and had managed to help 21 in the past two years.

<sup>8</sup> Membership of Ireland en Route includes the following NGOs and statutory agencies: Caride, Copine (Combating Paedophile Information Networks in Europe), Garda National Immigration Bureau, Holy Child Sisters, Immigrant Council of Ireland, International Organizations for Migration, Irish Refugee Council, Mercy Open Door, Mercy Sisters Migrant Rights Centre, Ruhama, Service for Young People Out of Home (Southern Health Board), Unaccompanied Minors Unit (Eastern Coast Area Health Board), Women's Aid, Women's Health Project (ECAHB).

<sup>9</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Proceedings of the International Conference on '21st Century Slavery — The Human Rights Dimension to Trafficking in Human Beings'. Franco Angeli, Milan 2003.

the sad phenomenon of human trafficking'.<sup>11</sup> The Council addressed the issue of prostitution and sex trafficking directly at an International Meeting on Pastoral Care for the Liberation of Women of the Street in July last year (2005). It released a document noting that prostitution is 'a form of modern day slavery' and adds that 'sexual exploitation, prostitution and trafficking of human beings are all acts of violence against women'.

The document sets out the task of the Church with regard to the victims. It is called upon to denounce the social injustices that bring them to this state, the violence to which they are subjected, and to call for an end to sexual abuse. The Church must increase awareness of the issue among its members, among religious congregations, lay movements, institutions and associations so that they give more pastoral care to women who are being exploited. The document also says that programmes are needed to form pastoral workers and to develop competence and strategies to fight prostitution and human trafficking. It includes a series of suggestions for bishops' conferences and religious institutes. It acknowledges the role women religious have played in this area such as outreach units, shelters and safe houses, training and education programmes for women who wish to leave the streets. Contemplative communities of women show their solidarity through prayer and often financial support. Considerable attention is given to the gender aspect of this whole problem. The need for seminarians, religious men and priests to be aware of it and to receive training so that they have the skills and attitudes necessary to work compassionately with both the women trapped in prostitution and their 'clients' is mentioned.

These two documents are to be welcomed in so far as they indicate a growing awareness on the part of the official Church about a serious pastoral issue of our time. But documents are only as good as their implementation. How much attention will be paid to them by those whose duty it is to see they are put into practice at the level of the local Church?

## PASTORAL RESPONSE IN IRELAND

Any solution to the problem of trafficking of women into Ireland for sexual exploitation calls for collaborative action on the part of Church and State, with politicians, clergy, religious and laity combining their resources. Because it is a serious pastoral issue the Catholic Church has a special role to play in spearheading action. Four groups in the Church in Ireland are well placed to inform and influence government and public opinion around the issue: the Irish Bishops' Conference (IBC), the Irish Missionary Union (IMU), Ruhama and the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI).

Two of these, Ruhama, as already mentioned, and the IMU, are actively engaged in raising awareness and doing research. The Irish Commission for Justice and Peace and the Pastoral Commission of the IBC has published a document on domestic violence, and recently (see p. 571 of this issue of *The Furrow*) the Irish Hierarchy has issued a statement about the two forms of violence against women that are prostitution and sex-trafficking. More is needed. The Commission for Justice and Social Affairs (ICJSA) could have a special desk to study and monitor the Irish situation and prepare a pastoral plan to deal with it in collaboration with those groups who are already working in this area. It could also be the means of raising awareness among the clergy and men religious, among whom it seems to be low. While this continues to be the case the problem will be looked upon solely as a women's issue. Until men are actively involved in combating it nothing will change. CORI and its Justice Commission has a high profile in Ireland but has not addressed this issue directly. Yet its network of religious congregations could be a power resource on which to draw when there is an urgent need for *ad hoc* assistance such as giving temporary shelter to a woman in need.

## CONCLUSION

This article began with a question: 'Which of you will listen to this, who pay attention in the future?' The task of combating slavery in any form belongs to all who believe in the innate dignity of the human person. It is a justice and human rights issue but is too often treated as one of migration, refugee and asylum-seeking. The IBC, as the voice of the Church in Ireland, has a particular role to play in preventing the escalation of this evil in our country. This means being a prophetic voice speaking the truth to clergy and laity, to politicians and civil authorities. It means leading all people to an awareness of what is happening and to action designed to prevent it. It also means setting up the necessary facilities to rehabilitate and reintegrate into society the victims of sex trafficking. The work is already underway thanks to the efforts of Ruhama. Because of its experience and expertise in dealing with prostitution and trafficking this organization is an indispensable resource for individuals or groups who are concerned about these issues.

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<sup>11</sup> *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 5