

When Women are Trafficked :

Quantifying the Gendered Experience of Trafficking in the UK

April 2004

The POPPY Project¹, as the only provider of supported accommodation for women trafficked into the United Kingdom for sexual exploitation, is in a unique position to represent the experiences of these women. To this end, we attempt to gather qualitative information about the types of experiences women trafficked into the United Kingdom have had prior to, during and after trafficking using a Data Collection form. The form was designed to be filled in by Support Workers (SWs) over time as women feel safe enough to discuss their experiences. Many of these experiences will not have been raised by women in any other setting because these are not the experiences that are useful to statutory services in terms of prosecution; because of shame/stigma around sexual violence; and because for women who have been tricked, deceived and abused, it is often difficult to trust anyone. We believe that the women we support tell their SWs of these experiences precisely because they are in a place of safety where they are believed, and where the gendered nature of the violence they have experienced is acknowledged. SWs inform their tenants that part of the Poppy Project's remit is to represent the experiences of those trafficked to other agencies, and that this information will be used to campaign for more appropriate and wide-reaching services for all trafficked women, and to gain a clearer outline of the experiences of trafficked women. We have undertaken to store this information confidentially, and not use it in a way which identifies the women.

In April 2004, the POPPY Project has been providing support accommodation for trafficked women for one year. We have gathered information from twenty-six women housed by POPPY/Eaves long enough to have developed a trusting relationship with their SW. We will add to these forms the longer we work with individual woman, and this will be updated by SWs in consultation with the Counter-Trafficking Development Worker over time.

The countries of origin of these women are as follows:

Lithuania (5); Ukraine (4); Albania (3); Romania (3); Moldova (2); Nigeria (2); Sierra Leone (2); Democratic Republic of Congo; Ghana; Latvia; Thailand; Turkey.

1. Experiences of Violence before Trafficking

Seven women have not disclosed experiencing violence before trafficking (27%).

Ten women have disclosed having experienced multiple forms of violence

¹ The POPPY Project provides accommodation and support services to women trafficked for sexual exploitation in the UK. POPPY also has a research and development team working on counter-trafficking and developing services for women seeking to exit prostitution. For contact information see page 8.

before trafficking **(38%)**.

Two women have disclosed witnessing political violence/family members murdered during internal conflict/war.

Sexual Abuse/Rape

Twelve women had been sexually abused or raped before being trafficked **(46%)**. Of these, ten rapes were committed by men within their 'family/partner/friends' network **(38%)**, and two women were raped by strangers not in a relationship with them in any way **(8%)**. It is important to note here that for the majority of women, these rapes were not isolated events, but were repeated by the same perpetrator over periods of time. Five women **(19%)** were raped by different individual perpetrators, and three women **(11%)** were gang-raped by different perpetrators at the same time.

Eight women **(31%)** were sexually abused/raped while aged 16 years or under, and seven women **(27%)** were sexually abused/raped while aged 16 years or older².

Physical Violence

Sixteen women disclosed having experienced physical violence of some kind prior to trafficking, either from family members or from others in their community **(62%)**. Four women **(15%)** were assaulted on a one-off basis by a man in some relationship with them (family member, partner or friend); two women **(8%)** were assaulted on a one-off basis by a man who they did not know.

Twelve women disclosed having experienced domestic violence (including physical and/or psychological abuse) prior to being trafficked **(46%)**. Of these, eight women **(31%)** disclosed domestic violence experienced as children from a parent. For seven of the eight women, this parent was male – either a father or a step-father. One woman experienced domestic violence solely from her mother. Four women **(15%)** disclosed having experienced domestic violence from a male partner/(s).

One woman was forced to have an abortion prior to being trafficked when she became pregnant following repeated rapes.

These figures are clearly significant. Firstly, it is not possible to say that the seven women who have not discussed experiences of violence prior to trafficking have not actually experienced violence; it may be the case that over time some or all of these women will disclose sexual or physical violence. In support of this is the fact that of the four women housed and supported by Eaves Housing for the longest period of time, all four have disclosed experiences of domestic violence, physical violence or sexual abuse prior to trafficking.

² Note that three women were sexually abused / raped both before and after they were 16.

There appear to be two possibilities explaining the high incidence of violence against women experienced by women trafficked into the United Kingdom before their trafficking.

The first is simply that trafficking networks and recruiters target women previously victimized by male violence. In support of this is the fact that for many of the POPPY tenants, the violence they experienced occurred well before the trafficking episode began.

The second possibility is that violence is being perpetrated against women with the explicit intent of grooming for trafficking. In support of this is the fact that several women have had the threat of the violence they experienced immediately prior to being trafficked being exposed as part of the trafficking process.

2. Trafficking Method

The ages of women when they were first trafficked vary between 12 and 41 years of age. The mean age when these twenty-six women were first trafficked is 22. Women were most frequently trafficked at ages 17 (3 women), 18 (3 women), and 19 (4 women). These are ages at which women are likely to be more prepared to 'take risks' in order to experience the world, and begin to build lives for themselves separate from their birth families, and thus accept job offers overseas. They are also ages where women are likely to be more easily manipulated and controlled than perhaps women in their twenties and thirties.

We have varying information on the trafficking process for different women. Women travelled in a wide variety of ways, overland, by boat, train, bus, on foot and by flying. Often women's routes were very convoluted, presumably to escape detection.

Twenty-two women have explicitly disclosed that they were accompanied by at least one trafficker at all stages of their journey (**85%**). Three women explicitly disclosed that they travelled unaccompanied, but were provided with travel documents and met upon arriving (**12%**), and one woman has not discussed this part of her trafficking.

Only four women have disclosed that they were forced into work 'en route' to the United Kingdom, three of these women (**12%**), were forced into prostitution in other European countries³; one woman worked in a restaurant for her traffickers in Greece prior to coming to the United Kingdom.

Five of the women we have worked with have been trafficked more than once (**19%**), all five having been trafficked again from their family homes after being deported or returned. None of these women had NGO support in their country of origin to our knowledge. Four of these women were contacted by either their original recruiters, or people connected with their original

³ One woman was forced into prostitution in Italy; one in Italy and France; and one in Italy, France, Albania, Belgium and Greece.

recruiters; three of these women were threatened with harm to themselves or their family, and one woman felt the shame and stigma of having been involved in the sex industry made her unsafe. One woman was re-sold by her family within three days of being returned.

3. Expectation of Work in Destination Country

Of the 26 trafficked women we have worked with to date, the majority were unaware of the work they would be doing on arrival in the United Kingdom. Two women (**8%**) were sold, and so had no expectation of work. Another three women (**12%**) were traveling solely to escape abusers – two women were fleeing violent rapists who were connected with the group that trafficked them, and one woman was fleeing political persecution. Another woman, trafficked when aged 12, believed she was travelling to bring back clothing.

In terms of women who were actively recruited for employment, six women believed they would be working in the restaurant industry (**23%**); six women believed they would be doing domestic work/childminding (**23%**); two women believed they were being offered education opportunities (**8%**); one woman came to the United Kingdom for greater work opportunities (**4%**) and one woman believed she was coming to work in accountancy (**4%**).

Only two women, (**8%**) were aware they were being trafficked to the United Kingdom to work as prostitutes in the sex industry. A further two women (**8%**) had been offered work dancing or escorting in the sex industry, but neither expected they would have to have sex with clients.

This is interesting in light of the recurring discussions between organizations working with women in the sex industry over the degree of trafficking versus the phenomena of ‘migrant sex workers’. While in no way is our sample representative of the sex industry in London, it seems clear that ‘trafficking’ as defined by the Palermo Agreement is certainly taking place. For the women we are working with who knew they were coming to work in the sex industry, they had been lied to about the work conditions here, and were controlled and exploited after arriving, so clearly fit within the boundaries of ‘trafficked woman’.

There is an unresolved question here too about whether a woman who knows she is coming to work in prostitution, but not the degree of exploitation she will face, is as likely to be referred to the POPPY Project. Such women may not identify themselves, or be identified by agencies they come into contact with, as ‘victims’, even though they may have been exploited and experienced human rights abuses. It is important that we continually stress how wide the definition of trafficking actually is when training or liaising with referring agencies.

4. Known Factors Leading to Trafficking/ ‘Decision’

We have discussed with the twenty-six women we have supported whether they feel they made a ‘decision’, and which factors were important in that decision-making.

Of these, five women **(19%)** did not make any kind of 'decision', but were either kidnapped or threatened with death if they did not leave their country of origin. One woman **(4%)** left her country of origin to escape political persecution.

For the remaining women, most detailed several factors as relevant in their decision to accept the chance to travel for work. Twelve women **(46%)** listed the promise of educational or work opportunities as key to their decision-making process; nine women **(35%)** explicitly mentioned needing to escape poverty and unemployment; five women **(19%)** were fleeing domestic violence or recent rape or gang-rape; four women **(16%)** accepted the chance to travel because they wanted to travel and experience new events; four women **(16%)** did not have family support, or wished to leave their families; and one woman was trying to fund her alcohol dependency.

The two women who decided to come to the United Kingdom to work in the sex industry believed they would be able to make substantial amounts of money here based on what they were told by recruiters/traffickers. Both of these women intended this to be short-term response to poverty – one to fund cancer treatment for her sister, the other to fund an alcohol dependency until she was to be given (promised) employment in the restaurant industry.

The two women who were coming to work in escorting and dancing also both cited poverty as part of their reasons for deciding to seek work in the United Kingdom. Both of these women were also the sole people earning in their birth families, and felt responsible for the financial well-being of their parents and siblings.

5. Trafficking Situation – Experiences of Violence

Twenty-three of the twenty-six women for whom information was collected here were trafficked to the United Kingdom for prostitution. Of these twenty-three women, twenty-one women worked in the sex industry before escaping, and the other two escaped before they could be forced into prostitution. Most of the women who worked in the sex industry were forced to work long shifts seven days a week, many seeing more than twenty clients every day. One woman reports seeing over eighty clients on Christmas Day.

Women were also pressured or forced to perform unsafe sexual activities including intercourse and anal sex without condoms, and intercourse whilst menstruating. Often the rationale for this was the idea that performing these unsafe activities would allow women to pay off their 'debts' more quickly. However, for most women, this 'debt' did not diminish rapidly, if at all, as women were charged rent for where they lived and worked (sometimes the same place); charged for food they ate; clothing and personal items bought; travel costs and so on. These charges were always disproportionately high compared to real costs.

Three women were trafficked into work other than prostitution; two women into domestic work, and one woman into waitressing and cleaning.

Experiences of sexual violence other than being forced to sell sex were described by women regardless of the situation trafficked into. Of the twenty-three women trafficked for prostitution, ten women (**43%**) explicitly say they were raped on at least one occasion in the United Kingdom. Of the three women trafficked into other work, two have disclosed rape.

Obviously this sample is not large enough to draw any meaningful comparisons on whether women trafficking into different types of situations are more or less likely to experience sexual violence. What is clear is that women trafficked into domestic slavery and forced labour are also controlled through sexual abuse and rape. It is also possible that having been forced into the sex industry may in itself mean women do not necessarily attach the meaning of 'rape' to every episode of forced sex they experience, perhaps as a type of coping mechanism.

Whilst in the trafficking situation four women (**15%**) had either been forced to abort pregnancies, or been beaten while pregnant in an attempt to make them miscarry.

Twenty of our twenty-six women have disclosed experiencing physical violence whilst in the trafficking situation. This means **77%** of the women we have worked with have been beaten, often with objects (chains, sticks, screwdrivers, household implements, bottles and knives were all mentioned). Women also mention being burnt with cigarettes, thrown from moving vehicles, locked in the boots of cars and threatened with firearms.

In terms of other types of control whilst in the trafficking situation, women disclosed being escorted and having their movements controlled, including being locked in properties; had passport or immigration paperwork removed; told they had to work to pay off 'debts'; received verbal abuse and/or threats to themselves; and were threatened with reprisals against their families.

Less commonly, we have worked with three women who witnessed other trafficked women being tortured and/or stabbed by traffickers/pimps; two women who had their food intake rigidly controlled by traffickers, and one woman who was threatened with the use of voodoo. We have also worked with one woman who conceived a child when aged 13 following repeated rapes by an associate of her trafficker. The child was then taken away from her by the rapist after she had cared for it for one year, and she does not what happened to the child.

6. Pornography

Although asking questions about pornography has not ever been part of our key working procedures, nine women have incidentally disclosed unwanted exposure to pornography as part of the trafficking process (**35%**).

Of these nine women, two women were shown pornography to 'groom' them into prostitution; two women had photographs taken of them by traffickers/pimps while naked, in one case while a gang-rape was taking place; and two women worked in flats where pornography was constantly available to men buying sex. A further two women's traffickers watched

pornography regularly. Both of these women were repeatedly raped by these men, with one of these women stating that her trafficker used pornography prior to, and during, his repeated rapes of her. Finally one woman, out of her trafficking situation now for over a year, but with photographs of her still in her trafficker's possession, had her photograph appear on a website for 'escorting' without her knowledge or agreement. These figures are very high, particular when the fact that we do not routinely screen for unwanted exposure to pornography is considered. With the use of pornography now mainstreamed and deemed 'acceptable', it is unfashionable to suggest links between pornography use and other forms of sexual violence against women. However, from the experiences of trafficked women we have worked with, a clear link is implied.

7. Known Health Effects of Trafficking

Twenty-four of the twenty-six trafficked women we have worked with have described symptoms of mental distress (**92%**). This has ranged from diagnosed depression where anti-depressants have been prescribed or referral to counselling services has taken place (**54%**), to near universal problems with sleeping/nightmares, anxiety and fear; and common problems with loss of appetite and controlling aggression. Many women also talked about experiencing panic attacks, memory problems, self-blame, distrust of others, particularly men, flashbacks of traumatic events, thoughts of suicide and actual self harm and crying constantly. One woman articulately sums this up as feeling like she is 'screaming inside all the time'.

There are also commonalities in terms of experiencing physical symptoms of distress with seventeen women (**65%**) disclosing ongoing physical difficulties following their trafficking. Most frequently, women disclosed recurring headaches and ongoing pain from physical injury (**27%** experienced both of these). Less frequently, several women disclosed ongoing back pain; problems with their stomach; skin irritations; and dental problems.

Six women of those worked with so far have required treatment for cervical abnormalities or gynecological problems (**23%**). All of these women have been raped or forced into prostitution as part of their trafficking. A further three women (**12%**), all of whom were forced into prostitution, experience heavy vaginal bleeding and extremely painful menstruation following their trafficking. Seven women (**27%**) have required treatment for sexually transmitted diseases contracted whilst in prostitution. These include HIV, Hepatitis C, syphilis, genital herpes and genital warts.

Finally, five women (**19%**) have sought support around substance misuse once out of the trafficking experience. Women have used alcohol, cocaine and marijuana to cope with their experiences, and for four women this began while in the trafficking situation.

None of these ongoing effects are in any way surprising, or atypical when compared with what is known about the health needs of trafficked women. There is a clear and ongoing need for coordinated support services linking trafficked women into appropriate health services to help work through the

ongoing mental and physical effects of trafficking. Merely escaping a trafficking situation is not enough for women to overcome the trauma of the human rights abuses they have experienced. It is important that service provision for victims of trafficking continues to acknowledge that recovery after trafficking requires long-term, coordinated support.

Written by Sandra Dickson
Counter-Trafficking Development Worker
April 2004

The POPPY Project
Eaves Housing for Women
2nd Floor, Lincoln House
Kennington Park
1-3 Brixton Road
London
SW9 6DE
www.poppypoint.org

Email : poppy@eaveshousing.co.uk
Tel: 0207 735 2062
Fax: 0207 840 7139
24 Hour Trafficking Hotline: 0207 840 7129

Eaves Housing for Women Limited
Company Number 1322750, Charity Number 275048