

Traffickers target Israeli girls to replace foreign sex slaves

Success in combating the import of women for sex in Israel has led traffickers to recruit local girls.

By Michal Zebede Aug.16, 2009 | 2:12 PM

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At the start of the new century, Israel found itself with an unexpected and unwanted reputation - as a destination hotspot for sex trafficking. The government took significant measures against this phenomenon, but the success in stamping out the import of women for sex has led to a new problem.

From the security of her Tel Aviv office, Yedida Wolfe dials a number at the bottom of a newspaper advertisement that reads, in Hebrew: "Looking for young liberal women for easy work at great pay!!" The phone is answered by a man named Yossi. He explains that the type of work was sex; Yedida would get to choose with whom, how often, and under what conditions.

"You will have complete control," Yossi tells her. The pair arrange a time to meet.

Wolfe is the Executive Director of the Task Force on Human Trafficking (TFHT). She chose the advert at random from dozens of others just like it that appear daily in a major classifieds supplement published across Israel's major cities.

Until 2007, thousands of women each year were trafficked into Israel for sex, mostly from the former Soviet Union. They were subjected to violence, rape, and public auctions, and forced to have sex with up to 20 men per night, often without any pay.

NGOs and government officials, however, achieved a measure of success two years ago in liberating and rehabilitating the foreign women,

frequently identifying them via their missing papers. Many of those saved from the sex trade were subsequently replaced by Israeli women.

"The demand for sex did not change, and the [gap] had to be filled. Israeli women filled it," Adi Willinger, the Trafficking Coordinator at Hotline for Migrant Workers, tells Haaretz. The National Coordinator of the Battle against Trafficking in Persons at Israel's Ministry of Justice, Rahel Gershuni, confirms this.

NGOs estimate that hundreds of Israeli women are currently trafficked within the country, mainly in Tel Aviv and Haifa. "We are just now uncovering this phenomenon," says Wolfe.

Wolfe, Willinger and the senior deputy to Tel Aviv's district attorney, Dalia Avramoff, explain how Israeli women are normally lured into the sex trade: A pimp seeks out a vulnerable girl, usually between the ages of 12 and 15. He takes her in from the streets, or from an abusive home, providing her with "love" and protection. He then gets her addicted to drugs (most frequently heroin) and forces her to work for him as a prostitute in order to pay off her drug debt.

The prostitution and the drugs form a vicious cycle; due to the physical and emotional terror to which the girl is exposed by her clients, she depends on substances for survival more and more. The more drugs she uses, the more money she owes her pimp - money that has to be raised by having sex with more and more men. These pimps have complete physical and psychological control.

The Israeli government acknowledges there is a new problem. There are two new state-funded shelters for Israeli women who have been forced into prostitution. One of them, Shalit, is now home to Miri, a former sex

worker.

Married at 18, Miri says she was quickly forced into prostitution by her husband. At first she refused, but he threatened to hurt their child and have her sister raped. Miri's husband repeatedly abused her; he drugged her food, beat her, and tied up her legs before raping her. She says he would tell her over and over again: "You're mine; I control you. You are not yours. You do not belong to yourself."

According to the manager of the shelter, Na'ama Ze'evi Rivlin, most Israeli prostitutes at Shalit are forced into prostitution by a boyfriend, partner, or husband.

The problem

The NGOs fighting the phenomenon say Israel Police flatly denies the existence of domestic sex trafficking. These groups are outraged at the perceived lack of police action against the people behind the classified ads.

The U.S. Trafficking In Persons Report, issued in June 2009, states: "Police did not initiate any investigations into the trafficking of Israeli citizens within the country and generally did not recognize trafficked Israeli women as such."

"They [the police] deny the existence of this phenomenon," says Willinger. "They claim there is no such thing as internal trafficking in Israel." Wolfe notes that when women from the former Soviet Union were first trafficked into Israel, police also denied the occurrence, but later estimated that 3,000 foreign sex workers were trafficked into Israel from the region annually.

But Gershuni believes that the Tel Aviv police are doing the best that they can to find and stop traffickers. Although trafficking is considered a high priority crime by the police, pimping and related sex crimes are not.

"Only after a victim has been trafficked by a pimp can we prove the pimp is a trafficker," says Wolfe. The police are not prepared to spend their time following newspaper ads that will lead them, at face value, to "merely a pimp."

"The police do not show extreme cooperation in pimping or soliciting cases," Avramoff says. "Unfortunately, if I do not have a victim to tell the story I cannot prosecute the crime in court. If no one speaks, our hands are tied."

All too often, she adds, the most despicable, ruthless sex crimes slip through the cracks. If they fall just outside of defined criminal law, Avramoff says, they cannot be prosecuted.

For example, authorities have trouble determining whether or not cases like that of Miri qualify as human trafficking.

Fighting on

According to TFHT, men in Israel pay approximately one million visits a month to brothels. Without this demand, Israeli women would not have been recruited to fill the void left by rehabilitated foreign sex slaves.

"There is now a legislative initiative to incriminate clients of prostitution," says Gershuni. The initiative is to be relaunched in September 2009, allowing for a year of research from the date when it was initially proposed.

In battling the trafficking of women in Israel, says Avramoff, "there is a long struggle ahead of us. And we are not giving up."