



STOLEN **LIVES**

**Trading
Women
Into Sex
and
Slavery**

Sietske Altink

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The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure
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For the woman who called herself Victoria

Preface

‘Shocking’: this is the reaction when traffic in women receives publicity. But wherever we live – in Europe, the United States or Asia – the problem exists, and it cannot be attributed to the naïveté of its victims, as the cases recorded in this book show.

In my work for the Dutch foundation against traffic in women, Stichting Tegen Vrouwenhandel (STV) and my research among prostitutes, I have studied a number of cases of trafficking. I have talked to more than 100 women suspected of entering the Netherlands through the channels of the traffic. For this book, which was first published in Dutch, I interviewed 20: three Thai women, three Colombians, five women from the Dominican Republic, one Moroccan, one Indonesian, plus a woman from Poland and another from former Yugoslavia. One wanted to say only that she was of Asian origin. The remaining women came from the Philippines. The group is a fair representation of the nationalities of Third World women trafficked to Europe. Some of the cases show how the trade in people can be adapted to local conditions.

As the traffickers are highly organized, most of their victims dare not speak out. Ana from the Dominican Republic said, ‘They were like a mafia. I couldn’t even discuss my situation with other girls. Whenever I told someone my story, the next day the traffickers knew that I had talked. The man who kept me prisoner explicitly forbade me to speak to other girls. If these criminals have the address of your parents’ home, they can keep you a prisoner. They say you endanger your father and mother when you don’t obey them. That’s how the traffickers subdue us.’ Because of their reluctance to talk, it made no sense to search brothels or red light districts for trafficked women. Indeed, when I did this, I would end up talking to the owners of the brothels and not the women.

By the time I interviewed them, most of the women I talked to were safe and the traffickers had no further hold over them. They had run away or were in contact with the police. However, a few of them were still being pressured by profiteers offering them dubious forms of help, usually for considerable sums of money.

One essential problem that most trafficked women face is that they are seen by the authorities as illegal immigrants rather than as refugees and it is therefore difficult for them to give evidence against their traffickers. Most of the women I talked to were not keen to relive their painful experiences. Celestina of the Dominican Republic said, 'I only tell my story to warn other girls. I don't really want to talk. When I tell you what happened in that particular period in my life, I forget to look after my daughter and I can only think of what that criminal organization did to me. That is not right. I should be thinking of my child's future.'

In the confined world which these women inhabit rumour is an important source of information. All the women I came across knew of cases of trafficking other than their own. One Dominican woman called this communication system of the powerless the 'Arabian telephone'. I have checked and double-checked these rumours as far as possible and asked people in their vicinity for background information. Not all the rumours are reliable, however. Sometimes the traffickers spread stories whose sole purpose is to disinform the women. For example, some women trafficked by the so-called Billionaire gang were told that one gang member had cut a victim in pieces and put her in the freezer, which is in fact the plot of a well-known Roald Dahl story.

The Netherlands have been the starting point for my research, but the methods used by traffickers to the Netherlands apply to most other countries, and the cases I have reconstructed illustrate the methods of recruitment used by traffickers and the problems the women they traffic encounter elsewhere. Research in Germany and Belgium has shown that the fight against traffic in women in those countries faces the same problems as in the Netherlands: women who dare not speak out and the difficulty of finding proof. Personal histories which have been published in these countries have much in common with the stories of women in the Netherlands.

It is virtually impossible to compile a complete picture of traffic in women in every corner of the world. Apart from Asia and some western European countries, statistics are hard to come by. Most data on traffic is gathered by non-governmental organizations and women's groups. Apart from the interviews, my own data comes from brochures and publications by women's groups which fight trafficking. Newspapers and television were also important sources of information, the newspaper reports being translations of stories from international press agencies which

appeared in Dutch newspapers. The vast body of documentation at STV and court cases in the Netherlands were also important sources.

This is not an encyclopaedic or scientific survey: it is rather a journalistic exploration with its own limitations of time and space. The cases of traffic in women for prostitution which I describe range from the small to the large scale. Women are usually forced into small-scale trafficking by one or two people; their husbands, for instance. In large-scale traffic a network run by international organized crime wholesales in people and makes use of contacts in high places. Chapter 1 defines what I believe trafficking to be and some of its characteristics. After looking at its history and international context in chapters 2 and 3, I consider the Dutch scene in chapter 4. Chapters 5 to 11 are more specific and are based on my interviews. They reconstruct traffickers' methods and routes from specific cases. They also contain some international information, for instance on South America, which is not included in chapter 3. Chapters 12 and 13 consider the plight of mail-order brides and domestic workers. In conclusion, Chapter 14 looks at measures that could be taken to prevent trafficking and there is also a list of contact addresses for organizations mentioned in the book.

To preserve their anonymity, the names of the interviewees have been altered, as have personal details such as the number of children they have. Traffickers' names have also been changed in some instances.

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I am also grateful to the following organizations and people, who are listed in alphabetical order – by first name, where relevant, as some people cannot be mentioned by their full names: AGISRA, Germany (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Gegen Internationale Sexuelle und Rassistische Ausbeutung); Al Dunnette; Amsterdam Call Girls, for additional information on Dutch prostitution; anonymous – most of all I am indebted to the trafficked women and non-trafficked migrant prostitutes who dared to share their experiences with me; the Anti-Slavery Society, London branch; the Asian Women’s Resource Centre, London; Avis Lewallen, who had her house overrun by a panicky author from the Netherlands while the book was being edited; Bayanihan, the foundation for the well-being of Filipinos in the Netherlands; the BBC for involving me in the *Inside Story* documentary ‘The Women Trade’; Belgrade’s hotline for women – Violetta Krasnic and Zorica Mrsevic; Ben Stam, my husband, for his priceless practical support; Brid Brennan, who works for the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam; CFMW, the Commission of Filipino Migrant Workers; the Chinese Community Centre in Gerrard Street, London; Chris de Stoop for sharing information with me; churches – I would like to thank the following churches for their financial support while I was writing the Dutch edition of the book: Projectencommissie van de Dominicanessen, Provinciaal Kruissheren and the Zending en Werelddiakonaat van de Gereformeerde Kerken in the Netherlands; CRI, the Criminal Intelligence Unit, Interpol, the Netherlands, especially Leen Pieterse; the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP); Fe Jusay for introductions in London; FIZ, the Frauen Information Zentrum, Mechteld Mauer; Heinrich Böll Institute, for taking me to Prague to meet organizations and experts involved in trafficking; Hester van Vugt, for advice on the Dutch edition;

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1 The characteristics of traffic

'My brother had warned me against traffickers in women. I never imagined that I myself was going to have to deal with them. I had heard about women who were sold to Japan, but I didn't realize it also happened in Europe.' Before Fatima, who comes from Indonesia, became a victim of the traffic in women and found herself in the Netherlands she had considered trafficking to be a marginal phenomenon, as most people do.

The idea of trafficking in women is associated in many people's minds with the 'white slave trade', with European girls being kidnapped and taken to harems in the Middle East. In the 1960s and 1970s the stories were numerous. Paris and Brussels were considered dangerous places for young girls: they would be lured into expensive shops, from where they would be whisked through a trapdoor in the floor into the cellars and never seen again. Or an elderly woman would ask girls to help her up the stairs, only to lock them up. Not unnaturally these reports were treated with scepticism. It comes as a shock therefore to realize that traffic in women for prostitution by professional criminal gangs is happening here and now.

Women are trafficked not only to Europe but worldwide, not only from south to north, but from Latin America to southern Europe and the Middle East, from south-east Asia to the Middle East and central and northern Europe, from South America to North America and Europe, and from eastern Europe to western Europe. To traffic women means to work upon their desire or need to migrate, by bringing them into prostitution under conditions that make them totally dependent on their recruiters in ways which also impair their rights. It exists where poverty has forced women to seek different methods of survival for themselves and their families. And it takes different forms for the women involved, not only prostitution but also domestic slavery or mail-order marriage.

According to United Nations official Jean Fernand-Laurent, trafficking in women is more profitable than arms or drug smuggling.

The concept of victim is the only one available to describe trafficked women. The word is used here in the legal sense: when you are robbed you are the victim of a crime. However, 'victim' has unwanted connotations of meekness and submissiveness which echo Victorian demands that victims of trafficking should be chaste and ignorant, a definition that ignores the sense of responsibility which leads women to migrate in search of work. Many women from the Third and Second Worlds realize their goal of maintaining their families with money earned in the First World. Yet women who don't seem submissive and innocent are still not taken seriously.

Women who dare to expose their traffickers encounter a barrage of questions in which the onus is on them to prove that they are victims. A former Dutch attorney, who is now an advocate general, Maria Koers, has often handled cases of trafficking. 'If a girl has a well-oiled tongue, it is very difficult to convince the judges that she was exploited. But a woman who speaks up can also fall victim to traffickers. The lawyer for the defence might say, "If that girl had so much initiative, she could easily have avoided her plight." But then they don't realize that the woman had virtually no choice.'

'It hurts, but don't call me a poor thing,' one woman I interviewed said. Victims can also be very tough who will do anything to avenge the damage done to them and make a better life for themselves. Some victims don't go to the police but start trafficking themselves, or side with the traffickers to avoid reprisals. After all, they know the ins and outs of the trade and so think they have less to fear. They believe they can make a new career as a trafficker.

The recent wave of trafficking has been driven by poverty in the Third World, which forces women to migrate from rural areas to the cities in search of better economic opportunities. Many of them then become part of the sex-tourism trade, which bolsters the balance of payments in their own country, or they migrate to the richer countries of the First World. A similar lack of opportunity and employment in eastern European countries and the new ease of movement between east and west have drawn women into western Europe.

Estimates of the numbers of women who are victims of trafficking vary considerably because they depend on the definition of what trafficking is. If every migrant sex worker is considered

a victim of the traffic in people, then large numbers can be splashed across newspaper headlines. Thousands or even millions of women are supposed to be trafficked worldwide, depending on the newspaper you read.¹ If the numbers are exaggerated in this way then the problem becomes so enormous that it is impossible to tackle. Nor are the victims helped if the problem is played down. Because of the nature of trafficking, it is difficult for women to come forward and say they have been trafficked, and therefore difficult to estimate how many women are its victims. Moreover, most foreign prostitutes in Europe are not victims of trafficking but are illegal immigrants, and they also won't speak out. Many prostitutes migrate voluntarily, by so-called chain migration: friends, sisters or nieces invite them over.² Most migrant prostitutes arrive on tourist visas which don't allow them to work, in prostitution or any other profession. And not all sex workers from outside the European Union are illegal immigrants. Some have permits of residence, through marriage for example.

What is trafficking?

Not all prostitutes are victims of traffic in women or sex slaves, as they are sometimes called. At first sight trafficking might seem to have many similarities with the slave trade. Like trafficked women, slaves had to work long hours and were punished when they didn't work hard enough. However, the main difference between the two lies in the nature of the labour performed. Slaves did 'normal', recognized labour. Prostitutes don't. Domestic labour is a borderline case: it can be undertaken with proper rights and pay, but it can also be informal, unpaid labour.

In European law legislators have carefully avoided equating the trade in women with slavery because they were afraid they would implicitly recognize prostitution as labour if they did so. At the start of the twentieth century traffic in women was considered to be immoral rather than exploitative. The emphasis was placed on the moral deterioration of the women. By stigmatizing the female victims of traffic as prostitutes who don't perform labour, the women were marginalized. The official view was that women who were trafficked could not be called slaves in case prostitution was thereby recognized as labour.³

A characteristic of the slave trade is the direct buying and selling of people; this also occurs in some cases of trafficking. Clients

with whom the women get involved have to buy their release. One punter had to buy a second victim at half price. In one criminal case the suspects were charged with the offence of slave trading, but the case was dismissed.

The idea that traffic in women is a matter of sexual violence has also been abandoned, although forced prostitution is still considered to be sexual violence because women don't have sexual autonomy. However, even when women don't object to working as prostitutes they may be victims of economic exploitation. Sexual violence may be involved because some women have been raped or forced to work without a condom.

Since violation of physical or sexual autonomy is involved, traffic in women is also a human rights issue. It violates articles 4, 5 and 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Trafficked women don't have freedom of movement or freedom of speech and in some cases are forced to migrate, for example when they are abducted.

Transporting women is a reflection of the role migration and organized crime play in trafficking. Most modern traffickers have developed their criminal activities from current major political issues: the tension between the desire of the Third and Second World peoples to migrate to the First World and the restrictions western countries place on immigration. Traffickers exploit the political void at the heart of migration issues.

The crime of trafficking arises from political expediency.⁴ Criminals take advantage of the fact that politicians don't deal effectively with controversial problems. This political dimension is absent in 'ordinary' serious crime. Criminality arising out of political expediency presupposes a flexibility that is only feasible in organized groups. Traffickers need to make contacts with the legitimate world. They do so, for instance, by replacing a failing administration in the women's home countries with their own systems for forging documents. Trafficking women is labour intensive. The women have to be brought to the target country, distributed, watched over and housed by the traffickers, who can't operate without contacts in the women's home countries. The gangs use other methods characteristic of organized crime: they work with corrupt authorities, launder money, have contacts in both legitimate areas and the underworld and form a hierarchy in which there is a division of labour. Only small-scale trafficking, for instance trafficking for marriage, cannot be described as organized crime. Among their other activities, most organized crime

groups – the Italian and Russian mafia, the Japanese yakuza and Chinese triads – all traffic in women.

Recruiting with a false promise of marriage is the oldest trick in the book. Another classic trick is to promise a job through personal contacts. Other methods include abduction, or promises of a holiday, a student grant, political asylum or a visa based on a phoney job offer from a company. Leen Pieterse of the Criminal Intelligence Unit in the Netherlands said, 'We are alerted when one company invites a few hundred Russian girls to work with them as secretaries.' Brazilian and eastern European women especially are led to believe they can combine a holiday with a job. Large-scale recruitment is done by agencies which promise women jobs or a career as an entertainer. Some women really believe they are going to be trained as ballet dancers. In one case the traffickers followed an eastern European ballet company which was touring Europe, went to the performances and kidnapped one of the most beautiful dancers.

The number of abductions is increasing. Before 1991 there were none, but since then six cases were recorded in 1994.⁵ Leen Pieterse said, 'Sometimes these girls are offered drinks laced with drugs and they are then raped in a hotel room. Pictures are taken to blackmail them with afterwards. Maybe these men don't intend initially to force the woman into prostitution, but she has to be disposed of and they daren't kill her. The easiest way out is to make her disappear into the underworld of prostitution. It is also possible that a girl has slept with a guy and he has paid for her drinks; she felt sorry afterwards and didn't dare to go back home to her parents.'

All nationalities, black and white, men and women, Bosnians and Serbs, eastern and western Europeans, work together to traffic women. Traffickers are all ages and come from all professions. Some are better educated than the police – one suspect, for example, had graduated in theology – others are virtually illiterate. He or she may be a player in a national football team (which has happened), a grandmother, a small-time criminal or a well-dressed manager. It is difficult to talk to suspected traffickers because the nature of their profession makes them hard to track down. The one person suspected of trafficking whom I managed to interview talked a lot without saying much.

The women they have trafficked could provide first-hand information about them. The victims of small-scale gangs in particular could give the details of their daily, usually violent, contact with

the traffickers. In general the women who have escaped from large-scale traffickers had little to do with the big bosses, but had more contact with their staff. However, something about the motives of the traffickers, their frame of mind and their personalities can be gleaned from trials where they have had to defend themselves, though it should be remembered that in the court room they are in a strange environment.

One sex-club owner who was accused of trafficking women wouldn't even admit that he was involved in the sex industry. He said that he provided a social service. The judge was not convinced. Some other traffickers presented their activities as development aid, saying they only wanted to help the women. The excuses traffickers find are usually very lame: one Yugoslavian suspect said at his trial that the women were conspiring against him because they wanted another pimp. Another could not believe that he had done anything wrong. 'Why do my girls always go to the police?' he asked. He was convicted.

Thousands of documented cases of traffic in women in Europe now exist. Since 1992, however, there has been an increase in the traffic of eastern and central European women in the Netherlands. For example, in 1993, 75 per cent of STV's clients came from eastern European countries, which increased to 80 per cent in 1994. For the English edition of this book, which has been revised and extended, I talked to some of these eastern European women. Through STV's contacts abroad I was also able to speak to some victims and informants in Belgium and Britain. Most of the women interviewed in the Netherlands were clients of STV. Kalayaan (Freedom), an organization of migrant Philippine women, also introduced me to women who were traded as mail-order brides and domestic workers.

In Germany the traffic in mail-order brides and domestic workers is well established; in the Netherlands and other European countries, however, it is a relatively new phenomenon. Because household labour is not formalized, organizations have been able to abuse women's rights and trade in them as domestic helpers. Mail-order brides are expected to work as unpaid domestic helpers and to deliver sexual services for free. Both these areas are defined as trafficking in women because they exploit women in the areas in which they work traditionally but which are not recognized, let alone formalized, as labour.

Although the trafficking in males and children is outside the scope of this book, it should not be thought that it is only women

who are trafficked. Recently a ring trafficking Czech boys was discovered. Brazilian transvestites are also trafficked. Trafficked men have the same rights in the Netherlands as female victims, but as yet there are no shelters for them. A social worker in Rotterdam, Door Malkus, who works with male as well as female prostitutes, said to me, 'Traffic in boys may occur in large numbers. And in children too for that matter.' However, most traffic in children takes place for the illegal adoption market. Occasionally the papers report traffic in boys from eastern European orphanages, usually for paedophiles or for men and women who hope that sex with minors will decrease the risk of contracting AIDS. There is also a market for child pornography, which people who are so minded can easily make in their own homes with camcorders. Millions of children are supposed to be abused worldwide. Unfortunately stories of child trafficking are usually sensationalized. Reports of satanic child abuse, that is to say unverified accounts of children being abused by rings of satanists in isolated houses in the countryside, do much harm. They distract public attention from the many real victims of child trafficking.⁶

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