

Sex slavery and Israel's failure to fight the growing trade

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Last year, the United Nations named Israel as one of the main destinations in the world for trafficked women, according to the *BBC*.

Israel has also been named as an offender in the annual U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons (Tip) report, which condemned the Jewish state for not fully complying with the "minimum standards" to eliminate sex trafficking.

According to Canadian journalist and social activist Victor Malarek, "newspaper ads from modeling and employment agencies promise exciting jobs, but the women are duped... They must submit, or they are raped, beaten and tortured. There are between 5,000 and 10,000 trafficked women in Israel and more than 280 brothels in Tel Aviv alone. It is a human rights issue the Jewish community knows about. They have a voice and they must use it."

With the promise of a job and better economic and social conditions, women are driven to slavery and sold in auctions that take place in nightclubs and bars. Afterwards they are pimped, beaten and isolated. Several trafficked women are subjected to degrading human auctions, where they are stripped, examined and sold for \$8,000-\$10,000.

- "They sold me- just sold me!"

The *BBC* interviewed one of the trafficked women in Israel, who gave her name as Marina. She is now hiding in a small house in northern Israel because she is wanted by the Israeli authorities for being an illegal immigrant and by the criminal gangs who lured her to Israel to sell her into prostitution.

"When I was in the Ukraine, I had a difficult life," said Marina, who came to Israel in 1999 at the age of 33 after answering a newspaper advertisement offering the opportunity to study abroad.

"I was taken to an apartment in Ashkelon, and other women there told me I was now in prostitution. I became hysterical, but a guy started hitting me and then others there raped me.

"I was then taken to a place where they sold me - just sold me!" she said, recalling how she was locked in a windowless basement for a month, drank water from a toilet and was deprived of food.

Although Marina managed to escape, she is still suffering from the physical and mental scars that she endured during her captivity.

Like Marina, several other women — most from the former Soviet republics — are trafficked into Israel legally on the false promise of jobs and better economic conditions. Recent figures show that from the beginning of the 1990s to the early years of 2000, an estimated 3,000 women a year were trafficked to Israel.

- “Israel did absolutely nothing”

Although prostitution in Israel is legal, pimping and running a brothel are not. However, the law isn’t enforced, and several brothels masquerading as massage parlours, saunas and internet cafes could be seen on the streets.

In Tel Aviv’s Neve Shaanan district for instance, a brothel is located outside the local police station!

The absence of anti-trafficking laws in Israel means that such inhumane activity is unchecked.

“During the first 10 years of trafficking, Israel did absolutely nothing,” said Nomi Levenkron, of the Migrant Workers’ Hotline, an NGO which helps trafficked women and puts pressure on the state to act.

“Women were trafficked into Israel – the first case we uncovered was in 1992 – and not much really happened,” she said. “Occasionally traffickers were brought to trial, but the victims were arrested as well, they were forced to testify, and then they were deported.”

Rachel Benziman, the legal advisor to the non-profit Israeli Women’s network, agrees, explaining how difficult it is to find witnesses. “It’s not a problem of finding the right section in the criminal code. It is more a problem of finding the women who will testify”, Benziman said, according to *Reuters*.

What’s more shocking is that, since 1994, no single woman has testified against any trafficker. Many say this could be attributed to the fact that although women are the victims, trafficked women are the ones usually arrested as illegal immigrants, while the men who brought them to Israel, who are usually Israeli, are not.

- “The supply of victims has not gone down”

According to NGOs, trafficking was made a crime in Israel in 2000, but the punishments were lenient and law enforcement was poor. Authorities only began to act after fierce criticism from the U.S. and the threat of sanctions. In an effort to fight sex slavery, Israel tightened its borders, launched investigations into suspected traffickers, and handed down stiff jail sentence to traffickers.

The opening of a shelter for trafficked women in north Tel Aviv in 2004 also marked a change in the way the state perceived the victims. There are some 30 women at the Maggan shelter – most from former Soviet states, but also five from China.

“When they come here they are in a bad condition,” said Rinat Davidovich, the shelter’s

director. "Most have sexual diseases and some have hepatitis and even tuberculosis. They also have problems going to sleep because they remember what used to happen to them at night... It's very hard and it's a long procedure to start to help and treat them."

Police say their actions have led to a significant drop in the number of women now being trafficked into Israel for sex – hundreds, rather than thousands, a year.

But campaigners say increased police activity had an adverse effect as traffickers have been forced to become more discreet, making the practice more difficult to detect.

"We've been keeping tabs on trends, in terms of, for instance, prices of exploitative services," said Yedida Wolfe, of the Task Force on Human Trafficking.

"Those prices have not gone up, which leads us to believe that the supply of victims has not gone down.

"While government officials are saying that their efforts have drastically cut the number of victims in the country, the NGOs on the scene really don't feel that's true."

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