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250 Brothels in Tel Aviv Alone

FIGHTING THE FLESH TRADE

Although new laws are in the works to stem the white-slavery trade into Israel, the authorities must do more to treat the prostitutes as victims rather than criminals.

By Marion Murrache /Jerusalem Post

"Woman's flesh for sale, woman's flesh for sale," yells a man in front of the Hamashbir department store in downtown Jerusalem, offering up to passers-by the young woman standing next to him.

Although **trafficking in women is very much a reality in Israel**, this scene was a protest staged last month by the Jerusalem Women's Center as part of the International Day of Protest Against Violence Against Women.

"Instead of just protesting rape and domestic violence as we do every other year, we could not ignore the terrible issue of **thousands of women being trafficked annually** into this country to be used as prostitutes," says Adi Kunstman, coordinator of activities at the center, adding "Trafficking is **modern slavery**."

Israeli organizations dealing with the issue, such as the Hotline for Migrant Workers and the Awareness Center, believe that some 3,000 women are smuggled into the country every year for the purpose of prostitution. The majority of these women are from Moldavia, Russia, and the Ukraine. They are approached in their countries of origin – where they earn \$20 to \$30 a month – with the promise of employment which will bring in a magical monthly \$1,000.

According to a report issued by the International Abolitionist Federation, an estimated one-fourth of these women are unaware that they will be working in the sex trade, believing instead they will be employed as waitresses, cooks, au pairs, models, or masseuses. None are prepared for what they eventually encounter. **Most suffer beatings and repeated rape.**

The women are viewed and bought at pimping auctions – during which they are forced to undress – at prices ranging from \$4,000 to \$10,000.

According to attorney Nomi Levenkron of the Migrant Hotline, those who fetch the lower prices end up working in the slum area around Tel Aviv's old central bus station. Their **passports are taken from them**, and they are often kept **locked up in apartments**

with barred windows. This was the case with the four prostitutes, who were trapped and burnt to death when a religious fanatic torched a Tel Aviv brothel in August, 2000.

That incident briefly raised public awareness of the issue, and sparked calls for the authorities to start treating the problem seriously. But it is only in the past month that two bills that might alleviate the situation began to make headway in the Knesset.

Last month, a private member's bill entitling women who were sold into prostitution to public legal aid, passed its preliminary reading in the Knesset. Meretz MK Zahava Gal-On, sponsor of the bill and head of the parliamentary commission of inquiry into trafficking in women, notes that these women, when arrested, usually find themselves represented by their pimps' attorneys, an obvious clash of interests that goes against the principle of fair representation.

Also late last year the Knesset passed, in its preliminary reading, a bill that mandates a four-year minimum sentence for traders in women. Currently, there is a 16-year maximum sentence, but no minimum jail time, and many white slavers end up getting off with relatively light sentences.

"Israel has become a convenient center for pimps who trade in women," says Gal-On, who also proposed this bill. "It is modern-day slave trading, and the sentences for the pimps are not harsh enough, as judges still do not take this matter seriously enough. The courts give the criminals ridiculous sentences, rendering the current law meaningless. At the worst, the pimps spend a couple of years in jail, but they make a fortune. But from now on, criminals will know that you cannot trade in women and get off lightly."

250 BROTHELS IN TEL AVIV

An illuminated sign reading "Palace Club" flashes outside a seedy brothel in south Tel Aviv. A group of journalists joining Gal-On's committee on a recent fact-finding mission, head down a few flights of dark stone stairs to the reception area where three young women sit huddled in a corner waiting for clients. Beside them stands their portly pimp dabbing the sweat from his forehead with a large silk handkerchief.

There are approximately 250 such brothels in Tel Aviv, an increase of 100 since last year. This is by far the largest number of brothels in the country; in other parts of the country trafficking exists, but it is less common and there is far less awareness of the problem. Some of the women live in brothels, others have a room elsewhere.

"... The women are viewed and bought at pimping auctions – during which they are forced to undress – at prices ranging from \$4,000 to \$10,000. ..."

If business is good, a shift can last from 10 a.m. to 3 a.m. They are paid at the end of the month after expenses and "fines" have been deducted – prostitutes can be fined by

their pimps for almost anything. And this is only once the girls have paid back their purchase price, during which time they are extraordinarily lucky if those who are pimping for them give them a **daily allowance of 20 shekels for cigarettes**.

Often, by the time they have finished buying themselves out of their slavery, they have been resold and must begin again. These women are told so often that they are the property of their pimps that they do not even stop to think whether or not they have to have sex with them as well. Although clients generally have to use protection, the pimps usually don't. Gal-On says one pimp told her his women make 120 shekels for a half-hour, "100 shekels for me, 20 shekels for them." Many brothels also have a kitty into which the girls have to put 30 to 50 shekels per client in order to cover the brothel's tax bill (declared income is credited to "massages").

These women are often **lured into prostitution in their native countries by misleading job advertisements** in the papers. They often have very young children who they have left behind with their families.

"Some have artistic careers, others are academics who want to make some money to pay for their studies," explains Levenkron. "Those who have children generally have not been part of the work force yet because they have married young."

Many of the women travel from Moscow to Sharm e-Sheikh, and then are taken to the Israeli border. They are met by there by Beduin guides, who smuggle them across the border and deliver them to an agent acting on behalf of procurers.

They are also provided with false documentation, needed for those times when the police raid brothels, check the women's identification papers, and ask to see if they have valid visas. But according to the prostitutes, they rarely enquire whether they are being held against their will. In any case, the women admit, they are usually too frightened to answer truthfully.

Although **prostitution [Slavery] itself is not a crime in Israel**, such groups as the Migrant Hotline and the Awareness Center accuse the authorities of treating the trafficked women as criminals, instead of victims, interested simply in deporting them – as has been the case with more than 1,000 such women in the past three years. These organizations also accuse law enforcement of generally ignoring the crimes of pimps and traffickers, even though they **"buy, sell, rape and torture women,"** because they sometimes cooperate with the police by providing information about other criminal activities.

There have also been at least a half-dozen cases of sex trafficking involving policemen as suspects, and one policeman was charged with managing a brothel. In four cases, policemen informed the pimps of expected raids on their premises, and in one instance a policeman was accused of selling a woman to another pimp following her arrest.

One prostitute, Sonya (not her real name), says she went to a police station and asked to be arrested because she had just ran away from the brothel where she was held against her will. The policemen turned her away, and as she left she heard them saying (in Hebrew) they were going to call her pimp.

AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN

One officer who does care is Tel Aviv Police Superintendent Pini Aviram, who heads a special investigative team dealing with the trafficking issue. But Aviram complains that he does not have anywhere near the manpower need for the job.

"My team consists of only five Russian speakers," he says, "We need people who can speak to the women in their own language, and interview them adequately."

JAIL TIME: A Neveh Tirza prisoner awaits deportation on charges of prostitution. "Julia", 23, told stories of an organized sex trade which brought her from Eastern Europe, and left her in jail.

This adequate interviewing is actually taking place, but unfortunately not until the women have already found their way into jail. They are held, usually at the Neveh Tirza prison but alternatively at Abu Kabir, Kishon, Negev or others, for weeks and sometimes for months, awaiting deportation. Levenkron or other volunteers from Migrant Hotline visit Neveh Tirza every Sunday taking a translator and additional student volunteers with them. Hotline is the only non-governmental organization which has been allowed access to the prisons, and they bring the women phone cards and clothing.

"One women sticks in my mind," says Levenkron; "She wore one green satin pajama for three weeks straight, until we were able to bring her clothes."

Now, thanks to Neveh Tirza warden Debi Sagi, Hotline has better and easier access to the women. "Debi doesn't think they should be in prison," says Levenkron, "but as long as they are she wants to make life as easy as she can for them."

In general, the prostitutes are housed separately from the hardened criminals, but that is **not always possible due to space restrictions**. Levenkron worries about this because of the danger of the women being influenced to take drugs by their cellmates. Eastern European prostitutes, unlike their Israeli counterparts do not generally take drugs. In fact, Levenkron has only come across one such case among all the women she has met and whose interviews she has looked over.

Another difference between foreign and Israeli prostitutes is that the latter get to keep a larger percentage of the takings. Sadly, says Levenkron, one girl's ambition was to "become an Israeli prostitute."

When asked whether they had tried to run away – and if not, why – many of the women explain that they are afraid for the safety of their families back home. Some have tried to escape, and were later caught and beaten. One woman presently housed at a hostel waiting to testify against her pimp, told the Hotline that a man who had befriended her was supposed to meet to help her escape but when she arrived at the prearranged meeting point, her pimp turned up instead. She began to scream and the police came and took her into custody.

In many cases when a woman is arrested, her pimp will pay an 30,000 shekels bail pending her deportation, so that she can go back to work. Thus, says Levenkron, “these women, who were raped, trafficked and exploited before their arrests, were in fact sold once more, this time by the state itself.”

Police Deputy-Commander Avi Davidovitch, head of an inter-ministerial team dealing with the trafficking issue established at Attorney General Elyakim Rubinstein’s recommendation, says that although the number of trafficked women is growing alarmingly high, few complaints are filed against pimps, and many women either refuse to complain or later retract earlier statements they have made to the police out of fear of reprisals.

Police investigations head Commander Moshe Mizrahi also expresses concern about how to protect women who decide to testify against their pimps. If they are simply repatriated, those who imported them will be able to find them; additionally, many are supporting children in their home countries whom they fear may be harmed. Mizrahi calls for a “serious international operation” that would extend to the women’s countries of origin.

For example, in some countries of the Former Soviet Union, a poster campaign has sprung up and women are able to read on buses and other public places about the dangers of falling for the offer of a well-paying job abroad. But, Mizrahi insists, much more still needs to be done.

At least now, thanks to the Hotline’s intervention, every woman who does come forward is provided with some assistance at the state’s expense. This came about after four women filed a petition through the Hotline requesting the court instruct the police to seriously investigate their complaints against their procurers. The women stated they would be ready to testify against the pimps in court, provided they did not have to spend the intervening months in jail until called upon to give evidence at the trial. As a result of the petition, the police questioned the girls, and those who agreed to testify were provided with a safe place to stay and living expenses until the time of their testimony.

But Hotline insists that even this aid (said by police to cost 6,000 shekels a month per woman, a sum with which Hotline disagrees) is inadequate, especially when it comes to medical expenses. Many of the women come out of the brothels with serious health problems; one 21-year-old former prostitute is now unable to have children because of untreated gynecological problems. According to Shuki Baleli, Vice Squad Chief for the Tel Aviv District, they rarely even go to a doctor unless they are in pain. "If they die, no one will even know who they are," he adds.

Even when under police protection, almost every medical incident needs to be appealed separately by Hotline on behalf of the women. The humanitarian group Doctors for Human Rights treats these women for free or for nominal sums in the 30 to 50 shekels range, but serious health problems sometimes require the women to seek other sources of treatment.

So far, despite the provision providing them with a place to stay outside of prison, only a few dozen of the trafficked women have agreed to testify against their pimps. What they need, says Levenkron, "is a reason to come forward and to give evidence against these criminals."

She recommends that instead of threatening these women with deportation, they be given work or student visas for a specified amount of time in order to make the ordeal worth their while.

"Legalization of their status is the only real option," she says, an issue that applies to all foreign workers in this country. "If there will be further laws written," adds Levenkron, "they should insure that these victims get effective legal representation, medical treatment, and a proper place from them to stay."

Until then, **the [Goyim] women will continue to suffer.**