

can get them a job abroad, or perhaps schooling, but always in the woman's mind, it's an opportunity to get out of poverty, to make a better life for herself, and she willingly goes."

Usually the victim is passed between a number of people, with no apparent signs of exploitation, yet travel arrangements will be made under false passports or illegal documents. It's only after walking through immigration of her own free will, that a trafficked person will begin to become aware of the reality of the situation. "She may be passed on to an Irish pimp, it's then that she may realise she has to pay back a large debt - sometimes way over what the cost would be for travelling - and she has to pay that back to the pimp or trafficker or maybe both," explains Gerardine, adding that the strength of this debt bondage is enough to make the women, most often in their teens or early twenties, feel left with no other choice than to work in prostitution. "They may receive threats of violence, violence may be carried out on them," says Gerardine, pointing out the added vulnerability of being alone, very far from home and often afraid of authorities. "Irish criminal gangs know how easy it is to exploit people who are foreign."

The life of victims of trafficking is a grim one, from what Gerardine has been told by the women Ruhama has helped. "They usually live where the brothels are, perhaps a two bedroomed apartment where one bedroom is used for prostitution, and they have to sleep in the next bedroom. They have to live on the premises and often be available 24/7. We have come across women who were locked in rooms. Others find that one week they're in one place, the next they're in another place, because the people who purchase the women want variety."

"This means the women become more vulnerable, because they don't get time to put down roots, make personal friendships, or get to know organisations that could help them.

"Conditions vary in the houses, but they are not very good. Psychologically, living where the brothel is, they're socially isolated and they have very little freedom."

The unfortunate truth is that these women, young girls and sometimes children, are simply a commodity, and the criminals who control the prostitution rings are savvy in their means of both keeping the customer happy, and the product that they're selling - in this case, human bodies - controlled. And as the criminals get better at controlling the situation, there seems to be less that can be done to stop it - at least, until legislation is changed, or

more actively enforced. A law brought in in 1993 made it illegal to solicit prostitution, to control another person in prostitution or to advertise prostitution, but currently it is not a crime for someone to go into a brothel and purchase sex. "It's a little bit ambiguous and it's not the best piece of legislation to deal with the issues today," says Gerardine. "We would feel there needs to be more focus on the users. If we didn't have people purchasing sexual services, then we would not have women being used, and we would not have the sex trade. We would recommend that we need to follow countries like Norway and Sweden and Iceland, who have within the last decade brought in laws which criminalise the purchase of sexual services, but decriminalise the selling." As well as the laws around prostitution, the Human Trafficking Act came in in 2008, but so far there have been no arrests or convictions. "It looks good in the Act, but we've yet to see how it can be effective in practice," says Gerardine.

But it's not just legislation that needs to change - Gerardine is a firm believer that the current misconceptions around trafficked people and prostitutes in general, is harmful to society, and to eliminating the crime of trafficking. "There's a huge misconception that women can enter prostitution and come out of it unscathed, that it's totally harmless. That women are choosing prostitution as a career choice," she says. "People sometimes have this image of a happy hooker who is making a lot of money. They're comparing

prostitution to a normal career and a normal profession and it cannot be compared."

"If people don't look at the level of abuse that is happening, that women don't need to be chained, or locked behind closed doors to be a victim of trafficking, that the chains may be psychological, and these women may feel that they've no other choice...sometimes people's apathy and prejudice is part of the issue that holds women in this form of what we would call abuse and violence."

The scars left behind on victims of sex trafficking who have managed to leave prostitution are huge. Psychological damage, low self-esteem, social isolation, risk of disease and daily threats of violence are typical for the women who come to Ruhama, and many are caught in debt or drug addiction or both. "Women enter prostitution at a time of crisis, or a serious issue in their lives or maybe when they entered, they had total absence of choice - they were pimped, pushed, forced, whatever you want to say, into prostitution. And it's not harmless fun. Not for anyone, even the users, it can affect wider society and the partners of users." Gerardine makes this last point with the worrying anecdotal evidence that some users are offering more money to vulnerable women to engage in unprotected sex. "We would be concerned of stories we have heard, particularly from drug using women, that men are offering more money for unprotected sex," says Gerardine, although she is quick to point out that most women she has met who have been involved in prostitution are extremely conscious of disease and of looking after their own health. Equally, the pimps prefer their women to stay 'clean' for the benefit of the business. But the evidence is there that where more money is offered, a service will be provided. "If someone is seriously addicted to drugs, they may go for it. It is really concerning. If a pimp thinks he could make more money by offering unprotected sex, he may order her to have unprotected sex."

Ruhama's services have been helping women in prostitution for twenty years, but there is no requirement to leave the industry

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to avail of the organisation's help. "We understand prostitution provides money and women may not be able to leave it overnight. She needs to build up an alternative career, an alternative way of making money." Through training, education, counselling and key worker support, Ruhama aims to help women find alternative routes for their lives. As well as a van on the streets, Ruhama prints multi-lingual leaflets, and its website is in various languages. Since prostitution is more often than not behind closed doors in today's Ireland, it is the only means of outreach the organisation has.

Gerardine feels that legislation has a long way to go in the battle against putting an end to trafficking, but so too do attitudes. "The sex trade is about the abuse and exploitation of women and children. People who glamourise it, films like *Pretty Woman*, are not the reality. A woman does not enter into prostitution, meet her knight in shining armour and live happily ever after. Women often have to have sexual encounters with ten men per day, strangers. And often women in prostitution die young - it's part of the life.

"People can sit very comfortably, have a job, a career, relationships and a lot of power in their lives, and make certain judgements. We have heard empowered women making judgements around the sex trade, but they're not doing it themselves, and they have no idea how they would if they found themselves in such vulnerability." ■

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