**NO DROP IN DEMAND FOR SEXUAL SERVICES DURING PANDEMIC, SAYS RUHAMA**

According to Ruhama, the organisation that fights sexual exploitation, prostitution and human trafficking, despite the pandemic last year, the demand for sexual services persisted, creating massive threats to vulnerable women.

In its Annual Report, published today, Ruhama engaged with 369 women over the year, an increase of 21.5% from the previous year. 136 of them were victims of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

“Ruhama was deemed an essential service in 2020,” said CEO Barbara Condon today Wednesday 18th May 2022) “That pushed our staff to adapt swiftly to ensure continuity of service provision. And they did. Thanks to their resilience and commitment, service provision remained constant and even expanded during this uniquely challenging time.”

The Annual Report includes direct accounts of being trafficked to Ireland by individual women with whom Ruhama works. One Romanian service user described how the man who controls her every day keeps her compliant.

“If I do anything wrong, he threatens to beat me. Even worse, he says that he will tell his mother – in whose care I left my daughter - to bring my daughter to the orphanage and leave her there. That she would be better off without me; that I am a bad mother. That terrifies me. So I am still here.”

Chair Ian Carter stated in the report that alerting those likely to encounter trafficked victims was key to intervening in such exploitation.

“We need frontline workers to understand that trafficking isn’t a social concept but rather a day-to-day reality they may encounter in their work,” he said. “Training on prostitution and sex trafficking reached 600 participants in 2021, providing them with the tools to identify and signpost potential victims of sexual exploitation. Training was delivered to Gardaí, schools, social care students, domestic violence services, addiction services, homeless services, direct provision staff and residential care staff.”

Ruhama has created a new role, Assertive Outreach Caseworker, to provide outreach and inreach in Addiction, Homeless and Direct Provision services.

The ongoing development and expansion of Ruhama’s counselling and trauma therapy service was a key strategic priority for 2021. 69 service users accessed this service representing an increase of 68% from 2020. Using the CORE-Outcome Measures feedback and evaluation tool led to a reported drop in anxiety, depression, and a reduction in the risk of suicide.

205 service users participated with education and development team an increase of 15% from the previous year. The Bridge to Work programme supported 40 women in 2021 with job coaching, assistance in commencing employment and supporting women to maintain employment.

 In 2021 Ruhama formed a service user engagement group to involve service users directly in the development and improvement of services.

Launching the annual report Minister McEntee stated “Ruhama’s annual report shows that despite public health restrictions, vulnerable women continued to find themselves in danger due to sexual exploitation and prostitution. These figures are stark, and each individual case must give us pause for thought given that is generally recognised that prostitution is inherently exploitative of vulnerable people, especially women and girls. But it is encouraging to see details of the work being done by Ruhama and advances being made and my Department will continue to support Ruhama in their important work to help women affected by prostitution, sex trafficking and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation.

It is important to note that I am also looking at prostitution as part of my ongoing work to combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I am currently leading work on the new whole-of-Government strategy to combat DSGBV, which will have a central goal of zero tolerance of this type of abuse and violence. It will structured around the four pillars or goals of the Istanbul Convention, namely Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Co-ordinated Policies. Under each of these high level objectives there we will be actions focused on prostitution, and I will outline these in more detail in the coming weeks when I publish the strategy.”

**ENDS**

For further information, contact Danielle Mc Laughlin, Policy & Communications Officer, policy@ruhama.ie Landline: 01 836 0292 Mobile: 0862591247

Editor’s Notes

To read the Annual Report in full, see <https://www.ruhama.ie/annual-reports/>