

The Local Situation

Our land border with another European state puts us in a unique position in the UK. Cheap direct flights mean that we can be seen as a gateway to both the GB and the Irish Republic. As long ago as 2002 the BBC exposed the fact that hundreds of workers had paid money in order to be smuggled into Ireland, to work on farms here on the promise of high wages. In reality they were passed on to farmers who just wanted cheap labour. (BBC news report http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/low/northern_ireland/2407629.stm)

In April 2009 research commissioned by the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) indicated that in the previous two years over 100 women had been trafficked into or through the Republic of Ireland for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

See http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/press_detail.php?id=90

Police Raids Rescue Trafficked People

The UK Government published its Action Plan on Tackling Human Trafficking <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/human-traffick-action-plan?view=Binary> in March 2007, but until recently there was little official recognition that there was a serious problem in Northern Ireland. However, in a series of raids, in July 2008, five people were rescued from suspected sex and slavery traffickers here. Six people were arrested, suspected of controlling prostitution and people smuggling, within the UK. Money was also confiscated. The raids were part of a short-term, UK-wide police operation, Pentameter 2, aimed at criminals selling victims for sex or forced labour. At that time, Marie Brown of Foyle Women's Aid complained of the difficulty of supporting rescued women because of the lack of funds. (Eastern and Central Europeans (A8) need a year's continuous registered work before they can receive most benefits. People from outside the EU are usually not entitled to welfare support until they have residency.)

'There are women from ethnic minority backgrounds who may not have come in trafficked but ended up being trafficked and have had to return back to situations (of threat) because we find them very difficult to support.'

See <http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/breaking/2008/0702/breaking56.htm>

Monica McWilliams, Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, also complained in October 2008 that there was an urgent need for an adequate system of safety and support.

http://www.nihrc.org/index.php?page=press_news_details&category_id=2&press_id=360&Itemid=65

On 3rd December, 2008, Paul Goggins, Chair of the Organised Crime Task Force, welcomed another operation against human trafficking:

'This operation demonstrates that law enforcement agencies from different jurisdictions are working as one to combat the threat from organised crime. These crime gangs are created to make money and they view the people they traffic as mere commodities to be traded and sold for profit. Human trafficking is a serious crime which destroys lives and we will continue to work together to bring those involved in this heinous activity before the courts.'

Disturbingly, however, there were press reports that the four rescued victims had disappeared after making police statements. Anna Lo, MLA, said: 'These women were here illegally so they had no recourse to public funds, they did not know anyone and

they spoke very little English.’ The PSNI Superintendent, Essie Adair who had been in charge of the operation also said that proper refuges were needed urgently. The women were reported to be from Nigeria, Brazil and Namibia.

Philip Bradfield in the *Newsletter*, 5 December 2008

<http://www.newsletter.co.uk/news/Human-trafficking-victims-39disappear39-after.4764843.jp>

UK ratifies the UN Convention Against Human Trafficking on 17 December 2008

This important event means that our country has agreed to put in place

- a new national referral mechanism, providing a nationally agreed process to help frontline staff identify victims of trafficking and offer them support
- strengthened arrangements for looking after victims, including a 45 day reflection and recovery period, and the possibility of a one-year residence permit for victims
- better support for victims in giving information to police, which will help authorities bring those who exploit them to justice

<http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/press-releases/government-ratifies-convention>

New PSNI Support Services

Following ratification, on 25 March 2009, Paul Goggins (speaking on this occasion as NI Security Minister) announced the launch of new support services stating that we were ‘no longer immune from the vile crime of human trafficking.’ Assistant Chief Constable Drew Harris said traffickers were targeting ‘females in sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe or the Far East with the promise of a far better life’. Read more at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/7962465.stm

The new unit has as its priorities the rescue of trafficked people and the successful prosecution of criminals who are guilty of crimes involving sexual exploitation, domestic servitude and forced labour. The unit was needed immediately, with at least one person referred, in early April, to one of the organisations subcontracted to look after the wellbeing of rescued people, while the National Referral Centre in Sheffield verifies whether there are reasonable grounds to believe that they are victims of trafficking. ‘Victim status’ enables the person to be given a period of 45 days for recovery and reflection before they are expected to co-operate with the authorities. During this period the Northern Ireland Office will fund people, and if they are found to be victims of trafficking they will be given a full year’s residency during which they will be entitled to full benefits. These developments are very positive but the 45-day period for reflection is woefully short for people who may be severely traumatized by what has happened to them.

Specialist PSNI officers have been trained to debrief rescued people and all front line police officers will also be trained to recognise the key indicators that people may have been exploited. UKBA immigration officers ought also to be able to identify cases and refer people to the National Referral Centre. (It would be helpful if others who come in contact with foreign nationals here could also receive training to help them become more aware of the signs that people may be victims of trafficking. This might include people such as clergy and pastoral workers, advice workers, teachers etc. A presentation by Alison Harvey, General Secretary Immigration Law Practitioners’ Association to the North-South Immigration Forum, 9 July 2008 contains some helpful suggestions about identifying a person who has been trafficked or exploited. See [Trafficking Resources](#) to download PDF.) The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has produced a handbook for health professionals working with trafficked persons that can be downloaded at: http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/CT_Handbook.pdf

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland <http://www.womensaidni.org/> will look after adult female victims of sexual trafficking recovered here and Migrant Helpline will look after adult male victims of sexual trafficking and all victims of labour trafficking. To read more see <http://www.nio.gov.uk/goggins-announces-extensive-new-support-services-for-victims-of-human-trafficking/media-detail.htm?newsID=15921>

Migrant Helpline is an English-based charity that provides help to migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum in distress. It is partly funded by the Home Office.

<http://www.migranthelpline.org.uk/>

Outstanding issues

- Amnesty is campaigning for a 90-day period of recovery and reflection.
- There is a shortage of specialist accommodation for victims of trafficking, and no specialist unit in Northern Ireland.
- If specialist organisations were given a role in identifying victims there would be more chance of early protection.

See http://www.amnesty.org.uk/news_details.asp?newsId=17992

- Young people who have been rescued from traffickers continue to go missing from the UK care system. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/8199867.stm>
- There are fears that some victims of trafficking still end up in immigration removal centres.

Support Leaflet for Trafficked People

The **Law Centre NI** has published a leaflet that explains to trafficked people how the Centre can help them. At the launch, Law Centre director Les Allamby said 'Trafficking by its nature is an underground activity. Our own work shows that it is becoming more prevalent in Northern Ireland. Trafficking is a modern day slave trade with people forced into slave labour and sexual exploitation.'

The leaflet, ***Exploited***, includes information in English, Albanian, Brazilian Portuguese, Czech, French, Lithuanian, Malaysian, Mandarin, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian and Thai. This choice of languages reflects the countries of origin of people who have been trafficked here. Help can be accessed via the helplines **Belfast (028) 9024 4401** and **Derry (028) 7126 2433**.