THE PROMISED LAND:
A STUDY OF TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN FROM CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE TO THE NETHERLANDS

ABSTRACT. This study on trafficking in women from Central and Eastern Europe explores the contextual factors, the characteristics, and the motivation of victims as well as the methods of traffickers. A combination of rational choice theory, strain theory and social control theory forms the theoretical framework of our research. Based on information from experts in the field, interviews with victims, questionnaires, a study of dossiers and a search of the literature, we developed a typology of victims, which may be helpful for prevention and law enforcement.

KEY WORDS: exploitation of women, trafficking, victims, women

INTRODUCTION

Traffic in Women as a Social Problem

According to studies by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), in 1995 some 500,000 women were trafficked, most of them illegally, to the countries of the European Union (IOM 1995, 1996a,b,c). The Dutch police estimates that several thousands of women from outside the EU are forced to work in the Netherlands as prostitutes. They come from all parts of the world: Nigeria, Thailand, the Philippines, China, South America and Central and Eastern Europe. In particular the number of women from Central and Eastern Europe has risen since the opening up of frontiers at the start of the 1990s. These women are now the majority of victims in the Netherlands. Annually, about 2,000 women from these countries are victims of women trafficking (IRT-NON 1997). Though exact figures are hard to obtain, it is clear that trafficking in women is a serious social problem, the visibility of which depends to a large degree upon the investigation efforts of the police.

Our study focuses — more or less arbitrarily — on Central and Eastern European victims in the Netherlands. The women were sometimes explicitly recruited for a job in this country, but in other cases the destination was less specific. Victims who end up in the Netherlands may have been put to work during their journey in Germany or other transfer countries.
Afterwards, they may go to other countries or even continents. This fleeting character of trafficking in women obstructs the task of law enforcement agencies and makes it hard for counselling agencies to reach victims. High mobility is clearly a strategy of traffickers to avoid prosecution. Temporary permits of stay for victims prepared to act as witnesses in judicial proceedings may therefore facilitate concerted activities of the police, the judiciary, and counselling agencies.

**Aim of the Study**

In a communication from the European Commission (1998), trafficking is defined as “transport of women from third countries into the EU for the purpose of sexual exploitation”. Some women enter legally, others illegally. A further distinction can be made between victims who are forced to work as prostitutes and women who (originally) consented to become employed in the prostitution business. Yet, in our view the essence of victimisation in trafficking is that in this process women are forced into prostitution by means of coercion, violence, deceit or psychological pressure, with basic human rights being violated. The fact that someone consented to work in prostitution does not mean that she/he may be held under conditions that resemble modern slavery.

We started our research to find an explanation for the increasing number of young women from Central and Eastern Europe that have become victims of traffickers. In our view, the simple explanation of naïve, passive victims, and the corresponding archetypal image of ‘the poor defenceless virgin’, does not hold water, nor does it give credit to these women as reasoning actors. Our study focuses upon four questions.

- Which contextual factors make women vulnerable to the practices of traffickers?
- Which individual characteristics of victims make them vulnerable to the practices of traffickers?
- What motives do women have for accepting an offer of a job in the Netherlands or Western Europe?
- Which methods of traffickers make women susceptible to women trafficking?

A more precise and reliable description and a more valid explanation of the trafficking problem may help provide an empirical base for preventive measures in Central Europe as well as in Western Europe.