

Mapping the Realities of Trafficking in Women for the Purpose of Sexual Exploitation in Cyprus.

Executive Summary

October 2007

The Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies {MIGS} has recently completed a research project with the aim to gain and share awareness, knowledge and understanding on the phenomenon of trafficking in women in Cyprus for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The research was carried out using a gender-sensitive, feminist perspective and attempted to map and assess existing data on the extent of trafficking in women for sexual exploitation in Cyprus; outline state and non-governmental responses to the problem and, suggest ways to combat this increasingly widespread phenomenon. The results of MIGS' research indicate that trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation in Cyprus takes unique and widespread dimensions and are summarised below.

The findings of the research are based on data gathered predominantly through interviews with key policy makers, government officials and NGO representatives /civil society activists working broadly in the area of trafficking, migration, and gender. Information was also gathered through the existing National Action Plan for trafficking, media monitoring, and secondary analysis of available statistical data, as well as systematic observation of the developments on trafficking in women in Cyprus, conducted by MIGS throughout the research period.

Cyprus has been associated with trafficking many times in the past both as a transit country and a country of destination for victims of trafficking, particularly from Eastern and Central Europe for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Evidence demonstrates that an estimated 2,000 foreign women enter the island every year with short term "artistes" or "entertainment" visas. However, these women are not legally accounted for as 'labourers' since "entertainment/artiste" vacancies are not listed by the Cyprus Labour Department, as are vacancies in other sectors open to third-country nationals. This means that these jobs are not available to foreign members of Cypriot families or Cypriots seeking employment.

MIGS points out that with the Cyprus Ministerial Committee's decision 2005 on the establishment of guidelines in relation to the access to the labour force by migrants that prohibits the employment of Cypriot women or foreign women married to Cypriots, a tolerance is generated for the continuation of 'importing' women as 'entertainers' to work predominantly in cabarets. In this way, the government appears to tolerate trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and contributes to demand for sexual services through the issuing of specific "artiste" visas as well as of licences for the operation of "high risk"

establishments. It is also indicative of the increased demand in the Cypriot context for the 'services' provided by establishments employing 'artistes' that within 20 years [1982-2002] there has been a dramatic increase of 111% in the number of cabarets operating on the island.

Trafficked women in Cyprus are victimised in the process of migration for multiple reasons associated with gender. These women are forced into prostitution by traffickers who fraudulently recruit victims for work as "entertainment" dancers in cabarets and nightclubs on short-term "artistes" or "entertainment" visas. Most arrive in Cyprus through employment agencies.

Most of these women are unable to move freely, are forced to work over and above their working hours, live in desperate conditions, isolated and under strict surveillance. A significant number of trafficked women are misled into believing that they are expected to work as waitresses, or barmaids. Instead, most of these women are forced, through the use of threats and/or violence, into prostitution.

Traffickers and/or many "employers" take possession of their personal documents (visa permit, passports). These women are at great risk of physical and psychological harm as they seem to be modern-day slaves, with their basic human rights violated.

Although the Cyprus government recognizes that the persons trafficked to Cyprus for the purpose of sexual exploitation are predominantly [if not all] women [and sometimes girls], no specific measures, strategies or activities to combat trafficking take gender specifically into account. The root causes of trafficking in women for sexual exploitation are not analyzed at all in the Cyprus National Action Plan or in the legislative framework. These causes can be very complex and are related to globalization, poverty, gender discrimination, ethnic and racial discrimination, *demand* for sexual services, migration policies, unemployment, among others. The Cyprus legislative framework to combat trafficking in human beings fails to address the particularities and specificities of the gender dimension and the important issue of demand for services of sexual exploitation. Also, trafficking prevention strategies, although in accordance with human rights norms, do not incorporate a gender-sensitive perspective and do not prioritize the protection of the women affected.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that there has been increase in marriages between "artistes" and Cypriot men resulting in the removal of these women from sexual exploitation. This research study suggests that many of these women are subjected to physical and psychological abuse from their Cypriot husbands.

The Cyprus government does not have a mechanism for identifying trafficked victims and this causes their wrongful exclusion from the protection of the law. Where victims of trafficking are identified, they are being placed by the Cyprus Social Welfare Department in homes for the elderly. MIGS is highly concerned about the extent to which placing victims in homes for the elderly ensures their physical safety, as their locations are publicly known. Our research indicates that these 'shelters', reinforce victims' feelings of abandonment, hopelessness and helplessness and, therefore, they often do not want to testify against traffickers and "employers". In fact, no measures have been taken by the government for the effective [re] integration of victims of trafficking in society.

Cyprus' only recorded numbers of trafficked women available are those collected as a result of police raids and inspections of cabarets, nightclubs and pubs. MIGS' research and observations indicate that regular police checks as to the living conditions of women working as "artistes" are rarely carried out. As a consequence of the lack of sufficient measures taken by related stakeholders, trafficking cases often remain unreported because the victims fear reprisals by their traffickers and/ or government penalties because of their legal status.

Conclusions and Recommendations

MIGS is highly concerned about the current situation in Cyprus in relation to trafficked women for the purpose of sexual exploitation and stresses that there is no evidence of concrete efforts being made by either the Cyprus government or the civil society in general to address it in a concrete manner.

It is for this reason that MIGS urgently calls for the Cyprus government and respective authorities to:

- Immediately account for the issuing of 'artistes visas' and proceed with their abolition. Any efforts by the Cyprus Government to combat trafficking in women for sexual exploitation are and will be undermined by the existence of such visas;
- Ratify and implement Council of Europe's Convention on Action against Trafficking;
- Ensure that in consultation with relevant experts and stakeholders, the Cyprus legislation on trafficking **should be gender specific**
- Respect the deadlines as set out in the National Action Plan and adopt a timetable by which the government departments and NGOs involved will implement all the measures assigned to them
- Thoroughly monitor and evaluate the measures and strategies of the National Action Plan on Trafficking and ensure that such monitoring is undertaken by an independent organization not party to the National Action Plan;
- Organise and critically re-examine the clear cooperation among governmental departments as well as cooperation between governmental departments and NGOs and clearly assign responsibilities according to each department's objectives;
- Adopt measures to cooperate with authorities and NGOs in the countries of origin with a view to identifying possible cases of trafficking. To that effect, administrative control officers, embassies and consulates should be adequately trained and informed;
- Amend anti- trafficking laws in order to cover a broader definition of "sexual exploitation". Currently, "sexual exploitation" is limited to exploitation for the purpose of forced prostitution. The definition should be expanded so as to include further acts of sexual exploitation, such as sexually explicit performances, stripping and live shows, which take place in establishments that thrive around the sex industry;
- Address the issue of demand through funded research and targeted awareness-raising activities;
- Constantly update the list of origin countries through the use of informed collection of data and research;

- Use the media wherever possible in its anti-trafficking activities and ensure that media officials and journalists are trained on gender-awareness and gender-sensitive reporting;
- Organise systematic and specialised training using a gender-sensitive perspective for all actors involved in human trafficking, including the police and the judiciary system;
- Organise high impact, gender sensitive awareness-raising campaigns based on reliable data and ethical research;
- Explore measures to deter and punish the purchaser of sexual services along the lines of the newly adopted Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (Article 19) that criminalizes the buying of services of a victim of trafficking, including sexual services;
- Ensure that the National Action Plan includes measures for the identification of victims by authorities at the borders, during police raids, and by the Welfare Services and the Asylum Unit;
- Ensure that the assistance and protection offered to trafficked women includes emergency and long term shelter/housing (especially considering the fact that currently the judicial proceedings relating to a case can last for months); long and short term medical and mental health services; easily accessible interpretation services; victim advocacy; free social and legal services; free and accessible information on social and legal rights and obligations.