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SPECIAL INVESTIGATION: The myth of Britain's foreign sex slaves

For years ministers have insisted that thousands of women are being smuggled into Britain and forced into prostitution. But when police staged a multi-million pound operation to smash the gangs, how many traffickers did they find? Not one

By [Tom Rawstone](#)

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The overblown language was more red-top tabloid than heavyweight Government announcement. Issued by the Home Office, the press release bragged about the success of the largest-ever police crackdown on human trafficking - 'one of the worst crimes threatening our society'.

Breathlessly it went on to detail how women were being brought to this country and then 'sold as commodities for the purposes of sexual exploitation'.

But now, it continued, thanks to nationwide police operation Pentameter 2, a staggering 528 criminals involved in this 'abhorrent crime' had been arrested.



Myth or reality: Claims that large numbers of foreign women are being forced into prostitution are not accurate, experts say

'At its core, this operation was about striking a blow against one of the most distressing aspects of serious and organised

crime in this country - that of people-trafficking for sexual exploitation,' said Dr Tim Brain, Chief Constable of Gloucestershire and the man who headed the operation, announcing the figures in July 2008.

Also keen to weigh in with her observations was the then Home Secretary Jacqui Smith. 'Pentameter 2 has been a great success,' she said.

'I would commend all those involved who have made a real impact in rescuing victims and bringing to justice those who exploit them.'

As intended, the media lapped it up, encouraged by Dr Brain's claim that the number of trafficked sex workers in Britain was actually 18,000 - five times more than previous highest estimates.

No doubt the Home Office was delighted with the coverage its press release achieved. But not any more. Fifteen months on and those words have come back to haunt them with a vengeance.

Last month, an investigation by the Guardian newspaper disclosed what Pentameter 2 had really achieved - the conviction of not one genuine sex trafficker.

An official review of the operation found that of the 528 arrests, almost one quarter were wrongly recorded.

Of the remainder, the vast majority of suspects were released without charge or charged with non-trafficking offences. That left just a handful of individuals appearing in court on sex trafficking charges.

But of the 15 actually convicted, it was accepted in ten of the cases that the individuals involved had never coerced the prostitutes they worked with.

The remaining five were convicted of importing women and forcing them to work as prostitutes - but those convictions stemmed from operations that pre- dated Pentameter 2.

'This failure is just the tip of the iceberg'

With hindsight, the 'great success' announced by Miss Smith now looks like nothing of the sort. But, worse still, is that the failure of this operation is merely the tip of the iceberg.

Academics and experts say that for years they have been warning the Government that the number of trafficked women working in the sex industry is far fewer than was being claimed.

But despite these warnings, they say that Labour ministers and other feminist- dominated organisations have repeatedly relied upon these distorted figures to further their own vested interests and political agendas.

As a result, it seems likely that millions of pounds of public funding has been spent trying to fix a problem that is far less widespread than portrayed.

Of course, many women experience unimaginable horrors when working in the sex industry - and it is despicable that in this day and age they are reduced to selling themselves.

But this makes it even more vitally important that the Government has accurate statistics and facts to hand so they can tackle the many problems presented by the murky world of the sex worker.



Then Home Secretary Jacqui Smith heralded trafficking crackdown 'Parameter 2' a success

What is also causing concern is the way that the fears about sex trafficking have been used as leverage to launch a moral crusade designed to ban prostitution outright.

Legislation which will make it a crime for someone to pay for sex where the person providing the sex was 'coerced' in some way is currently going through its final Parliamentary phase.

While many would no doubt support steps aimed at clamping down on the sex trade, experts in the field warn that this law will not only be unworkable, but will put prostitutes at greater risk.

They say that the increased threat of prosecution will force them to work in a more clandestine way, increasing the risk of rape, assault and murder.

'The new legislation has been framed on a false premise,' is the way one puts it. 'That is bad enough in itself. But what is even worse is that there is a very real risk of women's lives being put at danger as a result.'

How many women working in the sex industry in Britain have been trafficked? That is the question that goes to the heart of this current controversy. And it is one that there is no clear answer to.

For starters, the definition of trafficking varies. Under the United Nations 2000 Palermo protocol, trafficking is enshrined in international law as involving the three 'Fs' - fear, force, or fraud - to transport an unwilling victim into sexual exploitation.

In British law, the bar is set far lower. Under the 2003 Sexual Offences Act, the word is used to cover the organised transportation of a man or woman into prostitution even if that individual does it willingly.

For example, an individual who travels to an airport to collect an immigrant who has willingly travelled to this country to work in the sex industry could be convicted of the offence of trafficking.

The situation is further confused by the large numbers of immigrants who have travelled to Britain illegally in the past decade. By definition, many will have been 'smuggled' here by a third party. But what if they subsequently end up working in the sex industry?

'The Government needs to be seen to be acting tough'

An added complication is that no one knows how many prostitutes there are in Britain anyway. The figure is put at 80,000 - but, because of the secretive nature of the industry, no one knows if that is the case.

It is to that background that the current estimates of trafficked women in Britain should be seen.

The most commonly quoted of these is a figure of 4,000. It was arrived at following highly speculative research commissioned by the Home Office in 2003.

At the time, even its authors admitted it was 'very approximate', 'subject to a very large margin of error', and 'should be treated with great caution'.

In making their calculations, researchers had assumed that every single foreign woman working in Soho's notorious 'walk-up' flats had been smuggled into the country and forced to work as a prostitute. The figures were then extrapolated across the country.

Despite the authors' words of caution, the Home Office took the figure as gospel and ran with it. Others, such as the Salvation Army, did the same.

Not content with that, Government ministers started to make even more outlandish claims about the extent of the problem.

In 2007, former Foreign Office minister Denis MacShane told the Commons in a debate that 'according to Home Office estimates, 25,000 sex-slaves work in the massage parlours and brothels of Britain'.

Subsequently challenged over the figure, he attributed it to a report he had read in a tabloid newspaper. 'I used to work for the Daily Mirror, so I trust the report,' he said.

Equally happy to play free and easy with the figures was Fiona Mactaggart, a former Home Office minister. In 2008, she told the Commons that she regarded all women prostitutes as victims of trafficking.

This, she said, was because their route into the industry 'almost always involves coercion, enforced addiction to drugs and violence from their pimps or traffickers'.

Similarly eye-catching claims were being made by other organisations.



Critics of new prostitution laws warn they could put sex workers at greater risk

The Poppy Project, a charity which has received £5.8 million Government funding and which wants to end all prostitution on the grounds that it 'helps to construct and maintain gender inequality', carried out research that found that 80 per cent of London prostitutes working in flats were foreign.

It then concluded that 'a large proportion of them are likely to have been trafficked into the country'. The trouble is there is no statistical evidence to support that claim - let alone the 25,000 figure or, indeed, even the 4,000 figure.

Dr Belinda Brooks-Gordon lectures in psychology and social policy at Birkbeck University and has been researching the sex industry in Britain for the past 15 years.

She says: 'The research lacks the methodological rigour of a GCSE project, it is that bad - it is Carry On Criminology. I would go so far as to say the way in which the 4,000 figure was reached is so bad that if it was handed in to me by a student, I would think it was a spoof.'

It is a point taken up by other experts in the field. They point out that research interviews conducted with migrant prostitutes show that the majority say they choose to work in the sex industry because of the improved living conditions and opportunities it offers to them and, via the money they send abroad, to their families.

Niki Adams, a campaigner for prostitutes' rights, says this is far nearer the truth. 'We get daily calls from women working in the sex industry,' she says.

'In all the years, we have come across only two women who fit that classic description of someone who has been trafficked. One was an African woman and the other came from Moldova. They were being held against their will, they were being forced to have sex with men, and they were not getting the money.'

She adds: 'We know the situation in Soho very, very well and are in touch with just about all the women working in the 53 flats that there are there. I feel absolutely confident those women are not trafficked.'

If that is the indeed the case then it begs the question as to who benefits, and how, from this gross exaggeration of the trafficking figures.

In terms of the police, Miss Adams says that under the guise of responding to public concerns about trafficking, they have been able to carry out more extensive raids against prostitutes and other sex workers.

She points out that under the Proceeds of Crime Act, police forces can now keep 25 per cent of any assets seized.

For the Government, meanwhile, the tough talking about trafficking has coincided with the need to be seen to be acting tough against immigration per se.

As for what motivated individual ministers to accept the figures unquestioningly, it is perhaps harder to understand.

These inaccurate figures clearly chimed with their pre-conceptions of the sex industry. At the same time, they could be used to support the introduction of new legislation designed to challenge the perceived exploitation of women in the sex industry generally, a popular cause among the Left of the Labour Party.

One argument is that the act of paying for sex fuels demand and that more demand means that more women will be trafficked to fill that demand. Stop one and you stop the other.

Ready support for the politicians was provided by the charities and other organisations that have received Government funding to deal with the victims of trafficking.

These same organisations have also been involved in conducting research into the levels of trafficking, the results of which have bolstered the view that it is a major problem.

The concern, of course, is that resources that might be better spent elsewhere have been devoted to this problem. Jacqui Smith's much-lauded Operation Pentameter 2 lasted six months, involved every police force in the country and raids on 822 premises. The convictions achieved hardly reflected the level of effort.

Although Dr Brain insists that the operation created a 'hostile' and discouraging environment for those involved in trafficking others, the police service admit that 'the facts speak for themselves'.

It is a point taken up by Dr Brooks-Gordon: 'The result of such hyperinflation is policy that spreads resources too thinly - sometimes missing the really needy. When looking for a needle in a haystack, it doesn't make sense to keep making the haystack bigger.'

Equally pressing, however, are concerns about the policing and crime bill currently going through Parliament. It contains a proposal to clamp down on trafficking by penalising any man who has sex with a woman who is 'controlled for gain' - even if the man is genuinely ignorant of the control.

Unsurprisingly, supporters of the bill have been quick to dismiss the attacks on it and on the trafficking figures that have been used to support its introduction.

They insist that it is inherently difficult to assess the numbers of trafficked women and that if even one person is trafficked it is one too many.

No one would argue with that. But, at the same time, there is a danger that the over-eagerness to state their case, which now appears to have been exposed, could damage their cause in the long-term.

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there are many women trafficked into the uk to be work slaves on farms,in hotels,restaurants & takeaways,of course that form of exploitation is considered acceptable & is ignored by the govt and "charities" like the poppy project

- peter schevt, bury.uk, 13/11/2009 21:41

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This evil idiotic law is one of strict liability-ie you cannot inevitably know if you are breaking it, but can still be convicted despite this. It is indeed part of the hard left agenda to attack men and it has been based on ZanuLab creating a non existent problem via the usual lies and phony "consultations" where they only listen to those telling them what they want to hear. One hopes and prays this is just the sort of counterproductive vindictive stupid totalitarian tosh Dave and co will repeal,

- Mike R, Cramlington, Northumberland, 13/11/2009 19:31

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Zak, London, 13/11/2009 12:26 take it you concede then zak

- rich, oingondrog, 13/11/2009 16:09

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john, london, 13/11/2009 15:18 and john, london stop trying to abuse eachother or one of you change you name to john2, im getting confused which is which

- rich, oingondrog, 13/11/2009 15:33

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John London,instead of trying to score cheep points of me don't you have a point of view,or are you really[Joan of London].

- john, london, 13/11/2009 15:18

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john London .at least i have a point of view,and i don't go calling people i don't know small minded ,your mind is obviously so small you could only manage two lines.I - john, london, 13/11/2009 14:04 sorry john but you've just done what you said you dont and called someone you dont know small minded

- rich, oingondrog, 13/11/2009 14:40

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