

## The Glory Of The Guardian's Approach To Math And Sex Trafficking

Tim Worstall Contributor

forbes.com



Tim Worstall, Contributor

I've mentioned before that the newspapers tend to be written by the arts graduates: therefore by those who have no instinctual understanding of numbers. I've also mentioned before that certain people are trying to make out that sex trafficking is a very much larger problem than it actually is. That second piece is here. We've now had a piece in The Guardian that manages to combine these two most undesirable traits. Blowing up sex trafficking into a very much larger problem than it actually is and doing so by being near entirely ignorant of numbers.

The piece is here and it's about how there seems to be some 100,000 Vietnamese women employed in nail bars in the UK. All of whom are then forced into prostitution in the evenings.

A report by the Sunday Times (paywalled link) this week detailed the growing prevalence of nail salons controlled by human traffickers and staffed by the trafficked, specifically from Vietnam. Industry insiders estimate that there are 100,000 Vietnamese manicurists working in the UK, despite only 29,000 Vietnamese-born migrants officially being registered in census data. The workers are often expected to paint nails by day and work in prostitution by night. Many are children – and even if they're identified and taken in by social services, 90% will be tracked down by their traffickers and disappear from care.

The Great Joy Of The Guardian's Economic Reporting

The British Twitter Insults Rumpus: Sadly, Yes, This Is What Some People Are Like

The Guardian's Staggering Hypocrisy Over Corporate Tax

A Great Moment In Journalistic Numeracy

As I've mentioned before there's two very different things that go under the name "trafficking". One is the involuntary movement of (usually) women into the forced sex trade. This is vile, highly illegal and is slavery and repeated rape. It's also extremely unusual as The Guardian itself reported when it revealed the results of Operation Pentameter. When all police forces in the UK did detailed investigations into brothels, street walkers and escort agencies they were unable to find one single person in the entire country who could be prosecuted for forcing someone into sex slavery.

The other definition of trafficking is people who voluntarily move country, sometimes to work in the sex trade, sometimes for all sorts of other work, including of course nail bars. But they move illegally as most rich countries won't in fact offer a work visa to someone willing to do this sort of work.

As we can see in that quoted paragraph there's a definite intention to combine and confuse these two quite separate meanings.

But worse than this in some ways is that the writer, and of course the lovers of editors, the piece

But worse than this in some ways is that the writer, and of course the layers of editors the piece passed through, just don't understand numbers well enough to see that the claim must be wrong. For example, the best estimate of the number of prostitutes in the entire country (source, The Guardian) is some 80,000. So we're really not going to have 100,000 Vietnamese women on the game are we? And most certainly not some substantial number of Vietnamese children doing it. People really would notice if the number of tarts doubled I think.

There are other ways of checking such numbers. Given that the population is 60 million odd, 50% of which is female, the claim of 100,000 Vietnamese nail salon workers is that one in every 300 of the women in Britain is a Vietnamese nail salon worker. This is again something that people are likely to notice. And there's only 1,512 nail salons in the country. We really would notice if each and every one of them had 10 Vietnamese employees. Or even, if each of these trafficked Vietnamese women is put out to work on the streets each night and has three customers (a reasonable enough number) then one in one hundred of all Englishmen is having sex with a trafficked Vietnamese manicurist each and every day.

These are just not believable numbers: they're obviously wrong to anyone with even the vaguest pretensions to being able to understand the world around them.

Fortunately The Guardian does in fact employ someone who can count to 11 without taking her shoes off. Which gives us this article. Which contains this quite wonderful point:

But again, there are more reliable sources for understanding the scale of human trafficking to the UK. Since 2009, the UK has had a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in place to "identify individuals who may be potential victims of trafficking".

According to the latest statistics from January to March 2013, it is true that Vietnam is one of the top countries of concern, having the highest number of NRM cases after Albania, Nigeria and Poland. While even one case of human trafficking is one too many, the raw numbers do cast doubt on the implication that there are thousands of Vietnamese victims in the UK – 32 Vietnamese nationals were identified as potential victims in those three months.

Note that this is potential victims, not proven ones.

There's an old line that one should never believe what one reads in the newspapers. I don't think I would go quite that far: but I certainly wouldn't believe any of the numbers that turn up in The Guardian. The people who write the paper just don't know enough about math to be able to see when they're being flimflammed.

I'm a Fellow at the Adam Smith Institute in London, a writer here and there on this and that and strangely, one of the global experts on the metal scandium, one of the rare earths. An odd thing to be but someone does have to be such and in this flavour of our universe I am. I have written for The Times, Daily Telegraph, Express, Independent, City AM, Wall Street Journal, Philadelphia Inquirer and online for the ASI, IEA, Social Affairs Unit, Spectator, The Guardian, The Register and Techcentralstation. I've also ghosted pieces for several UK politicians in many of the UK papers, including the Daily Sport.