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Israeli government must stop human rights abuses against trafficked women

"I had a nervous breakdown. I wanted to escape from this place and asked a client to help me. He turned out to be one of them and I was beaten up by the owners. There was nowhere to run -- there were bars on the windows and bodyguards all the time, day and night."
(Testimony of a woman trafficked from Moldova)

The Israeli government is failing to protect the human rights of women and girls who are trafficked from countries of the former Soviet Union to work in Israel's sex industry, Amnesty International said today in a new report.

"Many of these women and girls become 'commodities', literally bought and sold for thousands of dollars or held in debt bondage. They are locked up in apartments and have their passports and travel tickets confiscated. Many women are subjected to violence, including rape. Yet most of the people who commit such human rights abuses are never brought to justice by the Israeli government," the organization said.

Anna, a 31-year-old physics teacher from the Russian Federation was lured to Israel by the promise of a job in the sex industry earning 20 times her Russian salary. When she arrived, her passport was taken from her and she was locked in an apartment with bars on the windows along with six other women from former Soviet Union countries. She was auctioned twice, on the second occasion for US\$10,000. The women were rarely allowed to leave the apartment and never allowed out alone. Much of the money they earned was extorted from them by their pimps.

The worldwide phenomenon of trafficking in human beings has attracted increased attention in recent years from governments and intergovernmental organizations. But governments have tended to ignore the human rights abuses to which trafficked persons are subjected, instead viewing trafficking primarily as an issue of organized crime and illegal immigration.

Rather than taking action against human rights abuses experienced by the women, Israeli governmental agencies in effect treat them as criminals, by holding women in detention for extended periods, for example. In 1998, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its regret that "women brought to Israel for the purposes of prostitution ... are not protected as victims of trafficking but are likely to bear the penalties of their illegal presence in Israel by deportation."

Many trafficked women end up in detention in a police lock-up or Neve Tirza prison following raids on brothels and massage parlours by the police and they are rarely released on bail pending deportation. Others may be detained for longer, sometimes because the Ministry of Justice has issued an order preventing the woman from leaving the country until she has testified in a criminal case.

Israeli officials maintain that it is difficult to bring to justice persons who commit human rights abuses against women in sex work who are illegally in the country. However, various Israeli laws and policies, in particular the strict enforcement of immigration laws against these women, actually make prosecutions difficult.

Moreover, many women are afraid to file complaints with the Israel Police or testify in court because they fear they will be imprisoned, deported or be subjected to further human rights abuses in Israel or

abroad. Despite these realistic fears, the government officials tend to blame the women for not cooperating with the police and the criminal justice system.

As a result of lobbying by local non-governmental organizations, Israel has taken some steps that would help combat human rights abuses against women in these circumstances, particularly in the field of legislation. In March 2000 the Knesset (Israel's Parliament) passed the Equality of Women Law, which states that every woman is entitled to protection from violence, sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and trafficking in her person. The Ministry of Justice is said to be drafting a provision to criminalize the buying and selling of persons.

Amnesty International believes that the steps taken by Israel are insufficient and it is urging the Israeli government to respect its obligations under international law to ensure the human rights of all who are in its territory. Amnesty International is recommending that the Israeli government should develop a strategy to ensure there is coordinated and effective action by key government agencies, such as the Ministry of the Interior, the Israel Police, the Israel Prisons Service and the Office of the State Attorney, to ensure the protection of these rights. NGOs should be consulted and invited to contribute to developing effective policies.

The organization is also calling for increased international cooperation between Israel and the governments of former Soviet Union countries and transit states to combat these human rights abuses.

"Both the government and the traffickers are treating these women as if they do not have human rights. The authorities have a responsibility to take action to protect the against enslavement, deprivation of liberty and violence," Amnesty International said.

Background

The human rights abuses experienced by women trafficked into Israel's sex industry include enslavement, including debt bondage; deprivation of liberty, for example by confiscating women's passports and other travel documents or threatening them with violence if they escape; violations of the right to bodily integrity, including subjection to violence including rape and other forms of coerced sexual activity; denial of health services and other risks to health rights such as exposure to HIV/AIDS because of coercive work conditions and denial of condom use. Many sex workers who have not been trafficked are subjected to human rights abuses.

Amnesty International notes that although this report focuses on human rights abuses committed against women from the former Soviet Union working in the sex industry, women also face human rights abuses when they are trafficked for other purposes including domestic work, bonded labour and servile forms of marriage.

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