



SEX SLAVES in suburbia

Forget dark alleyways and dingy flats. The red light district has moved on – to nice houses in nice streets just like yours. But, for the women forced into selling sex, a brutal existence waits behind these seemingly innocent doors. By **Catherine Gray**

She twists the napkin and pulls a clump of it off, as if beheading a voodoo doll. We are sitting in a coffee shop, decorated with daisy wallpaper, on one of those luminous winter days. But the conversation couldn't be darker. "The men, they would come eight, nine times a day," she says in a hushed voice. "They'd use the back alley to avoid the neighbours suspecting."

She's talking about a nice street with towering ivory townhouses in Brighton, the kind on which I fantasise about living. "I would often look out of the window at the milkmen, kids playing and

couples walking hand in hand, wishing I could be like that girl in the fairytale – Rapunzel – who lets her hair down as an escape. But I was paralysed, pinned to the bed."

Bella* is just like me in lots of ways: she's in her late twenties, wears a leather bomber jacket, has long brown hair and a weakness for lattes and *Gossip Girl*. But the difference is she's been a victim of sex trafficking. In 2007, she was tricked by her boyfriend into thinking she was leaving her home town in Lithuania to work as a nanny for a rich family in the UK. When she arrived, she was bundled into a van and sold for £5,000 to a sex-slave ►

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◀ ring. A female friend of hers introduced her to the 'recruiter'. She still doesn't know if that friend was an accomplice in the sale – or duped just as she was.

LIVING NIGHTMARE

According to the UN, the UK is now a 'major destination' for sex slaves. There are thought to be 500,000 women trafficked [for sex or labour] into the EU each year, and the Home Affairs Committee recently estimated there are currently 5,000 in the UK. Contrary to what most of us think, sex slavery is not confined to economically crippled countries and conducted out of tattered shacks. It's actually the rich, Western countries that drive the demand – and Western men who have the cash. Nor do they operate out of neon-lit brothels. Operation Pentameter 2, a recent six-month campaign by the police to crack down on sex trafficking, raided 822 premises – 600 of those were regular private homes. "There's definitely a move towards residential brothels because it's easier to avoid detection," says Ruth Breslin, the research and development manager from the Poppy Project, which runs government-funded safe houses and after-care for trafficked women.

Bella says there were nine other women held captive in her Brighton house. "We were allowed out to run errands together, like food shopping, but they'd pit you against each other," she says softly. "You'd be told that if you made sure the



The Sun exposes an Albanian gangster buying a Lithuanian woman for £3,000 from two other men on London's Oxford Street. Moments later, she was rescued and five men were later jailed for a total of 63 years

other one didn't run away, you'd get better treatment. And if she did, they'd cut one of your fingers off." So ironically, they helped imprison each other. "They'd let us sleep until around midday so that we had energy to keep going until 5am if we had to. Then we'd buy food, clean and cook for the four men in charge, a gang of Russian cousins. We'd get the odd hour of TV when we'd watch our favourite shows: *Gossip Girl*, *Come Dine With Me* and *Grand Designs*. The clients would start trickling in from 6pm. We didn't have one bedroom each, so we'd rotate according to who had a client. They would choose from a line-up of us girls. If we got tired, they'd sometimes give us speed to keep us going, and if a client

wanted us when we were asleep, we'd just get woken up. It didn't matter if you had your period; as long as the client didn't mind a bit of blood. Thankfully, I was never made to have unprotected sex but I know girls who did."

Trafficking out of Eastern Europe by organised criminals is a cliché because it's true, says Abigail Stepnitz, the national coordinator for Poppy. "They'll set up a fake store, which looks like a legitimate recruitment office, and promise well-paid jobs as nursery nurses or waitresses in five-star hotels. Everything looks official to shore up trust."

HONEY-TRAPPED

"There's been a recent surge in women being trafficked from West Africa," says Stepnitz. "A good-looking, charming member of the sex-slave ring goes to villages and towns, becomes ▶

Sex trafficking Is the use of force, fraud or coercion to transport an unwilling victim into sexual exploitation.

2003 The Home Office estimates up to 4,000 women are in forced prostitution.

March 2003 Eaves, a housing project that helps vulnerable women – such as victims of domestic violence – campaigns for safe houses for the trafficked women who keep landing on its doorstep. The Poppy Project is born.

comes into force to help convict traffickers. Since then, and up until March 26, 2009, the UK Human Trafficking Centre says there have been 105 convictions for sex trafficking.

July 2004 A survey of London prostitutes working in flats finds that 80% of them are foreign. The Poppy

May 2004 The Sexual Offences Act

Project concludes, "a large proportion of them are likely to have been trafficked".

August 2008 A study concludes that around 18% of sexually enslaved women met their trafficker via a female friend.

April 2009 Demand means the Poppy Project has to increase the bed space in its safe houses from 35 to 54 in total across three UK cities.

◀ the girl's boyfriend, and then dangles an alluring 'holiday' in the UK. He then runs out of money and begs her to drum up some cash by sleeping with just one man. Later, he'll use the fact he knows where her family lives to blackmail her. He'll sneakily send some money back to the village and let her talk to them at gunpoint to keep his hunting ground fertile. Boyfriend honey-trap ruses are common."

And it's psychological as well as physical control that keeps women imprisoned.

"Threats on family are very common," explains Stepnitz. "And we're seeing a big rise in debt bondage with Asian women. Those cultures take debt deadly seriously. Traffickers will tell them they owe up to £80,000 for their plane ticket and rent. Asian cultures see this as unbelievably shameful. One woman I know kept a log book of all the money she made and then asked for release when it was covered. But her captor just said she owed interest too."

"There's a farm in Romania where women are taken for several weeks before trafficking occurs. They're made to watch other women being beaten and raped so by the time they get to the UK, they're delirious with fear and can't contemplate escaping."

Bella knows all too well about emotional abuse. "My captor, Joe*, would veer between buying me flowers and telling me we'd run away together and get married, and punching me in the face. I became hooked on the good side of him." Breslin says this is common among the 550 women Poppy has worked with.

Incredibly, it's still legal to buy or sell sex. "Soliciting, running a brothel or kerb-crawling are all illegal, but the act of purchasing or selling sex isn't," explains Breslin. That's where this landmark move to crack down on sex trafficking – a new bill called Clause 14 – will help. It's coming into force right now and means that it is now a criminal offence for a man to have sex with a woman who has been 'subject to exploitation', regardless of if he was unaware of it or not. It's striking fear into the hearts of punters (the term for men who buy sex) with the threat of a £1,000 fine or criminal record. The hope is ▶

£3,000-£10,000

– the amount

women are

generally sold for

One in ten men

have paid for sex

"I'm British but I was trafficked"

Alex*, 22, from Chester, tells her story

"About 8% of all trafficking victims are from the UK. I was 15 when it happened to me. After a huge row with my father, I dropped out of school and went to stay with my mum's brother in St Helens, Merseyside. Steve* had always shown great interest in me – what I didn't know at the time was that his interest was sexual.

Under the guise of a weekend away, he drove me to Edinburgh. He took me out and gave me a hell of a lot to drink. We then went to an unmarked door, behind which was an underground lap-dancing club. Alarm bells rang, but I didn't want to seem prudish, so I let him buy me more drinks. Then he suggested I dance like the women on stage. It soon became clear that this wasn't a joke – it was an order. He threatened to beat me up if I didn't comply.

We lived in a grotty one-bed flat above the club. Steve let me speak to my mum on his mobile, but I was so conditioned by his forcefulness and aggression, that I couldn't speak out. She thought I was still in St Helens, working in a bar. I was never locked in the flat, but I was so afraid of him and the beatings with his belt, that I was a prisoner anyway.

“They'd get me so wasted I didn't know what I was doing, which was probably a blessing”

I worked in the club five nights a week. The dancing soon turned into selling sex in the back room. They'd get me so wasted I didn't know what I was doing, which was probably a blessing. Because I was 15, Steve got more for me than the pimps did for the other girls, who were over 18. It was around £30 a client and I saw about five a night, but when I turned 16, it fell to £20. Most of the other men didn't know I was forced, and the ones that did didn't care.

Finally, when I was 18, I plucked up the courage to stash some cash and run away. I've had boyfriends since, but I'll never fully trust men. I eventually told my mother, but she couldn't accept it and we don't talk any more.

My uncle was never prosecuted – I couldn't face testifying – but he did get some poetic justice from some angry male friends of mine who beat him with a belt like he used to do to me. I now live in London, ride my horse at the weekend, and have a great job in mental health. Steve still appears in my nightmares, but he can't touch me any more."

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◀ that punters will be much more discerning about whether a woman has been trafficked. Sceptics say it will drive the industry further underground, making the women less safe, but Breslin says that, "If the men can find the industry, we can too. Invisibility doesn't help bring in trade."

So, who are these men, the murky figures lurking in the shadows? The typical profile is, alarmingly, more like the men you date or befriend than you might expect. "Around 30, married, in full-time employment, and with no criminal convictions," says a spokesperson from the Home Office. "They're generally having sex with their partner, but want the prostitute to do things they can't ask their girlfriend to do," adds Breslin.

SAD SMILES

When I started a thread on Punternet.com

(where punters review prostitutes) asking their views on sex trafficking

and Clause 14, the response was largely hostile. A few believed that sex-trafficked women were about as real as mermaids. Many said the figures were a government-constructed myth (the motives for which remained unclear) or inflated by the Poppy Project to attract more funding. I suspect it's easier for them to be conspiracy theorists about sex trafficking; confronting the

500,000 – the
number of women
thought to be
trafficked into
the EU each year

Do the clients care?

Regulars on Punternet.com open up on the condition that they remain anonymous

"I have rarely had any punting experience where I was concerned she was coerced. I occasionally encounter oriental ladies who are very homesick 8,000 miles from home, but they usually maintain a stiff upper lip, biding their time until they have saved enough to head home and ensure their family's security."

"When a girl is found in a house, selling her body for sex, she will immediately cry 'coercion!' and the authorities will believe whatever she says. Eastern European women are very quick to say I was trafficked' to shift blame to others. I'll stick my neck out here – there is no such thing as a trafficked girl."

"I tend only to buy sex from ladies with a reasonable command of English. I ask direct questions while looking into their eyes, and check if they are bruised or have needle tracks. I have suspected coercion on three occasions and immediately stopped and telephoned Crimestoppers."

possibility they have 'punted' with a sexually enslaved woman doesn't sit comfortably.

Equally, many punters proved to be very concerned about sex trafficking, and genuinely interested in making it stop. Indeed, the Poppy Project has said many sex slaves are liberated when a worried punter sounds the alarm.

Many prostitutes also got in touch with me through Punternet. "I've worked with women who were trafficked," says one. "There is no way any guy visiting either of these girls would have known they were working under duress. Both, although very depressed and physically hurt, would put on a dazzling smile the minute a man walked into the room. They were conditioned to do this and didn't know any other way." Another prostitute confided that she's worked with sex slaves: "At the brothel I work at, we sometimes get calls from men with foreign accents trying to sell their girlfriends. We say no, and pass the number to our condom lady [government health worker], so that she can alert the police."

BREAKING FREE

As for Bella, she escaped when her brothel was raided in July 2008. Her face lights up as she talks about her rescue. A punter raised the alarm by calling Crimestoppers and giving an anonymous tip-off about the brothel. Bella isn't sure, but she thinks he was a regular.

"I got to know one guy quite well. He'd notice if I'd been crying or looked tired. He'd ask if I ever saw my family, things like that. I never told him I was forced, but he must have guessed."

The other eight women were also interviewed by the police, but only two told the truth – the others were too scared. Bella suffered from post-traumatic stress, but was granted permission to stay in the UK. She had therapy and now waitresses in Southampton and sends money home. "I'm going home for good next year," she smiles.

But for every rescued woman, there are thousands of women still imprisoned. Slavery still exists in our villages, towns and cities. And something needs to be done. **G**

If you suspect someone is involved in sex trafficking, call Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111 (you can remain anonymous). Call the Poppy Project on 020 7735 2062 between 9.30am-5.30pm, Monday-Friday