

Chapter 5

Cross-border trafficking of children

Introduction

Information on the cross-border trafficking of children for purposes of sexual exploitation is difficult to obtain. Interviews with SAPS officers, members of community organisations, an official of the Thai Embassy and newspaper reports however give some indications. Reports indicate that the traffic is mostly to South Africa and that it is organised by international crime syndicates from Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. It is suspected that crime syndicates involved in the traffic of women from these regions are also involved in the traffic of children.



With regard to traffic from the rest of Africa South Africa is regarded as a country of destination especially for children from Moçambique and Angola. It is not known whether the same organised criminal groups involved in the traffic of women are involved in the traffic of children.¹⁰⁰ One report indicated that the traffic of children from Moçambique was the work of an individual.¹⁰¹ Another report states that Moçambicans "cross the fence illegally via Komatipoort, in Mpumalanga, where they meet 'traders' who offer them the good life in South Africa".¹⁰²

2. South Africa as destination country

The cross-border traffic of children for purposes of sexual exploitation is not a new phenomenon in South Africa. Van Onselen¹⁰³ in his study on the early sex industry on the Witwatersrand highlighted the story of 15 year old Fanny Kreslo from Poland who was trafficked in 1898, and described the operations for both in-country traffic of women from the Cape and the need for girls from elsewhere thus:

"It is certain that some attempts were made to recruit local women into the trade in vice - a procedure which appealed to the souteneurs because it had the virtue of being relatively cheap. In such cases the pimps would usually send out the oldest and most trusted of their prostitutes - the madams of their houses - to the town parks and recreation areas where seemingly attractive propositions would be put to badly paid white domestic servants or other young white women. Given the chronic shortage of mature women on the Rand at this time, however, this practice hardly produced a solution to the pimps' problem, and for this reason they were forced to look further afield in their search for new recruits. In the course of this latter search the pimps found that the older social formation of the Cape Colony tended to yield a slightly readier supply of poor, vulnerable or marginalised women. Small numbers of coloured domestic servants who had already been seduced by white men could occasionally be recruited from Cape 'boarding houses', while job adverts placed in the Colony's newspapers - via bogus 'employment agencies' - sometimes succeeded in luring naïve European women into the Transvaal's 'houses of ill-fame'.

Not even these forays to the south, however, could keep pace with the Rand's demand for sexual services during the mid - 1890s, and for this reason the 'Bowery Boys' and other local pimps were forced to turn to the older societies of Europe for the bulk of their supplies of prostitutes. At least some of these European recruiting operations worked along the same lines as those employed in the Cape. Advertisements placed in British or continental newspapers offered young women an assisted passage to South Africa in order to take up well-paid positions as 'barmaids' or domestic servants in

¹⁰⁰ Molo Songololo: **The Traffic of Women into the South African Sex Industry**, 2000

¹⁰¹ See report on traffic in Wintersveld, in this chapter

¹⁰² N. Ncaca: "Cops rescue Illegals from grip of 'syndicate'" *City Press*, 31/1/99

¹⁰³ C. Van Onselen: 'Prostitutes and Proletarians 1886 - 1914: Commercialised sex in the changing social formations engendered by rapid capitalist development in the Transvaal during the era of imperialism' in **Studies in the Social and Economic Development of the Witwatersrand 1886-1914, Vol 1 New Babylon** (Ravan, Johannesburg, 1982)

Johannesburg. Needless to say, once these women had been 'escorted' to the Rand by the madams of brothels posing as 'agents', the vulnerable job aspirants were pressed into an entirely different line of service to that which they had perhaps imagined when they first set out on their journey.

In other cases the 'Bowery Boys' extended the area of their direct recruiting operations by pushing the boundaries back into the heartland of eastern Europe. In mid 1898, for example, 'Bessie Levin', acting on behalf of David Levinsohn of the 'American Club', was sent on a long trip which took her well to the north-east of her and her pimp's native Poland. In the small Lithuanian village of Vilna Krevo the procuress met and offered a fifteen-year old girl named Fanny Kreslo employment in London as a shop assistant at a salary of 100 Roubles a year. When the same proposition was made to the Kreslo parents they readily agreed to the 'employment' of their daughter on these terms and the two women then set off for England.

On their arrival in London Miss Kreslo was informed by Levin that her 'employer' had suddenly departed for South Africa, and the two of them should follow him to the Rand. Isolated, vulnerable, penniless and speaking only Russian, the Lithuanian girl agreed to accompany the older more informed woman on the further journey south. Once in Johannesburg, Levinsohn and Levin placed the girl in a brothel in 35 Anderson Street and informed her that if she wished to make her way back to Russia it would be necessary for her to earn the money for her passage by prostituting herself. After allowing Miss Kreslo the luxury of having a Polish speaker as her first sexual partner, the pimp and his madam then proceeded to provide the young Russian woman with a wider variety of Asian, black and white customers. It was only after several months - and after the backbone of the 'American Club' had been broken - that the young woman was released from her prison as a 'white slave'. In mid - 1899 the police, after learning of Fanny Kreslo's age, rescued her from the house in Anderson Street and arranged for the prosecution of Levinsohn and Levin." ¹⁰⁴

A hundred years later indications are that South Africa is still a destination country for girl children from Eastern Europe. This despite South Africa's ratification of the Convention on the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others in 1951. These children are trafficked into the organised sectors of the sex industry such as brothels and escort agencies. One report indicates that children from Russia are especially vulnerable. ¹⁰⁵

3. Countries of origin

If indeed children from Eastern Europe are trafficked through the same operations as women, ¹⁰⁶ then it is conceivable that the countries of origin could include, Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Estonia, Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. ¹⁰⁷

Those involved in the trafficking operations with regard to women from Eastern Europe have been identified as the Russian Mafia, Bulgarian syndicates and individual South African and Bulgarian agents. ¹⁰⁸ These recruiters, traffickers and agents are well organised in their countries of origin. According to one SAPS officer, Eastern European traffickers are almost exclusively ex-military personnel of senior rank. ¹⁰⁹ The syndicate operation typically spans several countries in Eastern Europe. Traffickers also operate in the country of origin and in South Africa. In addition to the trafficking in women and children the Eastern European syndicates also traffic drugs, cigarettes and compact discs and launder money. ¹¹⁰

Besides the traffic from Eastern Europe reports also indicate the traffic of children from Southeast Asia, especially from Thailand and Taiwan. ¹¹¹ Children from Thailand are typically girls between

Box 6: Article II – The UN CRC (1979)

1. State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to combat the illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad
2. To this end, State Parties shall promote the conclusion of bilateral or multilateral agreements or accession to existing agreements

¹⁰⁴ C. Van Onselen: 'Prostitutes and Proletarians 1886-1914: Commercialised sex in the changing social formations engendered by rapid capitalist development in the Transvaal during the era of imperialism' Ibid pp 120-121

¹⁰⁵ I. Price: 'Kinderprostitutisie - tragiese lot van SA se weggooiemensies' *Die Burger* 29/3/99

¹⁰⁶ See Molo Songololo: **The Traffic of Women into the South African Sex Industry**, Ibid

¹⁰⁷ From interviews with SAPS officers and a South African agent conducted for report on the traffic of women

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Interview with member of the Border Patrol Unit: Cape Town

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ I. Price Ibid and see for instance The Cape Times: 20/1/2000 for a report on the discovery of 11 Thai women and

the ages of 15 and 17.¹¹² They are trafficked primarily to escort agencies in Gauteng and Cape Town.

The methods of trafficking are similar to that used for in-country trafficking in Thailand.¹¹³ Girl children from Thai rural communities and their parents are typically approached by agents who promise work in a restaurant or as a domestic worker in South Africa.¹¹⁴ The children and their parents are enticed with offers of greater earnings, reminiscent of Fanny Kreslo and her parents, a hundred years ago. Agents "go into villages and say 'we got work for you, in South Africa. It can be domestic, in a factory or even a Thai restaurant. They can earn R3 000 - R5 000 a month. Those girls only earn R500 back home."¹¹⁵

Box 7: Section 32 (1) The Refugees Act (1998)

Any child who appears to qualify for refugee status in terms of section 3, and who is found under circumstances which clearly indicate that he or she is a child in need of care as contemplated in the Child Care Act, 1983 ... must forewith be brought before the children's court for the district in which he or she was found.

The children are then transported to South Africa, usually via Singapore as Thai border control officials are alert to the trafficking in children and women to foreign sex industries. Syndicates have found alternative means to ensure that these children reach their intended destinations.

Traffickers of Thai women are typically both male and female, Thai and South African. If children were brought through the same operation then it would be reasonable to assume that the same people are involved in the trafficking of children from Thailand.

With regard to children from the rest of Africa being trafficked to South Africa, indications are that children as young as seven are trafficked from Zambia, Senegal, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ethiopia, Angola and Moçambique.¹¹⁶

With regard to the operation from Senegal, Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania and Zambia it appears that girls were debt-bonded for R12 000. The report also indicates that South Africa is a transit country for girls from these countries en route to other destinations such as Bangkok.¹¹⁷

As far as could be established Moçambican children, both boys and girls have been trafficked to informal settlements such as Diepsloot north of Johannesburg,¹¹⁸ as well as to semi-rural areas such as Wintersveld.¹¹⁹ In this particular instance, a Moçambican national who had been living in South Africa for 10 years promised 4 girls and young women between the ages of 14 and 20, work in South Africa. On arrival in the Wintersveld area however they were given food and accommodation and were forced to have sex with men in exchange for money.¹²⁰ The community brought the case to the notice of the Wintersveld police. Indications are also that there are two categories of Moçambican children who are trafficked for purposes of sexual exploitation. In the first instance agents bring the children from Moçambique. It is not clear what the method is, i.e. whether the children are promised work and are transported together with children who are trafficked to farms in Mpumalanga and the Northern Province or whether they are abducted. In the second instance children who cross the border illegally in the company of their parents become separated from their parents. They are left to fend for themselves and become vulnerable to being trafficked.

one Thai child in a Cape Town escort agency

¹¹² Interview with Thai embassy official

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ P. Govender: 'Sex gangs luring young girls to South Africa' Sunday Times 7/2/99 and interviews with representatives of Gauteng based community organisations and a police officer in the Northwest Province

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Interview with representatives of community organisations, in Johannesburg

¹¹⁹ Interview with a police officer of the Wintersveld Police.

¹²⁰ Ibid

Map 3: Cross-border trafficking of children

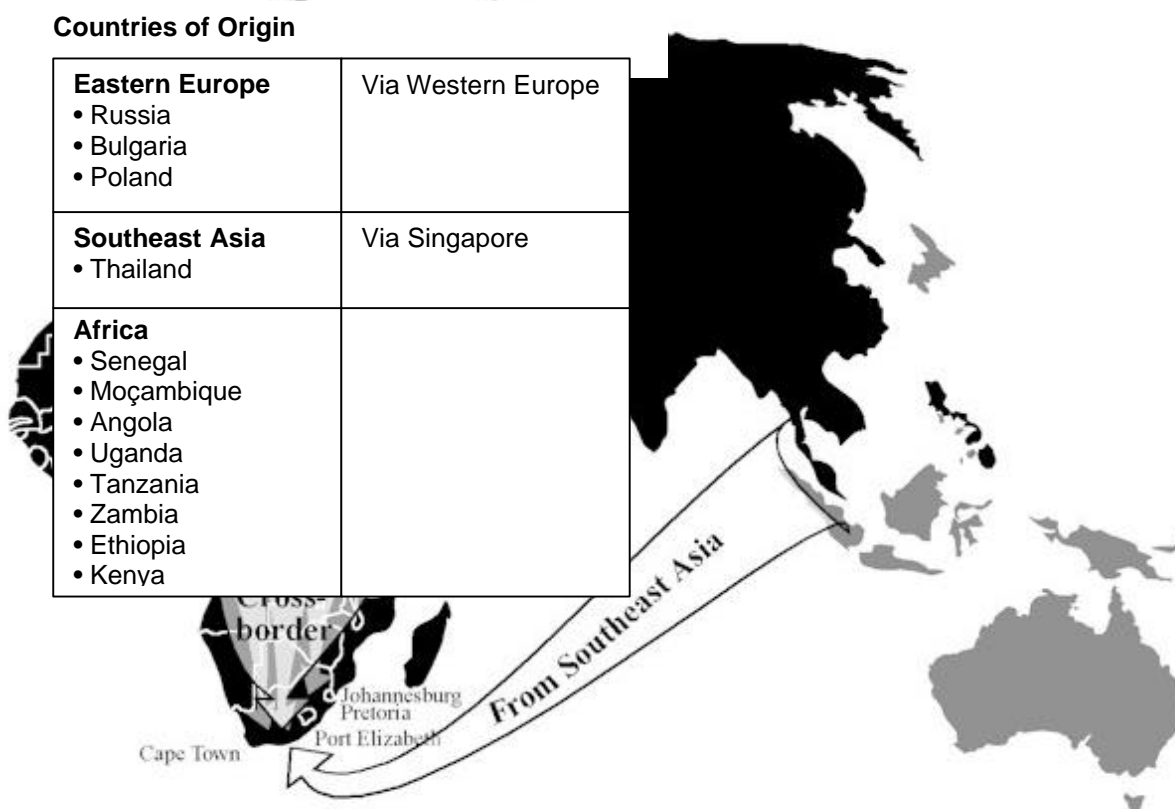
It is not known who the sex exploiters of Moçambican and Angolan children are. With regard to children from Eastern Europe and Southeast Asia it would be reasonable to assume that the sex exploiters would be men with sufficient money to pay for children in brothels and escort agencies. Given the stigma attached to sex with a child, the children's illegal status and the criminal nature of the operation it would also be reasonable to assume that amounts charged would be greater than for women.

4. The conditions under which children are held captive

Children would typically be held captive and would be closely watched. In addition they would have no means of escape. Their travel documents with which they entered South Africa (if they entered legally) would have been confiscated on their arrival. They would not speak English and communication with outsiders would be difficult. The outsiders they would come in contact with, such as sex exploiters, would not have any interest in ensuring the rescue of the child.

5. In summary

While evidence is sparse, indications are that the cross-border traffic of children for the purpose of sexual exploitation has changed little in the last hundred years. Indications are that the operations of Eastern European and Southeast Asian syndicates and traffickers are highly organised. Operations in East Africa appear to be as sophisticated. Operations in southern Africa appear to be less organised although the level of the traffic is probably higher as there is easier access to children who might enter the country unaccompanied and children who are separated from their parents on arrival.



Map 4: Trafficking of children from Africa via South Africa to Southeast Asia



Countries of Origin

Tanzania
Zambia
Kenya
Ethiopia
Uganda
Senegal