

# Slave trade

Last month the police service and government launched a UK Action Plan to tackle human trafficking. How is the Met getting to grips with this growing problem? Tina Orr Munro reports as the subject is due to be discussed at the Police Federation's annual conference

Britain commemorated the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery last month.

The creation of the Met's Human Trafficking Unit is evidence that, two centuries on, modern day slavery is flourishing.

The new unit, set up last month, is entirely dedicated to tackling the growing numbers of people smuggled into this country through violence, coercion or deception for the purpose of forced labour. Most people brought here

are young women who are sold into the sex trade. But people are also trafficked to work as servants or even for organ donation.

The Human Trafficking Unit, based near New Scotland Yard, was established following a three-month nationwide police operation that took place in February and highlighted the extent of the problem.

Operation Pentameter led to the rescue of 84 women and girls, believed to have been trafficked into the UK. Twelve

of the victims identified were girls aged between 14 and 17 years. In all, police raided 515 premises nationwide and arrested 232 people.

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This prompted the establishment of the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UK HTC) which went live at the end of 2006. And, in turn, last month, the Met announced it too would be setting up a special unit to deal with increasing numbers of people being trafficked into this country mainly for sexual exploitation. Its aim is, not only to target criminal networks that profit from smuggling humans, but also help the victims.

Detective superintendent Mark Ponting is in overall charge of Operation Maxim, a multi-agency response to international organised immigration crime. He says human trafficking is a greater issue in London than in other parts of Britain.

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The majority of victims, he says, are between the ages of 18 and 25. They are smuggled into the country and sold into the sex trade. Few are children because traffickers know smuggling children is more dangerous and problematic for them. The victims originate from the far corners of the globe including the Baltics, Balkans, Africa and South America. But, although the police have a good understanding of the profile of those who are trafficked, they don’t know the scale of the problem. The Home Office estimates that up to 1,420 women are trafficked into the UK annually for sexual exploitation, but Det Supt Ponting says this figure is unlikely to be accurate.

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The unit consists of a team of 12 and includes a chief inspector, inspector, two sergeants and eight detective constables. They have received no special training, but are a deliberate mix of officers who have been chosen for their experience either in traditional police enforcement activity or dealing with the victims of violence and sex crimes.

The Unit will concentrate on the high end, or Level 2 criminal activity, in an attempt to disrupt the criminal networks that dominate the trade in human beings. It will also be working closely with the UKHTC and with the countries of origin of some of the victims. Countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, which Det Supt Ponting has just returned from, are already co-operating well with the UK police in terms of raising awareness of the issue in their own countries. The team will also work closely with organisations such as the Poppy project which provides support and housing to women who have been trafficked into prostitution in London and has already helped over 100 women.

Less than a month after the unit was established, it is too soon to talk about success, but Vernon Coaker, Home Office minister, speaking at its launch promised, “Those involved in the trafficking of men, women and children can expect to feel the full weight of the law when they are caught.”

### Profile of a victim:

#### Maria’s story

Maria is typical of the hundreds of women trafficked into the UK every year.

Originally from Albania, she was sold by a member of her family. She was smuggled into this country in a lorry and sold into the sex industry. She ended up living in London for five years. During that time she was repeatedly raped and beaten. Maria was forced to have sex with up to 70 men a day until she and some other women in her house escaped and went to the police.

“My traffickers threatened to kill me, and they threatened to take my sister too and do the same to her. I was beaten often, very badly. I have scars from it now, especially from my broken arm. I have been raped many times. Although I am free I am depressed. I will never forget what they did to me.”

Source: Poppy project.