

Report on Human Trafficking and Prostitution in Northern Ireland Police Service of Northern Ireland

A talk given prior to the 2006 AGM of the Queen's Women Graduates, 28 January 2006

Our speaker introduced herself as a Detective Inspector working in the Child Abuse and Rape Enquiry (CARE) Unit, Criminal Justice Department of the PSNI. Her work covers serious child abuse, pornography issues and serious sexual assaults on adults.

She quickly homed into the realities of this kind of crime in the streets of Northern Ireland. Although a number of brothels have been closed in Derry over the past year, this problem is more specific to Belfast. The bulk of them are to be found in South Belfast where there might be ten to twelve operating at any one time. These brothels go in for prostitution on a cleverly organised basis, and operate alongside the more "casual", individual forms of prostitution.

The brothels, which have links to escort services, invariably feature minders. These individuals usually have criminal convictions, and many of them are connected to Loyalist paramilitary groups. The brothels provide the basis for selling drugs and operating protection rackets.

The brothel organisers are switched on to what is and is not legal, so the requirement that only one woman at a time may work means that the women work in shifts. A legal requirement is now changing this procedure in England and Wales as it will require two women to work at any one time.

The new apartments built in South Belfast are a current choice of premises, obtained on a short term lease for payment in advance, and with only shadowy details of identity supplied for the rental agreement. If the local residents have been taken unawares, they may make formal complaints so the brothel organisers will simply move elsewhere. The PSNI is aware of 60-70 brothels in the Province, a small proportion of which is constantly shifting addresses.

Ann was extremely well informed on the modus operandi of these brothels in terms of how clients can find them and the differing ways in which money is split between prostitute, pimp or brothel. It seems that Belfast is a lucrative part of the world for this business. Contrary to perceived ideas, some of the women involved are from professional backgrounds. They travel up from Dublin or flyover from the mainland to make a great deal of money over a short period of time.

The horrible phenomenon of women packed into vans and lorries and imported to the UK to work as prostitutes has not so far been seen in Northern Ireland. Her prediction is that human trafficking of this kind, where women are held under duress, will arrive as trafficking routes extend to include the Belfast airports.

Underage prostitution is particularly hard for the police to identify and deal with. The PSNI work with groups like Barnardos, the NSPCC and Women's Aid to try to encourage young people to come forward for help. The girls involved often come from abusive or dysfunctional family backgrounds, or from care homes.

All in all, she provided her audience with a sober, up to date account of the oldest profession as it is operating in Northern Ireland, and of the legal parameters within which police must work.