

Israel's Sex Trade Booming: Human trafficking in Israel rakes in more than USD billion a year, findings in annual parliamentary survey show

Y-Net News, March 23, 2005

By Miri Hasson

TEL AVIV - Thousands of women are being smuggled into Israel, creating a booming sex trade industry that rakes more than USD one billion a year, a parliamentary committee said on Wednesday.

The Parliamentary Inquiry Committee, headed by Knesset member Zehava Galon of the left-wing Yahad party, commissioned the report in an effort to combat the sex trade in Israel. Findings showed that some 3,000 and 5,000 women are smuggled to Israel annually and sold into the prostitution industry, where they are constantly subjected to violence and abuse.

The report, issued annually, said some 10,000 such women currently reside in about 300 to 400 brothels throughout the country. They are traded for about USD 8,000 – USD 10,000, the committee said.

The U.S. State Department ranks Israel in the second tier of human trafficking around the world, saying the Jewish State does not maintain minimal conditions regarding the issue but is working to improve them.

Israel passed a law in 2003 that would allow the state to confiscate the profits of traffickers, but watchdog groups say it is rarely enforced.

Most foreign prostitutes in Israel come from Ukraine, Moldova, Uzbekistan and Russia and many are smuggled in across the Egyptian border.

The committee found that the women work seven days a week for up to 18 hours every day and that out of the NIS 120 paid by customers, they are left with just NIS 20, while the rest of the money is passed on to their traders.

The prostitutes face constant threats of abuse and murder, the report said, and Israeli law does little to help them. Delays in trial dates and prolonged hearings force the women to remain exposed to violence for more than a year until they are called in to provide testimony, and courts rarely collect early testimonies, as permitted by law.

To help combat the problem, the committee recommended that the state prosecutor's office refrain from making plea bargains with sex traders. It also advised to raise the threshold of punitive measures and pushed for financial compensation for sex trade victims.

Background Articles

Combating Violence Against Women

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Passage of Comprehensive Anti-Trafficking Legislation

The Hotline for Migrant Workers, October 24, 2006

www.hotline.org.il

A new comprehensive anti-trafficking law passed a final vote in the Israeli Parliament on Wednesday the 17th of October, 2006. Approved by a majority of MP's, it both expands the definition of trafficking and contains important protections for victims. The law compliments and enhances pre-existing legislation outlawing trafficking in women for the purpose of sex- its main strength being that it includes all forms of trafficking such as trafficking for labor, trafficking in organs and child trafficking. Some other highlights:

- It establishes punishments similar to those for serious crimes such as rape, including prison terms of 16 – 20 years for traffickers.
- It establishes a fund consisting of fines given by the court to traffickers and profits from property which is confiscated from them. Half of this money will be earmarked for rehabilitation while the other half is intended for prevention and prosecution.
- It recognizes that legal redress is a basic right for trafficked persons. In cases where the court has ordered compensation for trafficked persons, however traffickers fail to pay these fines, victims can claim money from the above fund.
- Trafficked persons will be entitled state provision of legal representation provided in civil cases.

The law was initiated by MK Zehava Gal-On and the Israeli Ministry of Justice in 2003. However, the main push for its passage came following a downgraded rating in the 2006 US State Department Trafficking in Persons report. The report primarily criticized Israel for inaction regarding trafficking for labor.



Divorce in Israel: Men Get the Final Word

The Christian Science Monitor, November 8, 2006

By Ilene R. Pusher

Cancelled conference spurs debate over laws set by Israeli Rabbinate.

JERUSALEM – It's been nearly three years since Ariela Dadon began trying to divorce her abusive husband. But she can't gain her freedom or the right to remarry because her estranged husband has refused to grant her a *get*, a Jewish divorce writ that can only be given by a man to his wife

- never the other way around.

"We and others who are denied a *get* are like prisoners who can't get a pardon," says Ms. Dadon, who is raising two small children while she puts herself through graduate school in accounting.

She also makes endless visits to religious courts in a bid to get the judges to force her husband's hand. The catch: He won't do so unless she forfeits child support, among other demands.

Groups such as Mevoit Satum, a nongovernmental organization whose name means "Dead End," says there are thousands of women here like Dadon. While rights groups have lobbied for it, neither civil marriage nor divorce exist in Israel.

The Israeli rabbinate acknowledges only that there are between a few dozen to up to 200 cases at any given time. But the Rabbinate - which holds sway over the religious life of Israel's Jewish majority, governing everything from birth to burial, was to hold a groundbreaking conference here Tuesday to address the problem. Last week, however, it cancelled the event - which had been tailored to ultra-Orthodox guidelines of a closed session, no women, and no media. The move was widely seen as caving to pressure from ultra-Orthodox leaders, though no reason was given.

Even more liberal-minded Orthodox rabbis slammed the move. Shlomo Riskin, an influential US-born rabbi who founded the Efrat settlement in the West Bank, called the rabbinate's decision to cancel the conference "a tragedy."

The reignited dispute over how to approach the problem of Israel's *agunot* - which means "anchored" women - comes at a time of increased struggle between modern rights and ancient values, increasingly at stake in Israel's attempt to maintain a state that is both Jewish and democratic.

Every night for the past week, for example, there have been riots in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods over the state's decision to allow a Gay Pride Parade here on Friday. Some groups have threatened violence if the event takes place in the Holy City.

In the early days of the Israeli state, Orthodox religious leaders were entrusted with decisions on religious matters. Founding prime minister David Ben-Gurion made a compromise to win religious political support and argued that the deal would empower what was then seen as an endangered religious minority. Today, the ultra-Orthodox community is growing in influence and numbers, due to much higher birthrates in religious families.

Shula Kadourie, a mother of six who recently got her divorce after a four-year wait, says that the way she was treated in the process damaged her faith. It also made her wonder if she weren't living in more of a theocracy than a democracy, like many others in the Middle East. In court visits, she was regularly told to sit and be quiet; the judge was interested in hearing her husband's side of the story only.

Although the conference of rabbinical decision makers was called off, a counter conference - planned several weeks ago in response to the decision to exclude women from the room - was planned by Mevo Satum. The group's director, Rachel Azaria, said Tuesday that the problem was that religious authorities do not use the tools at their disposal to force recalcitrant husbands - many of whom have gone on to live with another woman - to release their wives. Halakha, or Jewish religious law, makes it clear that it is the husband's place to give his wife a *get*, but various forms of pressure may be placed upon him if he is deemed unreasonable.

"Israel is the only country in the world where there wasn't supposed to be an issue of [Jewish] women stuck waiting for a *get*," Ms. Azaria says.

Since there is no separation here between synagogue and state, state religious authorities can resort to all kinds of tactics to get men who have no intention to reconcile to agree to a divorce. These vary from freezing bank accounts, revoking driver's licenses, and throwing the men in prison. They can be stopped at the airport.

But religious authorities, advocates say, often prefer outmoded techniques that work only in the most traditional communities. These include putting social pressure on the husband and ostracizing him from group prayer or study.

In practice, Azaria says, these long stretches of time in which the woman waits amount to a sort of financial blackmail, systematically weakening the economic position of women. Authorities will suggest that the woman who is keen to get out of the marriage give up some of her rights to request alimony or child support. Women of means are expected to pay to get out the marriage, or are left to wait years in the bureaucracy.

"It's always worthwhile for the man to wait. It's always, 'What are you willing to give up?' " Azaria explains. "If she has money, it means paying, or giving up her claim to joint property, or giving up her right to child support."

Dadon, who had her last court appointment three days ago, is still waiting. "To give up my demand for alimony, fine, but I won't give up on behalf of my kids, on getting them the support they need," she says. In some court visits, judges have asked her for evidence. She included police reports after several instances of physical abuse.

Although these are taken into consideration, they don't replace the need for her husband to agree "of his own will" to grant the divorce. "I feel that the court is just legitimizing him and his attempt to push me to give up everything," she says. She wrote a long letter to the court to explain her situation, but it was ignored.

Abu-Ghanem Women Speak Out Against Serial 'Honor Killings'

Haaretz, February 23, 2007

The murder of Hamda Abu-Ghanem, whose bullet-riddled body was found in mid-January at her parents' house in Ramle, surprised nobody.

As police set about their investigation, everyone was aware that the victim's brother had been threatening to kill her, and that long before the murder, she had taken refuge in a battered women's shelter.

It was a typical "honor killing," meant to remove some perceived stain on the family's reputation.

The perpetrators of most honor killings in the Arab community are not apprehended. Hamda's murder, however, was one too many for the women in the Abu-Ghanem family. She was the eighth woman to be murdered in the extended family in the last six and a half years. All her predecessors also lost their lives in "honor killings."

This time, instead of keeping mum when the police questioned them, the Abu-Ghanem women gave detailed testimonies of everything they knew. One said she had seen Rashad enter the house where Hamda was. Shortly afterward she heard shots and seconds later saw Rashad, the key suspect, fleeing from the building.

The victim's mother told the police that Rashad had forbidden his sister to leave the house after some men had called her a "prostitute."

"It was a women's revolt against the men of the family. While the men refused to cooperate with the police and forbade the women to speak, the women revealed all. They decided to put an end to the bloody circle of silence," Chief Inspector Haim Shreibhand, who was in charge of the investigation, told *Haaretz*.

The detectives gathered testimonies from 20 Abu-Ghanem women and assembled the pieces of the puzzle together into an indictment, he said.

Kamal Rashad Abu-Ghanem, 30, was arraigned in Tel Aviv's District Court yesterday for murder. His cousin Mahmoud, who was also arrested, was released for lack of sufficient evidence to file charges.

Rashad Abu-Ghanem was charged with entering the family's home, in Ramle's Juarish neighborhood. His sister was alone in the house, lying on her bed. She probably knew she was about to die. He went up the stairs with a loaded 9-mm. handgun, entered his sister's room and fired nine bullets at her.

Before Hamda, the other women of the Abu-Ghanem family who lost their lives for honor were Naifa, Suzan, Zinat, Sabrin, Amira, Reem and Shirihan.

Like some of the other victims, Hamda had spent the last few years in a shelter, hiding from her brother. Her "crime" was apparently her numerous telephone conversations, and being seen talking to her cousin once.

About a year ago, she asked to move back to her parents' house in Ramle. A few months later, she filed a police complaint against her brother, who had assaulted her. He was arrested, but later released by the court.

"The hardest thing at these murder scenes is the awful silence," said Yifrah Duchovny, Coastal Plain police commander. "Nobody cries, nobody speaks."

"We held everyone who was in the neighborhood at the time of the murder for questioning, and started collecting testimonies. The first one who cooperated with us, perhaps without meaning to, was a relative who said the murder wasn't justified, that Hamda had not breached any honor. Then a female relative agreed with him," Shreibhand said.

The detectives told Hamda's mother, sisters and cousins what the first two relatives had said and asked for their opinion. "Gradually they started to speak. Each one started by saying she had had enough, that she didn't want this situation to continue. The mother, who had first stood behind her son, suddenly started speaking against him, sharing things she knew with us. She said she was angry that he had murdered her daughter."

Hamda's sisters went further. When they confronted Rashad at the police station they spat out at him: "You're a dog," and "Sit in prison for life, murderer." One of them asked him, "Why don't you try to murder me too? I'm not scared of you any more."

The men, on the other hand, hardly said a word to the police. "After the women began to talk, they found themselves receiving threats," said Shreibhand.

The witnesses have been put in safe houses, for fear the men would try to harm them. However, several women were not comfortable in the safe houses and are returning to the neighborhood. "The relations between the men and women in the family have become really tense. We've had special meetings about how to protect the women after they testify and we have a plan," the inspector said.

However, Aida Touma-Suleiman, director of the Women Against Violence group in the Arab sector, said she has grave fears for the women's lives. "I support these brave women. They finally broke the circle of blood and silence. But I'm also afraid they will be hurt. As long as there is no witness protection program, these women will be abandoned after they testify. They may have been courageous, but they have also sentenced themselves to death," she said.

Rashad Abu-Ghanem is represented by Attorney Giora Zilberstein.