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# The Syrian women and girls sold into sexual slavery in Lebanon

*Syria's refugee crisis has shone a light on sex trafficking in Lebanon, where victims are often treated as criminals.*

By Daniela Sala

Al Jazeera (11..02.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2uLjXUU> – “How do I know most of the women working as prostitutes are controlled?” asked Paul, a volunteer for the Jesuits, a religious order of the Roman Catholic Church, before answering his own question.

“[Because] the last time I tried to help one of them get in touch with an NGO, I got beaten and threatened by her captors.”

Everyone in Lebanon’s “sex trade” seems to be involved in trafficking in one way or another: Sources at both the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the General Directorate of General Security (GS) in Beirut told Al Jazeera that even pimps working further down the chain of command ultimately report to a bigger network of organised traffickers.

Paul has learned the ins-and-outs of Lebanon’s trafficking world over the years. Beirut, the Lebanese capital, and Jounieh, a coastal town about 10km (6.2 miles) north of it, are where most victims of sex trafficking end up in Lebanon.

A GS officer estimated that there are at least 800 women and girls who have been forced into prostitution in these areas. But the numbers are hard to verify because of the hidden nature of the problem.

While the ISF formally identified 29 victims – 10 of whom were Lebanese and 13 Syrian – of sex trafficking in 2017, the most recent year for which there is data, other sources, including officers at the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and NGOs, put the number in the thousands.

## ***The law***

The plight of these women is compounded by the way the law is applied in Lebanon. Article 523 of the Lebanese Penal Code criminalises “any person who practices secret prostitution or facilitates it”. The punishment is a prison sentence of anything from a month to a year.

It is not illegal to work as a licensed prostitute but seeing as the government has not issued any such licences since the 1970s, those working as prostitutes are vulnerable to being arrested and punished.

Beirut is no stranger to the sex industry. Prostitution was legalised in Lebanon after World War I when the government decided that concentrating prostitutes in one area – Mutanabbi Street, which became Beirut’s downtown red-light district before it was destroyed in the Civil War – would protect Lebanese women from French and Senegalese soldiers.

According to the Lebanese Prostitution Law of 1931, brothels were divided into two groups: public brothels and escort houses. The law also set conditions for those working outside the brothels, dividing them into groups of workers; cafe girls, mistresses and “artistes”.

After Lebanon’s Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, secret – meaning unlicensed – prostitution became a crime.

But hundreds of women enter Lebanon each year, particularly

from Eastern Europe and Morocco, with an “artiste” visa, to work as dancers in clubs. “Artiste” is widely understood to be a euphemism for “prostitute”.

### ***Life on the streets***

It is about 8pm on a Saturday, close to the Daoura intersection near Bourj Hammoud in Beirut’s Armenian district, on a crowded road full of busy shops and cafes. From his car, Paul has just spotted a woman leaning towards a black SUV. She and the driver talk for a few minutes. Eventually, she gets in the car. The transaction is quick, and people passing by do not even seem to notice.

“They found a deal,” explains Paul’s wife, Ray. The couple, both in their 40s, have been volunteering for the church for years. Paul first got involved 20 years ago when he discovered that one of his neighbours was being forced into prostitution. He says he considered it his “Christian mission” to help. Ray decided to join him soon after they met in 2010.

Paul and Ray are Armenian-Lebanese and asked that their real names be withheld because of the sensitivity of their work. For the past 10 years, they have distributed food and medicine once a week to “people in need”, the couple’s term for the homeless, drug addicts, beggars and women exploited into prostitution in Beirut.

As they drive around Doura, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, the main road is still crowded. Two policemen are patrolling

the area. But right around the corner, Ray spots another woman sitting in a car with a man. They have seen her here before, waiting on the street corner.

“We meet women who are Lebanese, East Africans and, in recent years, a lot of Syrians, of course,” says Paul. “In my experience, they all want to leave the job, but the only ones I have seen leaving a trafficker – it was because they were handed to another [trafficker].”

### ***The Chez Maurice case***

It came as no great shock to Paul when, in 2016, news broke that 75 Syrian women had been trafficked and held captive in a Jounieh brothel for years.

What became known as the “Chez Maurice case”, after the brothel in which they were held, only came to light because four women managed to escape.

Legal Agenda, a Lebanese NGO that collected several testimonies from survivors of the Chez Maurice brothel, described the place as a “torture chamber”.

“I didn’t think there was a state [law and order] in Lebanon,” one of the trafficked women told Legal Agenda. “[One of the traffickers] told me that he bought the state with his money. I believed him the moment I was detained in the General Security building for 24 hours and then released scot-free.”

Despite the media uproar surrounding the case, the owner of the brothel, a Lebanese businessman, was soon released on bail. Hearings into the case have been postponed multiple times and, three years on, the trial is only just about to begin.

### ***'No trust in the system'***

In 2011, the US State Department had placed Lebanon on its tier 2 watchlist of countries not fully complying with standards to combat human trafficking. Following pressure from civil groups such as Legal Agenda, Lebanon passed a new anti-trafficking law.

Since then, however, the Syrian crisis has precipitated a mass influx into Lebanon. Many of the refugees are women and children who have already suffered trauma and may be particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

Al Jazeera heard accounts of several scenarios in which Syrian women and children ended up in the hands of traffickers. One involved marriages, either in Syria or Lebanon, where the "husband" later revealed himself to be a trafficker. Another involved groups of women and children being trafficked across the border. There are also cases of women and girls being forcibly recruited within refugee camps or even sold by their families to traffickers.

However they arrived in Lebanon, human rights groups and aid workers say not enough is being done to protect them. Ghada Jabbour, head of the anti-trafficking unit at NGO Kafa (“enough” in Arabic), which focuses on gender-based violence, explains: “There is no trust in the system. Victims do not ask for help and do not report. And, at the same time, there is no outreach programme for the victims.”

### ***When the numbers do not add up***

According to Lebanon’s ISF, the number of identified victims of trafficking – including those forced into begging, labour exploitation and prostitution – has remained steadily low: 19 in 2015, 87 in 2016 (mainly the Chez Maurice survivors) and 54 in 2017. Most were Syrian.

However, Dima Haddad, programme officer at the IOM, says the official statistics do not come close to conveying the magnitude of the problem.

From her office at the IOM headquarters in Beirut, she coordinates a regional taskforce to counter human trafficking in Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan – the countries most affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. Sitting at her desk, surrounded by charts showing the dozens of tasks her team has planned for the next few months, she says: “Wherever there is a crisis, there is human trafficking.

“Vulnerability is increasing, hence trafficking is increasing.”

Asked whether there are gaps in the system for identifying the victims, Haddad answers immediately. “Absolutely. If I have to be more diplomatic, I would say there is a lot of work to do. It is urgent, as we consider anti-trafficking a life-saving intervention.”

There are also great obstacles to women being able to tell their stories. Aside from the shame and stigma that prevent victims from coming forward, it can also be difficult to access them. Approaching women on the street is dangerous – as Paul has found over the years – as they are watched by their traffickers.

In researching this feature, Al Jazeera tried to speak to survivors through NGOs, local journalists and local refugee camp leaders. However, those who were prepared to speak asked for money in exchange, requests that appeared to come from husbands and other relatives. Permission to access Baabda female prison – where many of the women arrested for prostitution are held – was not granted.

### ***Falling through the cracks***

During 2017, the ISF adopted a policy of trying to root out all cases involving potential trafficking victims through its Human Rights Unit. As of 2018, at least 108 training sessions had been given to the 37 law enforcement agents attached to the unit to help them identify and deal with suspected trafficking cases. But, according to Alef, a human rights watchdog based in Beirut, and other organisations, these

training sessions are rarely given to those on the front lines and are, therefore, missing their target.

Ashraf Rifi, who served as minister of justice between 2014 and 2016, and who was ISF director-general from 2005 to 2013, says it could take 10 to 15 years before there are significant changes in how cases of human, and specifically sex, trafficking are identified and combatted.

“It is a cultural problem,” he explains in his office, referring to the low numbers of women – and particularly Syrian women – identified as victims of trafficking. “It’s not unusual, because of stigma and discrimination, that Syrian women are considered ‘just’ prostitutes.”

The ISF is also responsible for investigations into exploitation networks. And yet, Rifi adds, one of the main challenges is the “high level of corruption”, including within the ISF itself.

In August 2018, the head of the ISF’s Human Trafficking and Moral Protection Bureau, Johnny Haddad, was arrested on charges of corruption in connection with a prostitution ring. To date, he is still under investigation by the ISF’s ethics committee, meaning that all information related to the case is classified.

Meanwhile, hundreds of women continue to fall through the cracks – treated like criminals instead of victims.

In 2016, 304 women were arrested on charges of prostitution, according to the ISF's data. More than half of them were Syrian. All were placed in prison.

The only support available to these women after they are released comes from charities. Dar Al Amal, a local NGO, helps women recuperate in its sparse offices in Sin el Fil, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut.

Here, the volunteers provide emotional and practical support to women who were forced into prostitution, trying to address their legal, medical and psychological needs.

Ghinwa Younes, a social worker who regularly visits the Baabda women's prison, says: "All the women I met want to quit this life. Most of them are in fact trafficking victims – but ISF did not understand they were victims. As soon as they leave the prison, they rarely get any kind of support and they are immediately back in the network of their exploiters."

When Al Jazeera spoke to Joseph Mousallem, a spokesman for the ISF, he acknowledged that the difference between prostitution and trafficking is not well understood by police officers. "But it is a cultural issue involving the whole of society, not only the security forces," he says.

"Countering trafficking is a priority, but we do have thousands of priorities: the whole system is under pressure.

We do our best, but not have the means or the resources to track the victims.”

***‘Of course they are victims’***

Lawyer Hasna Abdulreda meets dozens of these women during detention visits. For 10 years, she has provided legal support to women in jail, and she is currently the head of the legal department at the Lebanese Centre for Human Rights, a local NGO.

“In the past five years, every month at least two or three [women] reach out to me, after being arrested as prostitutes,” she says. “Most of them are Syrians and, of course, they are victims of trafficking.”

But there is little she can do.

“The trials are very fast and if the judge is given any reason to think that the woman is consenting to prostitution (for example because she keeps a share of the money), then he will just send her to prison without any further investigation,” Abdulreda explains.

This is despite the fact that both the UN Convention on Human Trafficking and Lebanese law state that the victim’s consent should be considered irrelevant.

“The only thing I can do is to give [detained women] my phone number and ask them to call me once they leave so that I can refer them to a shelter or an NGO. In prison, they do not have a phone, so I can’t contact them once they are released,” Abdulreda adds.

Despite many women asking for help, in 10 years nobody has called back.

For Syrian women, it is more complicated. Because they are foreigners, they are held by the GS for up to two days after being released from Baabda, Abdulreda says.

“I’m not allowed to access their files. I just lose every contact with them.”

### ***‘Double standard’***

Even when trafficking cases go to court, the odds appear stacked against victims of sex trafficking.

Legal Agenda analysed the 34 trafficking cases that made it to court in Lebanon between 2012 and 2017. According to lawyer Ghida Frangieh, who put that report together: “There is a clear double standard in the judges’ attitude towards prostitution and begging.

“While in all cases involving forced begging, judges were quite fast in ruling that it was a trafficking case, when it

comes to prostitution, they were digging deeper into the means of exploitation, asking for proof that the woman was actually forced into it. In certain cases they ruled that the woman was not to be considered a victim of trafficking as she consented, at least to some extent.”

Frangieh says that as well as reflecting a general prejudice against women in prostitution, this view has also been influenced by the Chez Maurice case.

“[Chez Maurice] became the victim paradigm. If you do not fit into this stereotype, you are hardly considered as a victim of trafficking,” she explains.

But this is not how trafficking works.

According to a former senior GS officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media, sex trafficking generally happens in one of two ways: through highly organised rings operating in brothels (such as Chez Maurice) or through so-called “free agents”.

But, despite their name, free agents still operate under the protection and control of a trafficker. “There is no prostitution that is not linked to the main traffickers,” the former officer says.

***‘Long-term solutions’***

“Alone, we cannot do much,” says Jabbour from Kafa.

Along with the Catholic NGO network Caritas, Kafa runs a shelter for female survivors of violence, mainly domestic workers who have been abused by their employers. The ISF occasionally refers trafficking victims to them.

But their resources are limited: Since 2015, Kafa has been able to offer protection to approximately 100 women, 20 of whom (all Syrians) were sex-trafficking survivors.

“These shelters are just a starting point,” says Jabbour. “What we need are long-term solutions.”

Some of these women were relocated overseas, some got married, but others, without a proper support mechanism, simply went back into prostitution – either forced or out of desperation.

“Countering trafficking and identifying victims is something that cannot be done by NGOs. It is a state’s responsibility,” says George Ghali, director of Alef.

According to Ghali, the problem is not the law but rather in the implementation of the law. “Where are the investigations? We are talking about organised crime. This is not something

you can expect NGOs to deal with.”

Back in Doura, Paul and Ray keep providing basic help to people in need. They do not have success stories to share.

Paul says he has not received any further threats from the traffickers. “[Why? Because] we make no change in the situation. And even if a girl manages to quit, they would have another one.”

He admits that lately, he has considered stopping his volunteer work because of the emotional toll it has taken.

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