

- ***Sicilian police charge five men over trafficking of women in Ragusa***

Sicilian police charge five men over trafficking of women in Ragusa

Romanian men taken into custody after raids targeting criminal exploitation and forced prostitution on farms

The Guardian (07.06.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2kVuswg> - Sicilian police have charged five Romanian men with human trafficking after a series of police raids targeted the criminal exploitation and forced prostitution of workers in farms across the Ragusa region.

Police said the arrests have exposed an organised inter-EU human trafficking operation between Romania and Sicily that is forcing men and women to live in conditions of modern slavery in one of Italy's largest vegetable producing regions.

The arrests follow an investigation by the Observer last year into the widespread forced labour and sexual exploitation of Romanian women employed as seasonal farm workers in Ragusa.

After a series of raids on farms across the region, Antonino Ciavola, chief of police in Ragusa, said he was shocked by the conditions in which dozens of workers – including a number of Romanian women – were being forced to live and work.

Ciavola said: "This is a first for Italy. We found that women are being recruited in Romania and promised good job opportunities in Sicily. But they all ended up being slaves".

Police said they found women living in dilapidated houses who were given rotten food to eat, beaten, made to work without pay and forced into prostitution with locals. A number of children were with them. If they refused to work or tried to leave they faced extreme violence.

"It's hard to imagine that a human being is capable of doing this to another," said Ciavola. .

The five men arrested were charged with human trafficking, labour exploitation and exploitation of prostitution.

"We have been surveilling these men since last year, for about seven months. We wiretapped their conversations, we were assisted by some victims who were brave enough to collaborate. [During the course of the investigation] we discovered a world where men and women are treated like animals."

In March last year, the Observer revealed that up to 5,000 Romanian women working on farms in Ragusa were facing conditions of forced labour and severe labour exploitation. The women said in interviews that they had been subject to routine sexual assault and

forced to work 12-hour days in extreme heat with no water. They also complained of non-payment of wages and being forced to live in degrading and unsanitary conditions in isolated outbuildings.

Ciavola credited the Observer investigation with kick-starting police inquiries into the abuse of Romanian women in Sicily. He said that police in Sicily have arrested more than 15 men and investigated a further 40 over the past 12 months as they step up their attempts to tackle widespread criminal exploitation on the island.

"I want to publicly thank the Guardian," he said. "This operation is the result of your investigation".

"We want to stop this," Ciavola added. "We want to end the exploitation. We need to free these women".