

Anti-Slavery Day - Wednesday 18th October

Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking in Northern Ireland "Hidden Horrors"

Many people in Northern Ireland think human trafficking is only something that happens in films like "Taken" or else in countries and cities far away from here. Unfortunately, this view is far from the truth. Each year Belfast & Lisburn Women's Aid support an average of 20 women who have been the victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Modern slavery is not a distant reality; it is right at our doorstep.

Women are predominantly trafficked through the South of Ireland along devised pathways from Eastern Europe, Africa and China. Traffickers utilise whatever means they have at their disposal to coerce, deceive and force women into a life of abuse and degradation.

Women's Aid work with these vulnerable women to address their complex needs and provide a safe and secure place to live while receiving support to address and overcome the trauma they have endured.

Sexual exploitation will remain an issue in Northern Ireland for as long as there is a demand for prostitution. Traffickers operate around us but out of sightline, ensuring women remain vulnerable and at risk. Many women are physically held captive in locked bedrooms or apartments, never allowed to leave the premises until traffickers have moved them to the next brothel. For those women who aren't physically imprisoned, they are mentally enslaved through fear; fear for their own safety and/or that of their family at home. The woman is a prisoner regardless of whether the door is locked.

The Modern Slavery Act introduced in Northern Ireland criminalises the buying of sex and has begun to tackle the issue and the demand for prostitution. It is a step in the right direction, but there is still a long way to go before this global issue will be resolved.

The concealed and underground nature of human trafficking can make it extremely difficult to detect and even harder for victims to escape. Indicators are not always obvious but signs to look out for include suspicious activity or movement at properties, women being spotted inside the house but never seeming to leave or women not holding their own passports whilst travelling. Quite often, if it doesn't seem right it probably isn't. Report your suspicions to the PSNI and the designated Human Trafficking Unit will be able to investigate. Perhaps your call is the tip that leads to a woman being rescued from months or years of sexual abuse.

All forms of Modern Slavery are an abhorrent breach of a victim's Human Rights, inhumane and traumatising with a profound, lifelong effect on a person's physical and mental health. Women's Aid will continue to shelter and support these women but we all have a responsibility to be aware of these hidden horrors in our own societies.

Rebecca Grounds & Sarah Bruce



Department of
Justice

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women's aid

Belfast and Lisburn