# UK–Women in need, public service and religious institutions: Unsafe havens

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**The Government is planning tougher penalties for men who use trafficked prostitutes. But who is helping the women themselves? Rahila Gupta uncovers a distributing trend.**

Anna, a waiflike 19-year-old from Albania, fell in love with a much older man when she was only 14. Her family banned her from seeing him, so they ran away together. He took her to Italy where she was beaten, raped and forced into prostitution. “He made me work every day and took all my money,” she told me. “Then he wanted sex. If I said no, he raped me.” She was picked up by police on several occasions. When she finally plucked up the courage to seek help, she was deported to Albania. There, the immigration officials refused to let her go until she paid them in cash or kind. An unknown man turned up, paid her fine and took her . . . straight back to her boyfriend. He then brought her to the UK, where she eventually managed to escape from him, ending up at the Home Office in Birmingham.

Those who argue that sex work should be considered a legitimate industry believe that trafficking problems – the most recent Home Office analysis estimated that there are 4,000 trafficked women in the UK – have been exaggerated, since for many sex workers prostitution is a voluntary choice. By contrast, Denise Marshall, who is the Chief Executive of Eaves Housing, which set up the POPPY Project, one of only two specialist organisations funded by the government to provide safe housing, advocacy and support to women trafficked into the sex trade, and has been working with vulnerable women since 1977, believes that there are trafficked women in massage parlours in every borough in the country.

And yet the resources available for helping women like Anna are scandalously limited. She was eventually referred to POPPY. As they have no safe houses outside London, they referred her to CHASTE (Churches Against Sex Trafficking in Europe), whose mission, according to its website, is to help women to “receive full divine attention and be set free”.

What that meant for Anna is that she instantly became a virtual prisoner. The moment she arrived her mobile phone was confiscated. It is Anna’s lifeline. “I really missed talking to Sally [her POPPY caseworker] because she had helped me and I had no one else to talk to.” The house that she was taken to, in a Leicestershire village, was “very nice but it was like a prison. There were no windows, only a front and back door.” And residents were refused a key to the building. There was a tiny courtyard in the back with high walls where the women were let out to smoke. Rev Dr Carrie Pemberton of CHASTE defends these measures, which are usually relaxed after the first fortnight, as necessary to protect the women’s safety. Yet POPPY do not believe it is necessary for women to be so confined, emphasising instead the setting of clear ground rules and the need to build a trusting relationship with support staff through daily contact. Exactly the kind of contact Anna was denied when her mobile was taken.

At the CHASTE safe house, Anna was allowed a pack of ten cigarettes every four days. She and the other women were taken shopping for personal items in a group, accompanied by a worker. Their benefits went straight to the coordinator and they were not allowed to buy their own food. They were obliged to say grace before eating. Anna, who has one Muslim and one Christian parent, is not religious, and found the regime unnecessarily rigid. “I was crying all the time,” she recalls. CHASTE also offers “psycho-spiritual support when requested by those trafficked into prostitution, working with the known religious routes of confession, blessing, absolution”, a religious ethos that offered Anna little in the way of practical support.

Faith-based organisations have been able to take control of the care of such vulnerable women because there is such a significant shortfall in government provision of safe-houses. The CHASTE network provides 20 beds for trafficked women along with the Salvation Army and the St John of God Trust– one third of safe housing available in the UK for trafficked women. They are independently funded through donations, thus saving the government large sums of money. As a result, unlike POPPY, they are unaccountable and not subject to any independent scrutiny of the services they provide. CHASTE says they “have invited the Under Secretary of State to visit the houses belonging to our network”. On an issue like abortion, which crops up again and again with trafficked women, a spokeswoman for CHASTE refused to state their policy, saying it was a “sensitive” issue. She did, however, confirm the existence of mother and baby facilities.

There are currently no formal mechanisms by which faith-based organisations can be compelled to improve their practice. POPPY and Women’s Aid are working on good practice guidelines but signing up to them will be purely voluntary. POPPY believe that “the Government is in breach of its obligations to these women if it fails, at the very least, to make the minimum standards guidelines binding”. As the Human Rights Act applies only to services provided by public authorities, there is no possibility of redress.

There is another kind of “public” service that CHASTE provides for trafficked women – a shocking one which it is not so keen to advertise. This fact tumbled out, quite by chance, when a young woman who was deputising for the official spokesperson revealed that their safe houses are also used to accommodate trafficked women on the point of deportation who are there “on bond” from the government. “This is another reason for not giving women the key to the house,” she said. When I put this allegation to CHASTE they did not deny it, though they would not provide any more detail. Such a muddle of objectives between the welfare and detention of women, of poacher and gamekeeper rolled into one, has clear dangers. On the one hand CHASTE publicises the fact that it provides safe houses for women without financial support from government, on the other it is paid by government to turn those safe houses into prisons for women en route to deportation.

The failure of public provision can also drive another group of women into the arms of religious organisations. Despite government rhetoric that it owes a duty to all women facing domestic violence, failed asylum seekers or women whose immigration status is tied to a violent spouse often find themselves homeless and destitute until they get leave to remain here. The No Recourse to Public Funds rule prevents women and children from accessing refuges or getting benefits until their immigration status is confirmed – something that can take months or even years. (A recent campaign to abolish this rule has gained widespread support from Amnesty International and Southall Black Sisters among many others, but has so far won only very minor concessions from the government.)

Manjeet Kaur, a 19-year-old with a seven-month-old baby, is forced to rely on handouts from her local Gurdwara (Sikh temple). Gurdwaras have a long tradition of hospitality, providing accommodation to poor travellers, usually men. Manjeet lives on a daily diet of spicy daal and chappatis from the Gurdwara, which aggravates her gastroenteritis. “My health visitor told me that I

must give the baby proper food now. But how can I? I have no money. I am still breastfeeding. And because I have diarrhoea, the baby has diarrhoea."

She was abandoned by her violent partner and lives in a room sublet by other tenants where she has been staying for the last five months on the promise that she will pay the rent as soon as she gets some money. The tenants scream abuse at her and kick her door in the middle of the night. "They have switched off the heating in my room, water runs down the walls. My baby is constantly ill. If I boil a kettle, the others scream at me for taking their electricity." They will not give her a key to the front door, leaving her standing out in the rain and cold with her baby for hours on end. She has no family, being separated from her mother while being smuggled out of Kabul where her father was decapitated in their front yard by the Taliban.

She has faced hostility at one Gurdwara. At another where she pleaded to be allowed to stay, the priest refused, saying that women had been raped and babies abducted, perhaps in a bid to scare her away. Meena Patel from Southall Black Sisters says there are "grave concerns about having to send women to religious institutions who often attempt mediation even where there has been violence. Women report feeling isolated and being harassed. Having escaped violence and rape they feel unsafe especially in the evenings when there are only men around."

How should we define a public service, especially when government is privatising its provision so enthusiastically? Poonam Joshi of Amnesty, which has been leading the campaign on trafficked women, says that "The Government is not providing adequate resources and I am concerned that women are being referred to organisations that may not have the level of expertise or experience in protecting and supporting women whose rights have been so severely abused."

In its 2007 report *Quality and Equality: Human Rights, Public Services and Religious Organisations*, the British Humanist Association warns of the dangers inherent in the involvement of faith groups in service provision: employment legislation allows faith groups to discriminate on the grounds of sexual orientation and religious belief in certain circumstances; there is a potential for discrimination against service users of different faiths; and the possibility of lower standards of service or the non-availability of those services which conflict with religious principles such as the right to life. The report defined public services as those which were government funded. However, given that public authorities like the police and social services regularly refer trafficked women to faith-based organisations, there are strong grounds to extend the definition of a "public" service to cover such provision so that they can be held accountable.

It's unlikely that organisations like CHASTE would survive the kind of scrutiny expected of the public sector. But even if they were to become accountable, would it be appropriate for them to be involved in the provision of these services? The answer has to be a resounding "no". Women should not have to rely on the "charity" of religious institutions to meet their human rights. It's a responsibility the government must urgently address. Or more women like Anna and Manjeet will continue to be thrown at to mercy of churches, mosques and temples when they are at their most vulnerable.

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* Correction: This article contains a correction from the original print version in the Jan/Feb 2009 issue of New Humanist.