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Truth About Israel

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Knesset: 3,000 women a year caught in modern slavery

By Gideon Alon, Ha'aretz Knesset Correspondent

A special Knesset committee finds that "3,000 women are sold each year in Israel's sex industry, in transactions with an annual volume of \$1 billion." Exploitation of sex workers includes imprisonment, and other forms of rank coercion."

The special Knesset committee's interim report is to be released Sunday. It describes the sex industry as a "modern form of slavery."

The report's authors charge that current law enforcement efforts against pimps and sex worker traders are inadequate. The laws provide for jail terms of up to 16 years for trafficking in humans. The courts, however, have made a travesty of these laws, the report alleges. Its authors propose two new bills which would, they believe, send a clear message indicating that pimps who traffic in sex workers will not get light punishments.

Testimony provided by sex workers and minors who appeared before the Knesset committee detailed the abusive, criminal aspects of trafficking. After the women are purchased, they have to "buy back" their freedom, and face constant threats, coercion and rape. Among other abuses, their passports are taken from them. A sex worker, the report reveals, has ten to fifteen clients a day, and earns NIS 120 from each client, with pimps taking a comparable sum for each client.

Committee chairperson Zahave Gal-On, MK (Meretz) said the panel's two proposed bills are designed both to reduce abuses in Israel, and to ensure that Israel is removed from the U.S. State Department's list of the second worst group of trafficking offenders.

In a July 2001 report, the State Department included Israel on a black list of states that fail to comply with the minimum criteria enforced by U.S. law to prevent human trafficking. Israel faced a threat of economic sanctions as a result of this ranking. Then, as a result of legislation promoted by the Knesset special committee, and by various public groups, Israel's listing on the State Department's 2002 report improved somewhat being ranked among the second worst trafficking offenders. Members of this category do not comply with minimal criteria enforced by American law, yet have made "significant steps" to reduce trafficking abuses.

Under current Israeli enforcement procedures, most attempts to prosecute trafficking offenders end in plea bargain agreements and light sentences of public service work, or no more than two years in prison. The Knesset committee objects strongly to these plea bargain procedures in its new report, it proposes that trafficking offenses be categorized as crimes for

which the courts are required to deliver prison sentences (apart from special circumstances that might be detailed by a court).

The committee also supports the use of economic pressures to reduce trafficking. Among other measures, it proposes that any property found on a person convicted of trafficking be considered assets gained illegally and thus subject to confiscation the defendant will bear the burden of proving that the possessions were not acquired illegally.

The committee also proposes measures which would expedite the legal system's handling of trafficking cases. These measures would be designed to enable the victims of sex trafficking to return to their home countries as soon as possible.

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