

## **MIGRATION INFORMATION PROGRAMME**

# **TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN FROM THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC FOR SEXUAL EXPLOITATION**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Out-migration of women for prostitution is an important and increasing phenomenon in the Dominican Republic. Different causes act as push factors, the main one being poverty.

The present assessment was carried out in the Dominican Republic in May 1996, and was based on interviews held with:

- twelve trafficked women who have returned to the Dominican Republic;
- social workers working with prostitutes;
- one main NGO (COIN) which assists and educates sex workers and returned trafficked women in the Dominican Republic;
- governmental authorities and foreign diplomatic representatives in the country.

The main recommendations to emerge from the present assessment are to focus on a prevention scheme: assist in the creation of opportunities for young women in their country of origin, establish information and educational campaigns for potentially trafficked women, and tighten regulations for visa applications and the obtaining of documentation.

## THE PROBLEM

Sources in the Dominican Republic state that their country has the fourth highest number in the world of women working overseas in the sex trade, after Thailand, Brazil and the Philippines. The number of Dominican sex workers currently abroad is estimated to be more than 50,000 women.

The main concentrations of these women are to be found in Austria, Curaçao, Germany, Greece, Haiti, Italy, The Netherlands, Panama, Puerto Rico, Spain, Switzerland, Venezuela and the West Indies.

The international sex work is viewed by many sources in the country as a concrete alternative for young, impoverished women who cannot find job opportunities at home. Obviously, exploitation, violence, deception, violation of rights and deportation are the common denominators of this type of irregular migration.

## THE CAUSES

The main cause expressed by all women interviewed was their poor economic situation and the lack of job opportunities in the Dominican Republic.

The majority cited two main objectives for their trip abroad:

Those with children: the necessity of having the financial means to feed and raise their children;

And those without children: to buy a home for their parents.

To remain at home would mean taking up employment in domestic work which is very poorly paid, or working in a free-trade zone assembling merchandise to be exported, also regarded as a low income job. Local prostitution, which is the alternative for most of these women, is socially less acceptable than overseas prostitution.

In the Dominican Republic, the minimum salary is equivalent to US\$ 80 per month, and that is the average monthly salary of a police officer or domestic worker. Bearing this in mind, and the fact that a large proportion of the population is earning far less than these figures, it is easy to understand why many Dominicans look elsewhere for opportunities.

The "imitation factor" could also be viewed as a cause. All women know or know of another woman/women who have gone overseas to work. Therefore, they know that the possibility is there despite how good or bad the other woman's/women's experiences were.

Furthermore, the existence of local and international traffickers in the country and the so-called facilities offered by them are also incentives.

An important role is played by what has developed into "sex tourism" in the Dominican Republic. The North and East Coast beaches attract thousands of tourists annually, mainly from European countries, and there is a specialization in some resorts for single males. Young girls - and in some resorts young males - attracted by the presence of foreigners, often fall into the hands of traffickers. Many of these tourists are traffickers, or become traffickers, when offering girls jobs in foreign countries that they will never be able to perform. Arranged marriages (for prostitution or not), can also take place. The existence of local and international traffickers and their networks and the easy obtention of forged documentation facilitates this process.

## **THE PROFILE**

The vast majority of the interviewed women originate in poor areas of urban centres, either the capital, Santo Domingo, or in provincial urban areas. However, some come from rural areas; often the same country in Europe will become the destination for most of the young girls in a village.

The average age of these women when making their first trip abroad, is between 24 and 28 years old. Some women travelled at a later age (39 years old).

The vast majority of them were either married with children or were single mothers.

Their average educational level was completed primary school. The majority of them came from poor backgrounds and split families.

## **THE TRAFFICKING PROCESS, TRAFFICKERS AND INTERMEDIARIES**

First contact is made through friends (male or female) who "know a woman who organizes trips" or a Dominican or foreign "impresario" who is looking to create a dance troupe to go overseas. Both in cities and in beach resorts, there is a combination of local and foreign entrepreneurs. Once the girl establishes contact, she is engaged as a dancer, barmaid or other, and has to pay a fee (usually US\$ 400 to US\$ 1,000) to cover initial expenditures i.e. certificates, passport, visa, air ticket, contract, etc.

Financial help for the trip and other expenses is normally provided by family, friends and trip organizers. It usually comes in the form of loans to be paid back once the woman starts work.

Normally, the recruiter takes care of obtaining all the documents. The majority of women interviewed were given a false identity in legal certificates and passports. In order to obtain a passport, a birth certificate and an identity card must be obtained. Therefore, in these cases all documents were obtained under a false identity. This is a strategy used by traffickers to avoid legal problems both in the country of origin and destination. The woman cannot complain legally or ask to be repatriated because she is using a non-existent identity. In case of disappearance, the false identity will facilitate things for the trafficker. She also receives, before departure, a short story of her life to be memorized in case of interrogation. The passport is genuine but the identity is false. Only the photograph coincides with the person.

The fact that a large number of these trafficked women leave with legitimate Dominican passports but under a false identity is worrying as it demonstrates how easy it is to obtain these documents through payment.

Women go, together with the trafficker, to Consulates when requesting visas so that the photograph corresponds to the person. No other major verification is needed.

All of the women were told by the intermediaries that they would work as barmaids, in striptease shows, as dancers or entertainers. None were told about sexual services. Nevertheless, most of the women were of the impression or

had other sources of information that some sex work was involved. This knowledge came particularly from the experiences of other women who had travelled and told their stories. Therefore, for the majority of them in general, there was no deception, although a small number were surprised.

An important element in the recruitment and acceptance process by women is that for most of them, either the husband, the father or the boyfriend accepted that they travel without ever clarifying exactly what kind of job would be performed. And it was usually the husband, father or boyfriend who would receive the remittances back home. This is an interesting phenomenon in a country with a traditionally male-dominated culture. More anthropological studies would be needed to learn if and how male chauvinism loses its principles and begins its disintegration through a process of sexual exploitation of women.

Normally the first trafficker, particularly those who are local, remain in the country when the women leave. A second trafficker takes them to the destination country where they are "sold" to yet another trafficker or impresario at the port of arrival.

A well-known system is used whereby friends, sisters or members of the family who are already in the destination country either on their own or married to nationals of that country, call the woman and make the initial contact, on her behalf, in the sex industry.

## **ROUTES AND DESTINATION COUNTRIES**

As mentioned above, Dominican women travel to Austria, Germany, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Aruba, Curaçao, Haiti, Panama, Venezuela and the West Indies. In general, when travelling to European countries, women trafficked from the Dominican Republic take a direct air route to the place of destination with no stop-over, connections permitting of course.

Of the women interviewed, those travelling to Spain and Switzerland usually flew there directly, while those heading for Greece travelled to London first, spent a few days there, and continued on to Athens where they were distributed to different places. All women left the country of origin by commercial plane and through one international airport.

Upon arrival in the destination country, they were received by the local trafficker and began work immediately. Without exception, their documents were taken away by the traffickers and they were threatened not to talk to anybody. Many suffered physical violence by the traffickers or their employees.

The working system varies according to the country. Women trafficked to Greece said that they had to work as dancers/prostitutes for the first three months without pay which meant incurring debts for accommodation, food, clothes, etc. Then, for the following three months they were allowed to keep 25 - 30 per cent of what they earned from which their debts had to be settled.

They were rotated every week to different cabarets and had one day off per week. All of them suffered physical violence by the traffickers and were told not to reject any client.

Those arriving in Spain described a similar system of exploitation, with the relative advantage that the women knew the language and could talk with the traffickers and clients.

Those who travelled to Switzerland also reported a frequent change of work places and an obliged excessive consumption of alcohol, paid by the customer, and contributing to the trafficker's gain.

All of them reported to have travelled with a contract as dancer, but in fact upon arrival, they had been informed that their duties included sex with customers.

## **RETURN**

The causes for return of trafficked women to their country of origin are varied. Some of the women interviewed were deported after they were caught by the police or denounced by the traffickers themselves in order to avoid

payment to the women (cases of Greece and Spain). Others (Switzerland) finished their contract period and decide to return for a certain time with a view to leaving again on another contract. A minority group got married to nationals (Switzerland and Austria) and returned to the Dominican Republic to formalize the marriage there. Normally they stay for a while in their country and then travel to their new country. The Swiss Consulate in Santo Domingo certifies, on average, six marriages per week, involving a Swiss male with a Dominican woman. Some of them have met their husbands in the beach resorts in the Dominican Republic and others in Switzerland. Finally, some found a way to escape from their traffickers and returned as they could, with the help of peers, clients or friends.

Finally, it should be noted that, according to returnees interviewed, many trafficked women cannot return because they do not have the financial means; they have no savings, are drug or alcohol-dependent, or are in prison.

Reception by their family and friends upon return was normally positive particularly when they had been successful and had been able to send some money back home. Most reported that they knew that they would be welcomed home either because of the money they sent or due to their emotional links with the family.

At the family and community level, the returnees are seen as persons who decided to improve their situation and that of their family with the risk of a new experience. If that experience failed and the money were not earned, the woman would be seen as courageous. If it was a successful experience and the woman earned some money, she would enjoy upward social mobility and her gains would be reflected in a new or improved house for her and her family, clothes, jewellery, and possibly a car. That, of course, would be the best advertisement for other young women in the area to take the same risk despite being aware of the work they may have to perform.

Most of the interviewed women said they would not be sex workers in their home country because of social considerations, but accepted to do it in foreign countries because that would give them the money to increase their social standing back home.

A vast majority of interviewees admitted to having had bad experience overseas and most said that if they had known prior to leaving, they never would have gone. Those who were married before leaving are now separated or divorced due to their work in other countries. (Among them, some work in prostitution back home as the only alternative). Men appear to accept that women go overseas as long as they receive the remittances, but do not accept when the women return and try to become more independent.

Only a minority of the women were able to save some money to bring back home with them. The amounts vary from US\$ 300 (the Netherlands) to US\$ 10,000 (Switzerland) after almost one year of work.

One clear feature among interviewed returnee women is their mental instability. Many of them suffer mental disorders mainly due to violent treatment experienced at the hands of traffickers and clients, a lack of solidarity and assistance by compatriots and peers overseas, and because of having to perform undesirable jobs.

## **INFORMATION**

All women interviewed responded that they had heard about the possibility of travelling through a friend who either knew someone who had travelled or knew a woman who organized trips. The other response was that someone, normally a foreigner, had approached the woman or her husband or boyfriend to ask if she'd be interest in forming part of a dancers' group and travel.

The concerned women did not request more information. Most of them knew that something was not quite legitimate, particularly when they received a false identity and documentation. Nevertheless, they decided that their financial needs were far greater and had every confidence that things would go well overseas.

None of the women requested more official information from the concerned Consulate or the Dominican Authorities.

# RESPONSES BY COUNTRIES OF DESTINATION

Governments of countries of destination have started to change policy or practice to deal with the overload of young women applying for visas and obviously being trafficked. Some examples are explained below:

## a. Austria

In November 1995, the Government of Austria established visa requirements applicable to Dominican nationals. At the same time, the "dancer" visa was less accepted for entry into the country which, during the period between December 1995 and 23 April 1996, resulted in 80 women requesting a tourist visa (known to be for prostitution), 21 requesting a residents' visa and 10 requesting a dancers' visa. A very small percentage obtained the visa mainly due to the new requisites, i.e., possession of a return air ticket, pre-paid hotel, invitation legalized by a public attorney or a Court in Austria, income certificate, traveller's insurance, US\$ 100 per day while in Austria.

Despite these restrictions women continue to travel to Austria, some get married and then invite family members to stay.

## b. Switzerland

On the 1 March 1996, Switzerland made some changes in its migration regulations which affect nationals of the Dominican Republic among others.

Being aware that the "artist" visa in Swiss legislation was being used for the trafficking of women to Switzerland, the Government established a new visa for "dancers" and a limit of only 6 dancers per cabaret which issues contracts to women from the Dominican Republic. These contracts must be authorized by the Swiss Police in Bern and then forwarded to the Consulate. Moreover, the impresario is obliged to issue three contracts for one month each instead of one contract for three months, leaving the women more freedom on finishing their contracts. Also, a return ticket is compulsory for the traveller. Finally, the Swiss Government has raised the minimum age to obtain a "dancer" visa from 18 to 20 years old. Since documentation forgery is wide-spread, however, there is no major problem for traffickers in overcoming this new requirement.

It is known that the women have to pay up to US\$ 1,500 to the traffickers for a 3 months' contract in Switzerland. Moreover, Swiss traffickers are reported to have been active in the Dominican Republic for several years, working in the capital and in beach resorts.

Marriages between Dominican women and Swiss males are a daily affair at the Swiss Consulate in Santo Domingo. Being a totally legal act, the Swiss regulations cannot impede them despite the fact that some of them will help increase the trafficking.

The result of the application of the new regulations has been mainly a reduction of "artists" visa acceptance by 50% (also a legal proceeding by one trafficker and death threats against the Consulate).

## c. The Netherlands

The Consulate of the Netherlands in Santo Domingo issues between 500 - 600 visas per year to Dominican nationals. It is estimated that approximately 10% of them are for prostitution in either one of the Netherlands Antilles and from there directly to Amsterdam or other parts of mainland Europe.

It is known that many women trafficked into the Netherlands do not ask for a Dutch visa because by travelling to Denmark or Italy first where visas are not required, they can pass quite easily to the Netherlands.

One of the most common systems used by Dutch traffickers is officially inviting a Dominican woman to visit the country. The identity and address of the person in the Netherlands is checked by the Police in The Hague and if the visitors' visa is approved, it is issued for a maximum of three months. Also, a return ticket and sufficient money should be produced. With that visa, the trafficker can bring the woman into his business.

Another system used by Dutch traffickers is the false recognition of a Dominican daughter. The Dutch legislation allows the recognition by Dutch nationals of children under 17 years old. If recognized, the woman can obtain Dutch

nationality and travel to the Netherlands. Since forged birth certificates can be obtained by traffickers in Santo Domingo, the woman can declare that she is less than 17 years and travel and reside in Europe easily.

#### **d. Germany**

German visa regulations for Dominicans are clearly established with a view to the dangers of trafficking in women. The women should produce an invitation from someone in Germany, a return air ticket, a health insurance certificate, proof of employment in the Dominican Republic, a copy of a bank statement, and in case of doubt, the woman has to post a bond of approximately US\$ 1,000 which can be recuperated if she returns within the visa period.

Despite the fact that many countries, as shown above, have established stricter regulations for women travelling to Europe in order to curb illegal immigration, it is known that traffickers also develop their own strategies in order to avoid regulations.

## **RESPONSES BY THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN**

There is clarity among Dominican authorities about the scope, magnitude and dangers of trafficking of Dominican women to many countries in the world. However, the national measures taken to reduce trafficking and to combat traffickers are still rather modest.

On the one hand, the General Directorate for Migration has established certain requisites for Dominican women travelling abroad: they have to show that they are in possession of at least US\$ 1,000. Also, a more thorough checking of documentation is planned. Unfortunately, this requires a technology which is not at the disposal of the authorities and documentation forgery is expanding. The Directorate is also creating a list of foreign traffickers operating in the country in order to expel them or not to authorize their stay. However, traffickers are not only foreigners and if they are, they can change their envoys.

On the other hand, the Foreign Ministry is developing a strategy aimed at the acceptance of international agreements dealing with the respect of migrants and against trafficking. It will also begin instructing the various Dominican consulates on assistance to be given to the victims of trafficking. Also, there is new draft legislation to prohibit agencies dealing with trafficking, and including sanctions on traffickers.

A practical response in the Dominican Republic is from the Centro de Orientación e Investigación Integral (COIN), a local NGO with grass root contacts, particularly with sex workers in the country. Apart from AIDS information campaigns and psychological assistance to women, COIN develops information campaigns for potentially trafficked women about the dangers of travelling abroad using the experience gained by women who have travelled and recruiting them as educators.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Trafficking in women has not only become an important element in the world-wide irregular migration process, but also in labour migration whereby people from regions of fewer opportunities migrate in order to perform jobs (legal or illegal) in regions of more possibilities. In that sense, trafficking in women is another element in the globalization of the economy, including exchange of human resources, in this case responding to a market demand.

The main feature, as it is known, apart from the human suffering involved, is that this activity is basically controlled by international criminal networks.

As trafficking in women for sexual exploitation increases in countries of destination, it also increases in the source countries. Despite efforts made by individual countries, trafficking in women from the Dominican Republic to the European continent increases, demonstrating the need for new coordinated strategies in countries of origin and destination to tackle this problem.

Being trafficked for sexual exploitation is a clear alternative seen by low-income, low-educated young women to



leave their misery. No other main alternatives are offered to them apart from badly paid domestic jobs or work in the free-trade zones.

Young women becoming single mothers at a very young age confronted with very few job opportunities increases the possibility that they will have to resort to trafficker's offers to be able to send money back home for their children.

The lack of clear knowledge of the meaning of trafficking and the risks involved mean that the women take an uninformed decision about leaving with the help of traffickers and the support of the women's relatives.

Sex tourism to the Dominican Republic has strongly helped in the development of local prostitution and trafficking for sexual work.

The existence of an active local market for falsification of identity papers and weak document controls on exit encourages traffickers to use that market for getting women out of the country with false identification, thereby lessening the traffickers' risk.

The vast connections of traffickers in countries of destination and the infrastructure at their disposal make trafficked women vulnerable.

Once they have been trafficked, Dominican women have very few possibilities for assistance and support in the countries of destination.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Efforts should be made by the international community, together with the Dominican authorities, to tackle the root causes of this type of irregular migration, in particular to fostering the creation of job opportunities and educational plans for young women in the Dominican Republic.
  2. Control should be established by the Dominican authorities, in coordination with industrialized countries, of tourism used for sex purposes and as a basis for trafficking of women overseas.
  3. Strong legislation and measures should be adapted by Dominican authorities, in collaboration with European countries, to detain, prosecute and expel traffickers.
  4. Stricter control should be exercised by Dominican authorities on the issuing of national identity documents and passports.
  5. Destination countries should establish stricter control of documentation, invitations, contracts and visas systems to prevent their use by traffickers.
  6. Information should be provided to potentially trafficked women through mass media, special brochures, NGOs, embassies and other channels on the dangers and risks.
  7. Programmes to assist trafficked women for their return and reintegration should be established in the Dominican Republic. They should include psychological assistance.
  8. Dominican Consulates, in coordination with local NGOs in countries of destination, should establish assistance programmes for trafficked women.
  9. Education/information campaigns are necessary in Europe in order to raise awareness among clients, doctors, police officers and lawyers who are in contact with trafficked women about the existence and dangers involved in trafficking of women.
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*Source and for more information contact:*

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