

# Tackling the trafficking myths

To pretend sex slavery doesn't exist is silly – thankfully, men who pay for sex with a trafficked woman can now be charged



**Denis MacShane**

guardian.co.uk, Monday 16 November 2009 11.43 GMT

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In a historic decision, British law has been radically changed. As Beatrix Campbell has highlighted, from now on men, not women, will be obliged to accept responsibility for the abuses of trafficked and coerced women forced to work as prostitutes.

It has been a long, slow-burn campaign headed by Labour women ministers and MPs. Until now it has been women who have been arrested, questioned or deported, as if the victims of the sex trade should be held responsible for their plight. Now men who pay for sex with a trafficked or coerced girl or woman may be arrested and charged.

The Daily Mail chose to celebrate this legislative assault on the sex-slave industry with a two-page spread under the headline "The myth of Britain's foreign sex slaves". It is a powerfully argued piece written with the customary brio and well-presented facts that one can expect from the Mail which, whatever one thinks of its politics, is a magnificent journalists' product. The Mail's argument is that the plight of foreign girls being brought to Britain to act as prostituted women is in essence not true. It quotes the English Collective of Prostitutes as saying the problem does not exist. "In all the years, we have come across only two women who fit the classic description of someone who has been trafficked," it says.

But let us turn to the Daily Mail itself to see if this is true. In 2007 a Daily Mail headline was "Women for sale in the Gatwick slave auctions" and reporter Charlotte Gill wrote: "Women are being sold into prostitution in modern day 'slave auctions' at Britain's airports." Quoting a senior Metropolitan police officer she went on:

Young women from all over the world are trafficked into Britain after being promised well-paid work in bars and cafes ... Women are frequently raped, locked in flats and given no money to prevent them running away from their captors.

In another story in 2007, the Mail headline was "Global prostitute ring boss jailed for luring teens from their families for vice". The story began:

The mastermind behind a £1m global prostitute ring who preyed on terrified

'European Angel'.

Last year the Mail headline was "Gang who lured Slovakian teenager into sex slavery in Britain jailed for 52 years". It said "the 16-year-old virgin from Slovakia was repeatedly raped and made to work in brothels in Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire and Middlesex".

So which Daily Mail should we believe? The one that reports gruesome cases of sex slave trafficking or the one that says such stories are a "myth".

To be sure, there are problems over figures. I am chastised for quoting in the Commons a Daily Mirror headline that talked of 25,000 prostituted women who could be categorised as sex slaves. Out of a total estimated 80,000 prostituted women said to be working in Britain that may be a reasonable figure but everyone who works in this field knows that in the underground world of this sub-criminal industry with links to globalised trafficking networks the accurate figures are impossible to establish.

As with rape arrests and convictions, which are shamefully low in Britain, the police with their deeply embedded masculinist and patriarchal culture are not very good at dealing with sex crimes.

But on balance I prefer the Daily Mail's court and police reporters to its claim about "The myth of Britain's foreign sex slaves". NGOs who work with victims of pimps have endless cases and to pretend that this is just a myth got up by politicians is silly. I pass over the abuse in the Mail heaped on brave women ministers and politicians who have tackled the complacency of Whitehall and the boys in the cabinet who to begin with were reluctant to embark on this reform process. I refuse any comment on friends in the liberal-left media and on Newsnight who have rubbished this problem in the manner of the Daily Mail.

Instead I salute a remarkable assault on modern slavery which MPs – and to their credit in a debate and vote on 3 November, peers, have now begun. If we can reduce demand, we will reduce supply. It is now men who have to accept responsibility after centuries in which women were made to pay in all senses for the belief that men can have such sex as they wish as long as they have money to pay for it. And Britain should not hesitate to take the demand-reducing aspect of dealing with the global sex trade and seek to persuade other countries to follow suit.