

## Dozens of Syrians forced into sexual slavery in derelict Lebanese house

Victims were tortured and only left house for abortions and treatment for venereal diseases in case that has shocked country



A room used by trafficked women at Chez Maurice. Photograph: Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images

Tucked in a leafy suburb of the Lebanese town of Jounieh, a short drive from the sparkling Mediterranean, stands a monument to human cruelty.

In this derelict two-story house, 75 Syrian women were forced into sexual slavery, the largest human trafficking network ever uncovered in Lebanon.

Here, the women were imprisoned after arriving from their war-torn country, sold for less than \$2,000, and forced to have sex more than 10 times a day. Here they were beaten and tortured and electrocuted, and sometimes flogged if they didn't get enough tips.

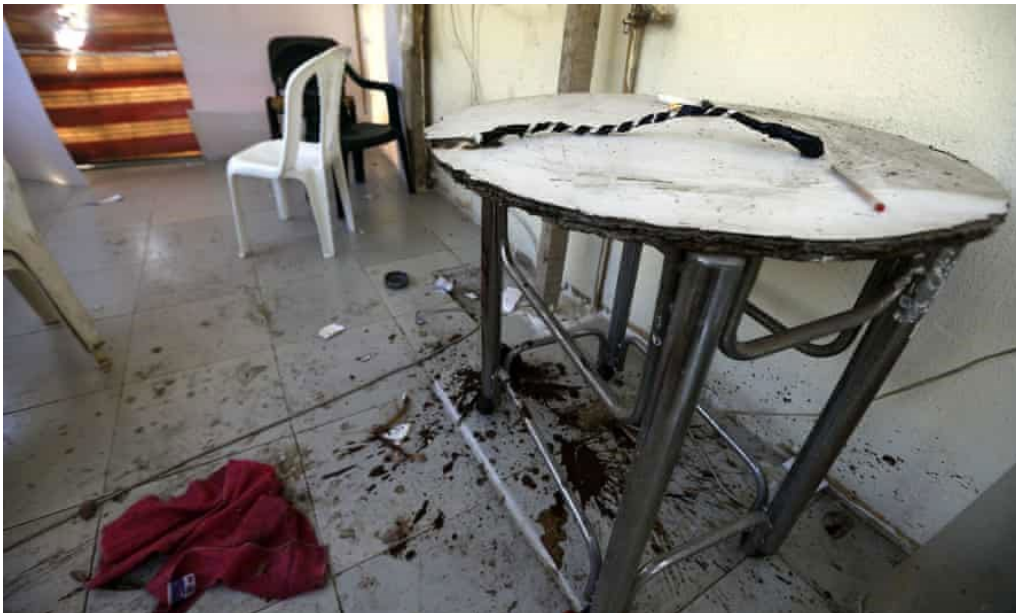
The windows and balconies are barred – giant cages where windows are painted black, depriving the women even of sunlight.

The women left the house to get abortions, of which they had about 200. They also left to be treated for venereal diseases, contracted after being forced to have unprotected sex with customers, or to be treated for skin ailments, brought on by their lack of exposure to the sun.

The house, called Chez Maurice, is now empty and sealed with red tape. Underwear and dirty clothes are strewn by the entrance, coffee spilled on the ground from the police raid.

Some windows have been left ajar, offering a glimpse into the lives of women held here for so long, some of whom were underaged when they arrived in Lebanon. The stench of rotting fruit rises from the dark interior, where clothes and half-empty cigarette packs are scattered about dingy rooms and beds with metal bars.

“These 75 women were saved from slavery, real slavery in this day and age with all the meaning of the word,” said Col Joseph Mousallam, spokesman for the Lebanese police. “They had lost every aspect of their freedom, over their bodies and even their thoughts. It was real slavery.”



A whip on the table in a guard's room at Chez Maurice. Photograph: Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images

Details of how the women were trafficked, the abuse they suffered, the architecture of the network and how it was eventually brought down were gleaned from interviews with Lebanese police and security officials, and a copy of the indictment in the case obtained by the Guardian. The names of some women were provided in the indictment, but their identities have been withheld.

The indictment charges 23 individuals with the crime of forming a human trafficking network, physically and psychologically torturing the women, imprisoning them and forcing them into prostitution.

It details the roles of the individuals accused of running the human trafficking network, including Fawaz Ali al-Hasan, the head of the network, and Imad al-Rihawi, a Syrian man alleged by police officials to be the enforcer of the group and who officials say is still on the run. Al-Akhbar, a Lebanese newspaper with close ties to the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, said he was a former interrogator in the feared Syrian air force intelligence service. A security source familiar with the investigation later confirmed the claim to the Guardian.

The Lebanese authorities have requested Rihawi's extradition if he is arrested in Syria, hinting that he may have returned to his home country following the crackdown on his network.

Police and judicial officials say the women were trafficked from war-torn Syria and Iraq, recruited by agents of the network for supposedly legitimate jobs such as restaurant workers, before being imprisoned at Chez Maurice.

“They were perhaps looking for weaker families, where nobody is going to ask about the woman, such as if her father died in the war,” said Mousallam. “They are hunters. They did not for a moment treat them as humans.”

Those who resisted working as prostitutes were raped and beaten, and then forced to have unprotected sex with customers. They were sometimes electrocuted or whipped, in an environment that judges described as “a journey to hell”.

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The indictment said the women were forced to have sex with customers more than 10 times a day, making between \$30-70 per session, all of which was taken away by the guards, including any tips, in effect making them sex slaves.

One of the women was “sold” by her husband to an agent in the network for \$4,500. The others were bought by the agents for \$1,000-\$1,500. The agents would send pictures of their prospective catch by WhatsApp to the network’s top echelons, earning \$2,500 per woman if the deal went through.

According to police those women who became pregnant were taken to a clinic in the northern Beirut suburb of Dekwaneh, run by a well-known doctor in the area called Riad Bulos. Bulos is alleged to have performed some 200 abortions on women in the network over four years, earning between \$200 and \$300 for each operation. He has been charged with carrying out abortions, a criminal offence in Lebanon. The Lebanese health minister said Bulos ought to “rot” in prison.



Chez Maurice seen from the outside. Photograph: Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images



Male guards stood watch outside the house, female guards inside, keeping the women under a strict timetable. They reported the women if they failed to bring in sufficient tips, or if a customer complained, if their makeup or dress wasn't up to standard, or if they did not perform well enough to convince the customers to stay for an extra hour. They would then be beaten.

The women would sometimes work for up to 20 hours a day, from 10am until 6am the following morning, barely catching some hours of sleep before they were called upon again.

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They escaped on Easter Friday. Taking advantage of the fact the house was lightly guarded on the holiday, eight of the women overpowered the guards. Four were too scared to leave, conditioned for years to distrust all, and the other four fled. Three of the four took a minibus travelling to south Beirut, and told their story to a minivan driver, who called the police. Officers who had been trained to identify human trafficking networks arrived, interrogated the women and then planned the sting that brought an end to the tragedy.

Some of the women had been there for two or three years. The Internal Security Forces, Lebanon's police, is conducting an internal investigation to determine how the network escaped detection for so long.

The women are now in a number of local shelters, shielded from the eyes of the media and given a chance to recuperate. The shelters are expected to provide them with social, legal, medical and psychological support, and are studying options to resettle them in another country. But first, they will be given a chance to rest away from any questioning, to come to terms with what they have suffered.

The case has shocked many in Lebanon. Maameltein, the suburb of Jounieh where the women were imprisoned, has long been known as Lebanon's red-light district, the seaside resort's streets peppered with casinos and "super-nightclubs" frequented by foreign visitors and Lebanese.

Many of the women who work there come into the country either through land crossings with Syria or through a loose entry scheme known as an "artist visa" that allows them to be employed formally as barmaids and performers in nightclubs, though most end up working as prostitutes.

The network's downfall has sparked a broader conversation about prostitution – formally illegal in Lebanon according to the penal code – human trafficking and the exploitation and vulnerability of Syrians in the country, as well as broader societal attitudes towards sex and gender equality.

Lebanon passed a law to combat human trafficking in late 2011 under pressure from the US, and the police has renamed its vice squad the "human trafficking and vice team", and trained officers to handle such cases.

Prior to that, human trafficking networks were prosecuted under the penal code criminalising prostitution, which equated the women in the network with their pimps. The new law treats the women as victims, though they are required in the law to prove that they were forced into prostitution. Since both laws are on the books and contradict each other, more efforts are required to train judges and law

enforcement personnel to understand how to handle human trafficking cases, and rights workers believe the penal code article ought to be rescinded.



A room used at Chez Maurice. Photograph: Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images

Anti-prostitution laws were never really a deterrent – people involved would be released after a month in prison – whereas the new trafficking law mandates sentences between five- and 15-years depending on the severity of the harm to the women.

Police officials and human rights workers acknowledge that the problem grew much worse with the war in Syria, which left many women vulnerable to the machinations of human traffickers. Not all of the women in the network were refugees, but came from dispossessed families in Syria. Still, one in five refugee households in Lebanon are headed by women, who are left vulnerable by having to care for their children and provide for them even though it is illegal for them to work. There are more than a million refugees from Syria in Lebanon, and two-thirds are women and children. Child workers are common in Beirut and the Bekaa valley, the agricultural hinterland.

“These women are completely destroyed by the fact they were in prostitution and that they were abused in a very extreme way,” said Ghada Jabbour, a co-founder and head of the anti-trafficking unit at Kafa, a feminist group working on issues of violence and exploitation of women and providing support to victims of such abuse.

Kafa has also trained members of the Lebanese police force on how to handle human trafficking cases.

Jabbour said the psychological support would help the women address feelings of self-esteem and stigma as well as the scars of daily torture and violence and humiliation, as well as helping them to rebuild the ability to trust.



But she also called for a refinement of Lebanon’s human trafficking law and greater awareness among judges and law enforcement on how to apply the law. So far, there have been no sex trafficking convictions in Lebanon since the law was passed in late 2011.

Jabbour said she hoped the Chez Maurice case would act as a model for similar situations in the future, with women treated as victims rather than being on par with those who run any network.

But she said there would also have to be a cultural shift in the way Lebanese society looks at prostitution. Kafa is not in favour of legalising prostitution, saying it legitimises exploitation and the treatment of women as commodities. Instead, it advocates punishing human traffickers and sex buyers.

Though Lebanon is one of the more liberal Middle Eastern societies, domestic violence and gender inequality are still pervasive. A one-of-a-kind survey carried out by Kafa, which interviewed sex buyers in Lebanon, found that many thought that if prostitution was completely prohibited, rates of rape would increase, and so it was necessary to have a sub-class of women who would shield the rest of society from male sexuality. Most of the interviewees felt entitled to have sex whenever they pleased, and also believed that the prostitutes enjoyed having sex with them, on top of being reimbursed.

“Everything evolves around the sexuality of men,” she said. “We raise boys and men with the idea that it’s very normal to buy sex and to have sex whenever they want, not to control their sexuality.”