

# *The Psychological Impact on the Trafficked Person*

**Eimear Burke**

Rather than give a rather dry quantitative presentation on the psychological consequences of trafficking on women I have chosen to talk from my own experience of interviewing women who have been trafficked. What I found is similar to findings in other research carried out on women who have been trafficked and on people who have experienced trauma. I was asked by a service provider to provide psychological reports on these women to provide information for their applications for leave to remain here in Ireland. This was also to reduce the likelihood that these women would have to tell their stories over and over again.

I have been given permission by these women to tell their story so long as I do not reveal any identifying information about them. One woman said she wanted to be helpful so that other women are not caught in the same trap.

In order to protect the anonymity of these women I have changed all names.

## **Some background:**



This presentation is based on the stories of 6 of the women I interviewed. They come from West and Central Africa and Eastern Europe. They range in age from 23 to 29 years. Most spoke good English. For some there was an interpreter present.

I will use the Tree Metaphor in order to provide a picture of the trafficking experience of these women.

The roots, which are usually hidden and require sensitive and careful exploration, relate to the pre-disposing factors which have left the women vulnerable to trafficking.

- **Poverty**
- **Trauma**
- **War/violence**
- **Bereavement**
- **Murder**
- **Genocide**
- **Rape**
- **Lack of extended family**
- **Forced migration**
- **Poor support systems**
- **Lack of education**
- **Child sexual abuse**
- **Orphaned**

Each of the women I interviewed endured at least 6 of the above. Although the women's stories are very different, there are common threads among them. Invariably, the women were befriended by someone, either they knew or a stranger who promised them a "better life" elsewhere. They arranged their documents, false ID, visa and airfare, saying that the women could pay them back later. Some women paid up to €5000 for this. Some women were trafficked directly into Ireland from their country of origin while others were trafficked into other European countries and eventually fled to Ireland for asylum.

The tree trunk relates to the methods used by the traffickers to control and force the women in to prostitution.

- **Rape**
- **Starvation** - *One woman got fed every 2 or 3 days. For another woman the only food she got to eat was what the clients brought with them to the brothel.*
- **Physical exhaustion**
- **Deception**
- **Torture - psychological** – *not knowing when it was going to happen again*
- **Bewitchment**
- **Drugs**
- **Beating**
- **Isolation**
- **Death threats**
- **Alcohol**
- **Relocating**



- **Removal of personal documents and identification**
- **Imprisonment**
- **Taking their clothes**
- **Threats of deportation**

The traffickers use very brutal and manipulative methods to exert control over the women. The initial process is such that it serves to break the woman down both psychologically and physically. It often involves weeks or months of travelling on foot, by bus, truck, car, train or boat. The women are not told anything about their destination. They are forced to have sex with their traffickers, which for some resulted in pregnancy. By the time they arrive at their destination they are exhausted, confused, demoralised and disempowered. One woman described her horror when she realised she had been sold into prostitution. When she tried to refuse, the other women in the brothel suggested she do as she was told as there was no point in refusing. This woman was threatened by her traffickers that something horrible would happen to her and that no one would find her. Other women were threatened that their family members at home would be killed. A number of them were told that they had to work in prostitution in order to pay back the money it cost to get them to Ireland. One woman was told she had to repay €50,000.

These methods serve to break the woman down, her personal autonomy is violated. The woman learns to accept anything. *“I was stressed all the time and horrified at what was going on all around me. Feelings were hunting me all the time... I felt my life was in danger.”*

*“I thought the best thing for me was to do what they wanted so it wouldn't get worse.”*

The tree branches relate to the feelings and presenting psychological symptoms of the women.

When the women come to me for their interview, I usually go out to greet them. My office is at the back of my house and I get an opportunity to observe them as we are walking to my office. All of them appeared very anxious, looking over their shoulder in a hypervigilant manner. A number of them were very jumpy and startled easily at the slightest noise. This is in

sharp contrast to my usual clients who although they might feel a bit nervous on coming for the first time, are able to look around the garden and make some comment about it.

The approach I use with the women is to acknowledge their fear and their difficulty in telling their story. I explain that I need to hear their story in order to provide a report. I work from the attitude of believing these women and showing compassion. An approach I use with all of my clients. This allows space for me to spot any inconsistencies in their stories.

## Feelings

- **Lack of trust** - *“I don’t think I can trust anyone. Anyone I’ve trusted except Elizabeth has turned me down. My mother abandoned me when I needed her. I cannot trust my father.”*
- **Anger or irritability** – *one woman describes how she is given to extreme outbursts of anger and how she turns it on herself. Sometimes she cuts herself and at others she hits her head with her fists.*
- **Sadness** – *“I am very tense... I feel flooded by feelings I used to have in... I feel overwhelmed by sadness... I’m nervous. I don’t have very nice memories... a lot of bad memories.”*
- **Fear** – *“I’m scared people from... have my details. I’m nervous all the time. I’m scared that someone from my past will find me.”*
- **Insecurity** - *“I travelled here in trucks, living in other people’s houses... I come to my destination but still I’m unhappy... I’m scared they’ll send me back.”*
- **Shame** – *“I feel ashamed because I was on the streets. It’s dishonourable.”  
“I didn’t tell anyone about what happened. I didn’t want anyone to look at me and know.”*
- **Guilt** – *“I blame myself for leaving my sisters... I’m angry at myself and at others.”*

- **Confusion** – *“I was confused and very scared. I never knew people could do these things”*
- **Depression** – *one woman gets so low that she doesn't have the energy to go for her counselling although she has a good relationship with her counsellor.*
- **Terror** – *In one case the woman described how she sits in her bed at night with the chair against the door terrified that someone might break in.*
- **Helplessness** – *“I don't have the strength to stop people. I can't defend myself. I need someone to defend me. I just cry all over the place.”*

### **Symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**

- **Recurrent nightmares**
- **Flashbacks** – *“I see war... I see them cutting my sister into pieces. I see blood everywhere... children are crying... people are running everywhere... they've killed my uncle... I'm scared... people dying... I don't see I'm safe... war is in my head”*. Prof. Ivor Browne, former Professor of Psychiatry in UCD, talks of people who have experienced trauma as freezing at the time of the trauma. In order to cope they shut down emotionally. They do not integrate the experience. The experience is frozen within the person but outside of time. So the person lives the experience again and again as if for the first time. This she experienced in the room with me. Note she is using the present tense. It's as if it was happening to her in the present. She was highly distressed at the time.
- Recurring and intrusive memories of traumatic events.
- Intense psychological distress at anything that reminds them of any aspect of the traumatic event - *“The word that comes into my head is 'Death'. I feel on my own... I think I hear her calling me... I pray I'll be able to find her. It's very painful that she's not here. What scares me is that I can't contact her... I can't hear her on the phone.”*

- Physiological reaction to anything that resembles the traumatic event - *“I get dizzy when I think about it, everything spinning around. I pray not to see them anywhere.”*
- *One woman described how she goes into a trance like state where she feels weak, her mouth becomes dry, her hands shake and she finds it difficult to breathe.*
- Attempts to avoid thoughts, feelings or conversations associated with the trauma - *“I don’t want to be on my own to think about that happened. My past is so bad... I’ve had no childhood. I find it difficult to trust other people. I don’t get too deeply involved with them.”*
- *“I want to let it go but nobody will let me. (Referring to the asylum process) I have to keep talking about it.” “I wish someone would take all of this away from me.”*
- Attempts to avoid activities, places or people that trigger and memories of the trauma – *not watching the news on television, or avoiding people from their country of origin.*
- Inability to recall specific details of the trauma, for example, dates, or event sequences.
- Diminished interest or participation in significant activities *“I don’t go out... I don’t feel I’d be good company.”*
- Feeling detached or estranged from others - *“I don’t want to go out, even to collect my money. I hate anyone to know how I feel. I don’t want anyone to see my confused crying. My head is completely full so I stay in my room”*
- Limited range of emotions, e.g. inability to have loving feelings.
- Poor sleep, difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- Irritability or outbursts of anger.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- Hypervigilance.
- Exaggerated startle response.



All of the women had suicidal thoughts or had attempted suicide at some point. In my opinion there is a very high risk of suicide if they were to be sent back to their own countries. When asked what they thought might happen if they were to be deported:

*To ...? I would be cut up. I could bear to be shot but not cut up. If they send me back I will kill myself. I won't wait for them to take me, I will be dead."*

*"I will better kill myself 'cos I know Anna will be safe here. I will not go back with her. I will be killed. She will not be safe there. Jonas will kill me."*

*"I have rest of mind now. But if it happens again I want to die... God should take my life."*

*"It will be a death sentence... the soldiers who attacked me and my sisters are still there. The file will go back... all the information about my parents is still there. I will be locked up at the airport. I will be put in prison... I will be killed."*

*"I will really kill myself. I don't call it my country anymore. I'd rather end up on drugs and kill myself. I don't want to think about my country, not even on the news. There's nothing there for me. I don't want to think about it at all. I miss my grandmother but that's it."*

*"I'm too scared to go back. They'll just find me (referring to her traffickers) ... I'm safe here... I've lost Susan. I'm afraid of losing Sophie."*

In some cases, rape triggers obsessional cleaning and washing. *"I can stay in the shower for hours scrubbing myself... I can clean one place a hundred times."* In another case there were obsessive fears about contaminating others through cups and cutlery.

There were instances where there was obsessional checking and rechecking of door and window locks.

When I asked the women how it would be for them if allowed to remain in Ireland:

*I'd be more relaxed as I wouldn't have to think about my country or going back there. I'd know my future is secure. I know I'd make a good life here.*" Referring to a course she'd like to study, "... something significant, that I would feel good about it."

*"I'd have a quiet life... I don't know if I could take another big change in my life. I feel more safe here than anywhere else. I could give my child a future and a life I never had."*

*"There is no prostitution here. I'm safe in Ireland."*

All of the women expressed hopes for their futures if granted asylum in Ireland. When speaking of what they envisioned for themselves their faces would light up. Some want to study, for example, nursing, journalism. Others who have never been to school would like to start their education.

I would like to comment on the experiences of the women since they came to Ireland.

By the time the women get to the Department of Immigration they are so traumatised and terrorised that they are unable to tell their story. Some of the women were warned by their traffickers to lie about their age or country of origin, or the route they took to Ireland. They are often so frightened and confused they cannot speak. The bureaucratic approach which is adversarial and essentially non-believing results in a secondary trauma for these women. A consequence of this is that they shrivel up and freeze. When I was approached to interview these women it's because no one had been able to get a clear account from the women about their experiences.

I'm sorry to say that the treatment some of these women have had from the authorities here is such that it serves to prolong their psychological distress, for example, the manner in which the women are transferred from one hostel to another. One woman was moved to a hostel in another part of the country with only 24 hours notice. That meant that her counselling and art therapy classes stopped, she lost the support of her case worker and her local



drop-in centre. *“I feel sad... I lost another part of my family and friends.”* Another woman described how difficult it was for her to trust people. She’d just made one friend in the reception centre and then they were both transferred to different parts of the country. Another woman who has very little English is in a hostel down the country where there is no one who speaks her language. All of her supports are in Dublin but she cannot access them regularly.

The very long asylum seeking process results in prolonging the women’s sense of insecurity. It does not allow the women an opportunity to move on with their lives. Looking at Maslow’s Hierarchy of needs, security along with shelter, food and water needs are among the basic needs for a human being to function and develop. No amount of counselling or befriending is going to help these women to heal unless they have a secure base. Then they can begin to make social connections and develop a supportive social network. They are depending on the Irish system to provide this.

They need to be treated with respect and compassion. Their stories need to be acknowledged and believed. In a paper by Maercker et al., published this year in the *European Psychologist* on Chechen refugees it was found that there is a correlation between lack of social acknowledgement of their trauma and PTSD. Other studies have shown that social acknowledgement in traumatised victims has been shown to be a recovery or protective factor for PTSD in former political prisoners and victims of crime.

Unfortunately in this country there is a culture of not believing or acknowledging the stories of those who have been abused or traumatised. It took the recent Ryan report to knock us out of our complacency. And still there is a considerable amount of denial about it.

I will end with a piece which was commissioned for this presentation. It is by Howard Campbell. “When I heard about the plight of trafficked women in Ireland it reminded me of Ann Le Marquand Hartigan’s short play *La Corbière* which paints a graphic account of French women trafficked to Jersey for Nazi soldiers’ entertainment during World War II. The ship transporting them sank. Nearly all were drowned. Their bodies left as food for fish.”

## *We are trafficked women*

*By Howard Campbell*

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Mama, papa, sisters, brothers  
Sons, daughters threatened, stabbed, shot  
Pray for us.

Truck, walk, fuck  
Rape, slapping, slavery.

Belarussia, Britannia, Bulgaria, Eire,  
España, Italia, Moldova, Nigeria,  
Romania, Sahara, Albania, Hellena.

Words, pages, chapters, sentences of terror  
Murder, crushing rape  
Bullet splintering bone  
Beaten, battered, bruised minds.

Page upon page of waking nightmare  
No pause, no comma, no fullstop.

Who will punctuate our misery with kindness?  
Let our racing minds rest so our souls can be.

Bought, sold over and over and over  
2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th hand slaves  
We are powerless. You decide which bed tonight  
We are powerless. You decide which country tomorrow  
We are powerless. You decide which torture next.  
Who will cross the road to hold our bruised souls?

Who will punctuate our misery with kindness?

What spirit is in your questions, questions, questions?  
What spirit is in your office?  
What spirit is in your forms?  
What spirit is in your place of bureaucracy?  
What spirit is in your Justice?

Where can we stay?  
Where can our children play?  
Who will put a fullstop to our terror?  
Who will send us back,  
put us on the truck?  
Each official stamp, a passport  
to the bump & lurch of rape, fist & boot.

Better we murder ourselves than  
you send us back to the graveyards which are our homes.

You take no pimps fee  
so show us the profit you make  
by giving us back to the traders in  
sex and the stench of rape.


Who will punctuate our misery with kindness?

Who will put a fullstop to our journey now?


Let us lie in this bed  
Let us stay in this house  
Let us prepare our food  
Let us do our work  
Let us look after our children.

Put a fullstop to our journey.

Let us write a new book with  
Your sentences of kindness.



After Eimear's talk, a short response was given by Kathleen Fahy, who was at the time the chief executive of the Ruhama agency. This is what she said.



### **Response by Kathleen Fahy, Director of Ruhama to the paper presented by Eimear Burke**

Thanks to APT for giving me the opportunity to respond today. I'm glad that you've chosen to highlight the psychological effects of trafficking. This is an aspect that has not to date received enough attention as our focus in past conferences has – understandably – been on the legislative frameworks and the need to bring Ireland into compliance with its international obligations.

My brief is to respond to Eimear's paper today and I have been asked to focus on Ruhama's experience in working with suspected victims of trafficking.

Much (indeed all) of what Eimear has said resonates with Ruhama's experience over recent years.

Eimear has described well the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder which the women we work with display so I won't go into this in depth here other than to confirm that:

- The anxiety, nervousness, fear, guilt, confusion and depression which she has spoken of are very evident when we meet trafficked victims.
- The intense psychological distress and the physiological impacts are very real –
- Often they are literally a bundle of nerves when they first come to us

- I think it's good that she has gone into this in depth as we do need a clear understanding of the stressful impacts which the trafficking experience has on its victims and how it seeps into every aspect of their lives and can disable their ability to deal with normal everyday situations.

For Ruhama the point of understanding their stress patterns and their mental and emotional issues is to be able to offer effective support.

We are dealing with women who have been hugely betrayed, whose autonomy and power has been stripped from them, who have lost hope in themselves and in everyone around them.

Our challenge is to help them begin to trust again, to get in touch with their emotions, to break out of the shell – the protective armour they have surrounded themselves in, following the brutality of their experiences.

It is a lot to overcome and the road to recovery is a long and difficult one.

It's not easy and yet before our eyes we have again and again watched women move (slowly and hesitantly to be sure) from frightened, anxious individuals towards confidence. Slowly we see their demeanour change, standing a little taller, gradually becoming a little less fearful, a little laughter emerging, a new outlook slowly unfurl. I have often heard colleagues comment on this blossoming taking place before their very eyes.

But how is this achieved?

Primarily through putting in place a caring environment where they can begin to feel secure, where they are treated with respect and so begin to respect themselves again.

Where they experience kindness and acceptance and can begin to trust themselves and others again.

Where they can begin to deal with the feelings of shame and anger and loss – all emotions competing for attention – Eimear quotes one woman as describing feeling dizzy with everything spinning around. These are key steps in the empowerment process.

By addressing their health needs and referring them for the necessary screening and supports. HIV is a big concern for women trafficked into the sex trade, and invariably we find that until they have assurance around this issue they cannot relax.

Secondly by offering a programme of support that focuses their concentration and attention, involves learning, goal setting, planning for the future, ... acknowledging that there can be a future.

- We have found that our training and education programmes have great therapeutic value beyond their immediate goals.
- They provide stimulation, take them out of the depression and anxiety for a period.
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a response by a normal person to an abnormal situation. Through our programme of supports we try to bring some normality back into their lives.

I suppose it can be summarised in the provision of support in a holistic way tailored to individual need nurturing mind, body and spirit. In this way they rebuild some faith in humanity and become open to reintegrating into society again and healing can begin.

But I'm not trying to paint a rosy picture here. – This is an inch by inch – step by step process towards reclaiming their personal autonomy.

But we have seen enough success to know that with the right supports the human spirit can overcome the most awful adversity.

Sadly we have also had enough experience to know that not everyone will achieve that wished for outcome;

For many fear remains a constant in their lives –

- Fear of their traffickers and of being recognised on the streets or in the hostels and being caught again.
- Fear for their family's safety back home.
- Fear of being deported.

I doubt if those fears are ever truly overcome

Some of our clients end up with psychotic disorders. Some will be on antidepressants for a very long time. We have had a number of clients experiencing suicidal ideation.

Needless to say the mental health supports are woefully inadequate. Ruhama is more and more convinced that advocacy for victims of trafficking must include a focus on the need for improved mental health care. The National Action Plan for responding to victims of human trafficking needs to make special arrangements to meet mental health needs of this target group.

Eimear has highlighted the need to acknowledge their story and the difficulties they experience in telling it. This is particularly important at an official level.

It is hugely important for the abused person to feel believed, that her experience is not being denied. In denying her story we further erode her rights, deny her the justice she deserves. The long investigative process is a reopening of the trauma a reliving of events that she wants to obliterate not dwell on.

Instead she endures many re-counting of her story being examined for consistency and accuracy (or inconsistency and inaccuracy).

I acknowledge this is a difficult one; there is no avoiding the telling of her story no matter how painful. The reality of what has happened to her must be verified and this also is her right.


But that said now that we are developing formal legislative and administrative frameworks for dealing with suspected victims of trafficking perhaps we can agree on a framework which would allow one telling to reduce the stress involved. And in the process we need to be extra vigilant to ensure that we don't jump to conclusions that the person is lying in order to get residency or leave to remain here.

Ireland is currently in the process of finalising its national Action Plan for responding to suspected victims of trafficking. Indeed much is now already in place. Over the past two years Ruhama has consistently called attention to the deficits in some elements of the plan.

- Chief among these is the use of Direct Provision hostels as the only accommodation now on offer, even though their unsuitability for this client group has often been highlighted. (The lack of personal space, no place to retreat to, the commotion in the early hours of the morning when others are deported all add to the anxiety and are certainly not conducive to the rest and reflection which we now agree is their right).
- The dispersal of suspected victims throughout the country and away from their support mechanisms is sometimes detrimental and we do need a more supportive approach to this at official levels. (Much of what Eimear has just told us should demonstrate the need for consistency in support).

I am highlighting these two aspects in particular as they have potentially the most significant impact on the psychological welfare of the women we work with.

Thank you,



At the conference organized by APT, Eimear's talk and Kathleen's response were followed by another important talk. This time the speaker was Hilikka Becker, who is a solicitor who works with the Immigrant Council of Ireland. Hilikka spoke about the difficult legal situation in which trafficked people find themselves. The second chapter in this little booklet is the text of her talk.

