

# Turn Off the Red Light

End Prostitution and Sex Trafficking in Ireland



## **Case studies**

### **based on experiences of women and girls exploited in the Irish sex industry**

Maria is from a large family in Brazil. Her maternal aunt Cecilia is married to a doctor working in Ireland. Aunt Cecilia and Maria's mother strike a deal whereby Maria is to live with her aunt's family in Ireland, where she will help with the household and with the upbringing of their two young children. Maria's family is to receive payment for her services in Ireland. A fake passport is produced for Maria, where the surname of her aunt and uncle is stated, as opposed to her real surname. Maria is then collected from Rio de Janeiro by her aunt whom she had never met before and brought to Ireland. Maria is instructed to refer to her aunt and uncle as mother and father respectively. Maria is 15 years old on arrival in Ireland.

Once Maria arrives in Ireland, her aunt charts a strict schedule with tasks stretching from 6am until 10pm, involving cleaning, ironing, breakfast for adults, breakfast for the children, bringing the baby to crèche, bringing the older girl to school, collecting the children from school and crèche, cooking dinner and serving it, cleaning after everybody and putting the children to bed and seeing to them throughout the night.

Initially Maria does not attend school but as neighbours start asking questions about her, she is enrolled in secondary school. Maria's schedule of duties continues as before. She now needs to get up at 5am and goes to bed even later in the evening, in order to finish her household duties and do her homework. Whenever Maria does not fulfil any of her tasks or asks for anything for herself the aunt is verbally and physically abusive to her.

Maria is constantly tired and falls asleep at school on several occasions. The school authorities are concerned and notify the HSE. After a particularly violent incident at home, Maria flees her aunt's house and covered with blood seeks shelter in her friend's house. Eventually, after two years of abuse, Maria is taken away from her aunt and uncle and placed in hostel accommodation. She is 17 years old. The residency stamp in her fake passport remains valid for another few months until she turns 18.

When Maria reaches maturity, the State support is withdrawn from her and she is advised by her social worker to move to Reception and Integration Agency accommodation and to apply for asylum – she comes in contact with the Refugee Legal Service at that point.

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Maria is offered a place outside of Dublin, which she refuses to take and starts living on the streets in Dublin. She is quickly recruited for prostitution, and experiences rape and assault.

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Beti is from Slovakia. She has been raised in State schools and foster homes. She has just turned 18 but has not finished her education in a State run boarding school. The school has computer rooms where Beti loves chatting with friends online. A long-term friend with whom Beti shared a foster family in the past informs her that she now lives in Ireland. Her name is Mara and she lives with an Indian boyfriend whom she plans to marry. They invite Beti for her summer holiday to spend time with them in Ireland and assure her that she'd be back in time for her school term in September. Beti prints out her electronic tickets and arrives at Dublin airport. Mara is not at the airport but an unknown Asian looking man approaches her, he introduces himself as Mara's friend 'Javinder' and asks her to follow him to his car. Beti has hardly any English but presumes that the man is Mara's friend and will bring her to her friend.

However, Beti is brought to a house in an unknown location. Four men are present there. She is raped several times by different men over the coming days. Occasionally, other Eastern European women are brought into the room Beti is held in and she is able to exchange a few words with some of them. They are all hungry and frightened. The man who collected Beti from the airport brings limited supplies of food and keeps them locked in. From her conversations with the other women Beti understands that she is considered valuable for her European passport and that some day one of the men who come to the house will pay money to marry her. She is being promised a share of the money if this happens. From this money she will have to repay her travel costs and monies spent on her food and accommodation.

One day Beti manages to escape together with another woman from Slovakia whom she has met in the house. Beti first contacts her friend Mara, but is told to go back to the house and stay with 'Javinder' as she is owing money and has to first pay off her debt. Beti and the other woman hitchhike to Dublin and seek assistance from a migrant oriented NGO.

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Tamara is a Somali national from a small ethnic minority who fled Somalia after the killing of her parents and siblings when she was only 4 years old. She then lived in a refugee camp in Kenya for the next 16 years where she was first sold into marriage by the 'aunt' who had been looking after her and, having escaped from the marriage, then ended up in prostitution in Kenya. She became pregnant and gave birth to a baby daughter when she was 18 years old.

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After some time Tamara met a white customer who introduced himself to her as 'Peter'. 'Peter' promised to help Tamara and to bring her and her 2-year old daughter to Ireland where she would work as a domestic help for a rich family. He told her that she would have her own room, regular days off and that she would be paid a salary on top of food and accommodation.

Tamara agreed to travel with 'Peter' and he organised the necessary documentation for herself and her daughter. Tamara does not know the names on the passport but says that they had her and her daughter's pictures in them and that they were dark red.

On arrival at Dublin Airport, 'Peter' introduced Tamara to his friend 'Anna' and told her that she and her daughter would be staying with 'Anna' until she could start work.

On the second day in 'Anna's' house, Tamara was told to have a shower and put on clothes that 'Anna' had bought for her. She was then told that she would have a customer as she needed to earn her upkeep until the other workplace became available. Tamara was told that she should not cause any trouble and that if she did she would destroy all of her chances and those of her daughter to settle in Europe. Tamara did not feel that she had any option but to do what she was told as she had no papers and did not want to frighten her little daughter.

In the coming months Tamara saw up to 5 men per day in 'Anna's' house. The men paid 'Anna' after leaving the house and Tamara herself never received any payment. While she was with the men, 'Anna' and Tamara's daughter remained in another room in the house. Whenever Tamara asked about the work she had been promised, she was told that she had to pay back what it had cost to bring her to Ireland before she could go to work somewhere else.

One day, when 'Anna' was out shopping, Tamara managed to escape from the house together with her little daughter. She sought the help of neighbours in the housing estate and they referred her to ORAC.

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*Note: the following testimony is a composite of actual experiences disclosed to Ruhama by women and is presented as such, with key identifying details changed in order to preserve the confidentiality and also the safety of the women involved.*

"My name is Yvonne. I was involved in prostitution for 6 years. It has been a long journey to get to where I am now but still so much of what has happened to me is right there almost every time I close my eyes. It does get easier though as I try to put distance between my past and my present.

I had a difficult time as a child and teenager. There were a lot of problems in my family – we were never very close or together. There was a lot of drama. When I

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was fourteen I was sexually abused by a male family member and when I told I wasn't believed. The abuse kept happening I couldn't think where to turn to and I just ran away at fifteen. For a bit I stayed in friends houses but that couldn't last so I did end up on the streets and in the hostels, which was sometimes really frightening. I met a guy when I was 16 and moved in with him. He was a few years older than me and I thought he was amazing. He told me he loved me and that he would take care of me.

At first it seemed great, I played house and he got the dole and did a bit of work. Gradually though he began complaining about having to pay for me and asking what I was going to do to pay for myself. He kept on pressuring me, and then began threatening to throw me out of the house if I didn't make some money so in the end I found myself on the streets selling myself with him supposedly keeping an eye on the punters to make sure I was "alright". I was fairly naïve and really thought that he was caring for me but he really just took nearly all the money I made from strangers having sex with me and kept pushing me out there. He didn't even bother working himself anymore. He also started treating me a lot worse – calling me names like some of the punters did: "slag", "slut". Sex with him became just like with the men on the street because he really didn't think he needed my consent anymore – as far as he was concerned I didn't have any right to say no because I was selling it anyway. It made me feel like I was nothing – just there for other people to use.

I started drinking a lot more to deal with how I was living. My boyfriend used some drugs and gradually I fell into using those instead of the drink as it worked better to keep me disconnected from the horrible reality of prostitution and the pain of my life in general. That became a vicious circle though as the more dependent I became the more I needed money to get the drugs. The result anyway was that I stayed out on the streets – I couldn't see any alternative. It took my nearly being killed to wake me up to what my life had become and start looking for some way to get out of my situation. I had been beaten and robbed and raped over the years but the end came for me when a guy threw me into the back of his van and tied me up and took me up the mountains and raped me. I was so certain that I was going to die. I managed to get away but when I got home my boyfriend just didn't care what had happened to me. He hit me because I came home with no money, he made me go back out again even though my face was bruised and bleeding – he hadn't even noticed I was missing.

I had seen the Ruhama van on the streets but hadn't really paid it much attention before. I felt really alone though and didn't know how to get out of what I was stuck in. Next time I went out I got into the van and found out that Ruhama could offer support.

I finally went into the Ruhama offices and I met my caseworker who talked with me about what I would like for my life. She helped get me into a drugs programme. She also supported me in getting into temporary accommodation

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because I couldn't stay anymore with my boyfriend and eventually when I was straightened out I was able to get a little flat of my own from the council. Once things were a bit more settled I started doing classes in computers and a personal development programme that helped me feel more assertive and positive about what I might be able to do. I got involved in an initiative through Ruhama where I was able to get a job placement that turned into an actual job in a store. I also was given a counsellor who's still helping me deal with the impact of everything that has happened to me.

I still feel so much shame and sadness for those years. One of the worst things is that, no matter what I do in my "new" life I feel like I have to lie about my past. How do I explain those lost years? But on the other hand the little money I earn now in my job feels proper; like "clean" money. When it was through prostitution I used to feel like I had to spend money as fast as I got it because it made me feel filthy inside and worthless, but now the money I have I need to use really carefully to get by but I value it so much more. I also value myself so much more and that is the greatest thing."

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"I am Beatrise. I come from a small town in the east of Latvia. I lived there with my mother and two younger sisters and it was a very difficult life because my mother suffered from illness and there were not very many ways to earn money. I felt very responsible for my family and used to do cleaning and waitressing and any other jobs I could find to try to support them.

A cousin of mine introduced me to a friend of his called Georgs who said that he could arrange a job for me in Ireland working as a nanny for Irish children. He said I would be able to live with the family and also study English language and the money was good enough that I could live well and send plenty home. It sounded too good to be true. It was.

I left Latvia with Georgs and we arrived in Dublin in 2008. I was so full of hope and excited to meet the family I would be working for. We met an Irish man at the airport and drove in a van to a flat somewhere. When we got there Georgs said that I had to pay back all the money I owed for my transport here. I said I thought that I could do that from my wages as a nanny and he laughed. Then all of a sudden he punched me in the stomach and when I bent over with no breath the Irish man grabbed me and they both raped me. It was so painful and my head was swimming. When they finished the Irish man took my papers and said that there were other ways I would be paying back the money I owed. Georgs said that I should just do as I was told as otherwise he would make sure my mother and sisters would be hurt. He said that the police knew them and that no-one

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would believe anything I said here. I spoke hardly any English and didn't even really know where I was – I felt so sick and trapped.

There were three other girls in the apartment and we had to share rooms. The Irish man said that the other girls would be watching me and would tell him if I did anything wrong. I believe now that he said the same thing to all of them too but at the time I felt I couldn't trust anyone so I didn't really speak with them. I just turned in on myself and tried to get through one day and one day at a time.

Men came to the apartment and I was told to let them have sex with me. Any time my mobile phone rang no matter whether I was asleep or eating I had to go to the bedroom and wait. It became like an electric shock: every time it rang my whole body would shudder. Some of the men were very rough. Some would get cross and say things like "you could at least pretend to enjoy yourself". Sometimes they would make me do things that really hurt, or would not wear a condom. They would say that had "paid extra" but I never knew: I had no control over what happened. I became numb.

One night the police came, the Gardai, they took me out of the apartment and one of the Gardai saw that I was very distressed and they made a phone call to Ruhama.

I found myself in Ruhama's safe accommodation. I met women who gave me normal clothes to wear and fed me and gave me a room to wash and to rest. They said that I was safe and that they were there to talk if I wanted but I just slept. I couldn't speak and, although at first I did not know if I was safe there I did feel begin to feel a bit safer.

From there things changed and became much better for me. I met a caseworker in Ruhama and she talked with me about what Ruhama was and how they could help. They didn't push me. The Gardai wanted to talk with me and my caseworker came with me as I was so worried and scared but they really wanted to find Georgs and the Irish man for what they had done to me and the other girls. Ruhama also found me a counselor to talk with and I gradually began to tell about what has happened to me. They helped me contact my family. It was such a relief to know that they were safe and well. I cried and cried.

It has been some months now and I am feeling greater trust, mainly because of Ruhama. It meant so much to me to be believed when I did start to tell. It took time but I realized that there was help there from people who didn't want anything from me in return. I have been so betrayed and hurt but am starting now to feel like a human being once again. It is slow but at least I can now see past today, I am doing classes and starting to set some goals and see a future for myself."