

Mirror INVESTIGATES HORROR OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

EXCLUSIVE
BY TOM PARRY in Mumbai

From a dimly-lit alley a teenage pimp emerges to tout a schoolgirl held prisoner inside the six-floor brothel behind him. "I can get you young girls," he boasts. "Minor, only been used four or five times. Everything is for sale here in Mumbai, sir."

Somewhere in there is a girl whose stolen innocence is the sordid selling point in the rat-infested red-light district of Kamathipura. In this labyrinth of rubbish-strewn lanes, where homeless tots sleep rough beside wild-eyed junkies, there are thousands of such girls, some as young as six. They are slaves, sold to child traffickers by their own penniless families.

Kamathipura was first set up by the British for the use of colonial troops. It was called a "comfort zone".

When our forces left in 1947 Mumbai's local pimps moved in, scenting easy money to be made by exploiting children.

So while Britain prepares to enact a Modern Slavery Bill which will hand out life sentences to human traffickers, India remains the country with more people trapped in forced labour than any other.

The Global Slavery Index recently said the world's second most populated nation contains nearly half of the world's slaves. A total of 15 million people, many of them children, are forced to work for no pay as domestic servants, miners, cotton pickers and, worst of all, prostitutes.

And although this corner of Mumbai is a hell-hole, the same city is a hugely wealthy hi-tech powerhouse in the rising economy of the East. Many UK firms base their call centres here and it ranks fifth in the world after New York, Hong Kong, Moscow and London for the number of billionaires.

None of these riches are any help to the youngest victims of the sex trade locked inside pitch-black wooden boxes inside secret rooms concealed behind trapdoors and false walls. The girls, daubed in make-up by their captors, have no way to escape from paedophile clients.

British photographer Hazel Thompson wrote a book, Taken, about Kamathipura and returns every year to record the suffering.

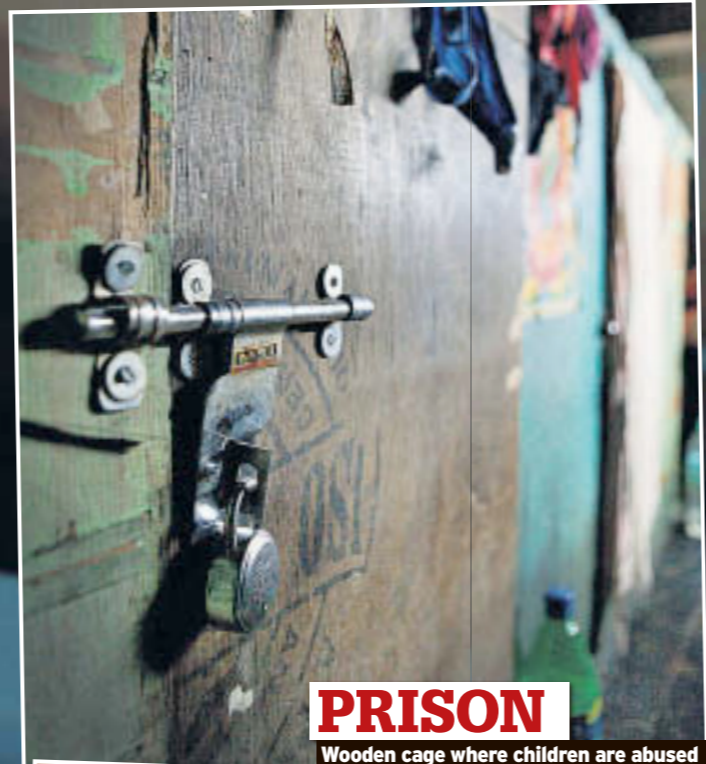
"Girls are still tricked and trafficked into brothels," she says. "Most arrive aged 10 to 15 and are held in cages, only taken out to have sex with customers until they are 'broken' and will not try and run away."

Seena Simon, who runs a halfway house for rescued girls, says: "The girls are kept plump and beautiful in cages like factory-farmed chickens. The pimps prefer them as young as possible to make more money."

One child rights organisation says 40% of prostitutes in India are of school age, a meagre one recently rescued

girl, 16-year-old Padma, who was sold by her indebted parents in the state of Uttar Pradesh when she was six. She tells me her father first resorted to begging, then took out a loan he couldn't pay back. The loan sharks beat up her parents and threatened to kill them unless they sold Padma, their youngest child, to a female trafficker.

"The lady beat me all the time," says Padma. "Then she brought me to Mumbai. First of all I was a slave in her house. By then I was seven. About a year after that I was handed to this gang. One of the men told me I had to be ready to be a woman. "They made me start to put on make-up. One day he told me to take off my clothes. I didn't know what I would have to do. He



PRISON
Wooden cage where children are abused



GIRLS
Young prostitute in Mumbai's Kamathipura red light district



BROTHEL
One of city's oldest... others have under-age girls hidden away

attacked me, molested me. I had no idea what was happening. I was completely petrified.

"When he had finished the woman who had sold me locked the door from the outside and left me. I was naked and crying. When she came to speak to me the next day, she said, 'It's not a sin - it's just what we do.' "I was threatened so many times that I just decided to accept what they wanted. I was nine then. I had become a prostitute." Padma recounts her ordeal with astonishing composure. But while she is dressed maturely in a pink sari, her facial expressions are child-like. Our interview is conducted in a dormitory decorated like a child's bedroom with stencilled angels on

brightly-coloured walls. The building is in a quiet street far from the predators who might seek revenge on rescued girls.

Padma calmly describes how she was raped by a continual stream of men from 4pm until 4am every night. "The men would come into the brothel and choose one of us in the waiting room, where we all sat," she says. "I would be earning thousands of rupees every night, but I never got any of the money. "And in the daytime I had to babysit some

of the younger girls so I never really slept properly. There were many of us, sometimes 10, crammed in a tiny, hot room in the day. It was horrible."

If she ever complained she would be beaten, tied up, or even starved of food.

"Once they undressed me, tied me to the ceiling fan then turned it on," she says. "I was slapped as I was spinning round."

Padma was finally rescued last year in a police raid. On that occasion, like many others, the pimps and the traffickers who controlled the girls all got away.

Another girl at the refuge, Dishita, tells how her brothel keeper would always be warned in advance of a raid and she would be temporarily shipped out to another building. She was locked up in a room just big enough for a tiny mattress.

Food was pushed through a slot and she had to knock on the door for hours before she was allowed to use the toilet.

She, like many at the centre, is HIV positive and faces a grim future while trying to cope with her terrible past. Her friend Rashmi, 18, was sold to a brothel by her own mother when she was only eight.

Seena says some girls are so traumatised that they have totally blanked out their past. And most cannot sleep at night because they are so used to a nocturnal life.

"The worst cases I have heard are of children taken from their mothers when they are still in hospital after giving birth," says Seena. "They are sold on to eventually be used in the brothels when they are still of primary school age. "You cannot see these very young girls. They are kept out of public view on the streets, but they are there. "In other cases the traffickers tell families they will get the girls a job in Mumbai

and pay about £50 to take them away. She continues: "Once they get here, they are sold on to brothels for 10 times that - around 50,000 rupees."

"The girls are in their debt from the moment they pass through the door. Until they have worked enough to pay off that 50,000, and a lot more besides, they cannot leave. Often they have to sleep with 15 to 20 men a night. It is the brothel keeper who keeps the money, not them. Sometimes the police carry out raids in the red-light district, but this still carries on. I think they turn a blind eye to it. It is totally corrupt."

"In India, just as in Britain, it is a very serious offence to have sex with a juvenile, but they choose to do nothing about it. "Child prostitution is growing. It's a big money-making business and they allow it to happen. None of them are thinking

Aged 9, Padma was locked in a cage, beaten and raped by paedophiles for 12 hours a day ... just another victim of India's child sex trade



PADMA, NOW 16
She was nine when raped for the first time
Pictures: IAN VOGLER

“In the worst cases babies are taken at birth and end up being sold for sex”
SEENA SIMON WHO HELPS RESCUE CHILD PROSTITUTES

about the effect on a young girl's life."

In Britain, shocking cases like that of three women held as slaves in South London remain rare. Here in the seedy, foul-smelling lanes of Kamathipura there are not only slave children in the brothels, but even younger boys and girls forced into manual labour.

British charity Tearfund, which helps fund the halfway house, says traffickers even exploit parents who have lost everything after natural disasters. "When families lose breadwinners and even their homes, they fall prey to opportunistic child traffickers," says the agency. "Out of desperation, families accept the offer, not realising their child will be sold into the sex industry or child labour." ■ To make a donation to Tearfund go to www.tearfund.org or call 0845 355 8355. tom.parry@mirror.co.uk

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