

Scottish Federation of University Women
Seminar on “People Trafficking” 27 March 2008
Report by Alison MacLachlan, SFUW- Edinburgh

On 27th March 2008, the Scottish Federation of University Women held a seminar on “People Trafficking” at the Scottish Parliament. The seminar was sponsored by Margaret Smith MSP who welcomed us to the Parliament, appreciating our focus on this topic and pointing out that it was just over a year ago that the UK Government signed the Council of Europe’s Convention on Trafficking, although it is still to be ratified. She pointed out that thirteen per cent of trafficked people in the UK are in Scotland: in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling and Tayside, and that it is not just an urban problem but a rural one too. It was clear from a debate that had taken place in the Parliament the previous week, that there was all-party support for ratification. She made a particular plea that victims of trafficking should not be prosecuted and referred to what Fergus Ewing, Minister for Community Safety, had said in the debate about the Scottish Government working closely with the UK Government on an action plan. This plan sets out measures on enforcement, prevention, victim support and child trafficking. Ms Smith expressed the hope that the afternoon’s seminar would be successful and apologized for having to leave because of pressure of business in the Chamber.

The President of SFUW, Dr Catriona Thompson, who chaired the seminar, warmly thanked Ms Smith for sponsoring the meeting. Her introduction had been excellent, highlighting as it did the problem and the ways in which the Scottish Parliament could contribute to its solution. Dr Thompson said that Education is the focus of the Scottish and International Federations of University Women, but we are equally devoted to peace and human rights: “people trafficking”, she said, “is a gross violation of human rights”.

The three speakers, from the Church of Scotland Guild, the Criminal Justice Directorate of the Scottish Government, and Amnesty International, who were introduced by Dr Thompson, created for us a picture of the problems faced by the victims of trafficking and of the efforts being made by voluntary and statutory bodies to deal with this. Although approaching the subject from slightly different angles, all agreed with Margaret Smith on the seriousness of the problems caused by People Trafficking, especially for women and girls who were trafficked into the sex industry. They were all concerned with raising the awareness of the general public as to the very serious nature of what was happening; and were agreed that the victims of this trade who were often afraid to speak up because of threats of violence to themselves and their families back home, must not be treated as criminals but as victims.

The Church of Scotland Guild speaker opened by saying that trafficking of women is not simply a women’s problem: many of those trafficked are traded into the sex industry which has been created mainly by the demands of men. It is men too who most often profit from the trade. She spoke of the need to educate boys and young men to realise that the buying of someone else’s body is an

extreme abuse of human rights. The speaker explained how the Church was trying to raise awareness about the traffic and the problems it created and had joined with other organisations to help tackle this. She felt that an open debate on the link between prostitution and trafficking was needed: if there was no demand, that aspect of the trafficking industry would fail. In conclusion, on a slightly different note, she spoke of conditions in the Tea Gardens of North India which she had visited in 2007. Because of the drop in world tea prices, families there were facing extreme poverty. Parents were duped into selling their children with promises of a better life while in fact, they were sent to the cities as domestic servants or placed in the sex industry.

The speaker from the Criminal Law Directorate stated that Article 4 of the Convention on Trafficking defines trafficking in human beings as “receiving, holding, use of force and deception for the purposes of exploitation, forced labour, slavery and removal of organs”. He explained that, although there has been some success in identifying and arresting traffickers, so far there have been no successful prosecutions in Scotland. However, a number of agencies are now involved with the police in investigating and dealing with the problems created by trafficking and there have been some early indications of success. Since the signing of the Convention, much work has been done in the field of Victim Support: TARA, a Glasgow based organisation which works with victims of trafficking and prostitution generally, has continued to receive government funding and there has been increased funding across Scotland. From 1st April, funding is available for local authorities to deal with other forms of trafficking too. So far, there is little evidence of child or labour trafficking and none of trafficking for organ donation in Scotland. If changes could be made in the length of time for a period of reflection (at present, one month) this could be beneficial for victims and might lead to more prosecutions for trafficking.

The UK Government announced in January this year that it would ratify the Treaty by the end of the year. This gap between signing and ratification is normal for the UK: agreement in principle is given by signing, then a process of establishing laws takes place so that, when the Treaty is ratified, the laws to deal with it are in place.

The speaker from Amnesty commented on the general field of human rights and enlarged on their work regarding asylum-seekers who, if their appeals fail, become destitute because they cannot work nor do they receive government support. This led on to Amnesty’s campaign on Violence Against Women, including physical, sexual and emotional abuse, which ties in with concerns for victims of Trafficking who have been exploited by means of violence, coercion and deception. He quoted a number of examples of women and children caught in the People Trafficking trap and pointed out that it is not only in the metropolitan areas that trafficking takes place: in Wales evidence of trafficking was found in Cardiff, Newport and Swansea, but also in small isolated communities. Amnesty is urging that the “reflection” period for victims of trafficking should be increased from one to three months, plus a six months residence period. He finished by

underlining once again the importance of ratification of the Convention on Trafficking and said that, on the 60th Anniversary of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, it was disgraceful that trafficked people were still being held in a form of slavery.

The audience engaged in a lively discussion with the speakers, raising many questions including how the authorities can deal with traffickers, how prostitution has moved from sauna parlours to other sites. The method of trafficking people into this country was also raised, and it emerged that they mainly come in via London and quite frequently have genuine passports which, once they are in the country, are confiscated by the traffickers so that they are trapped. Among other issues raised was the fact that these women have no access to the Health Service though some of them can become seriously ill; trafficking of women for the World Cup in Germany in 2007 and the possible trafficking to London for the Olympics and to Glasgow for the Commonwealth Games.

The meeting concluded with Anne Reynolds, Vice President of SFUW, expressing our thanks to our sponsor and to the three speakers for helping us understand the horrors of people trafficking, particularly with regard to women. They had each presented different aspects but all were united in their condemnation of the trade and had encouraged our members to follow up the afternoon's discussion with action. Mrs Reynolds also expressed our appreciation for the opportunity to hold the meeting in the Scottish Parliament and hoped that we might do so again. Members made it clear that they had learned a great deal from the afternoon and were anxious to give our support to any action which could help end people trafficking. The President declared the meeting closed and wished all a safe journey home.