

Damning report on Cyprus flesh trade

By Jacqueline Theodoulou
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CYPRUS AUTHORITIES have again come under the international spotlight for their inability to effectively combat human trafficking and the sexual exploitation of women.

Under the headline "The worst record in Europe for human trafficking", the Financial Times newspaper reported on the problem in Cyprus this week, with statements by a priest from the Russian Church, father Savvas Michaelides.

The cleric claimed that the state was well aware of the sexual exploitation suffered by many women but issued 'artiste' entry permits without giving it second thought.

The report also refers to a recent report by the US State Department, the Cyprus Ombudswoman's report and the results of an investigation by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, which all stress the Cyprus Republic's lack of will to combat the phenomenon, due to the influence imposed by cabaret owners.

At the same time, Cyprus authorities openly encourage the situation by licensing more cabarets and dancers.

The Financial Times didn't forget to mention the lack of shelters on the island to offer protection for victims of trafficking.

The Permanent Secretary of the Interior Ministry, Lazaros Savvides, refuted the FT's claims, saying its criticism on Cyprus was unjust and that recently passed laws to combat human trafficking were already in force.

But the humiliation suffered by a female dancer in a Limassol cabaret, Yelena, was also published in the publication, putting paid to the island's authorities' claims that the problem is nothing like its being made out to be.

Yelena told the paper that women in the cabaret she worked at were being held hostage and under constant observation by the owner and his men.

She said she had come to Cyprus believing she was going to work in a cafeteria. But upon her arrival, she was taken straight to the cabaret and forced to have sex with customers at a price.

Painting an even grimmer picture, Yelena added that women who resisted their owners' orders were subjected to threats and even beatings.

Finally, she claimed that the police seemed to be afraid of cabaret owners, which was why the problem was being fixed.

The head of the Police Headquarters' Human Trafficking Office, Rita Superman, rejected these last claims, though she admitted that women showed extreme terror when police officers carried out checks.

Superman also referred to a recent incident, where five women were taken to an old people's home for shelter but despite police efforts to make them testify against their employers, they refused to do so.

The next day, the five abandoned the home and, ostensibly due to their testimony being the only evidence police had, the case couldn't be taken to court.