

Simplifying the complexities of human trafficking

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Human trafficking is much more than kidnapping and selling people. Those who commit labour exploitation can, for example, also be sentenced for human trafficking. Criminologist Masja van Meeteren hopes to simplify the complexity of the phenomenon by charting the different forms of labour exploitation.

Women who are kidnapped in Eastern Europe to work in the Netherlands as prostitutes are one of the best-known examples of the harrowing problem that goes by the name of human trafficking. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Many other forms of human trafficking are

less well known to the public, often because they are not recognised as such. This makes it difficult to trace, and even more difficult to deal with. This is particularly true of [labour exploitation](#), a crime that has been treated in the Netherlands the same as human trafficking since 1995.

Consenting victim

'It is by no means always organised gangs that traffick in people, although this is the image that most people have,' says criminologist Masja van Meeteren, who conducts research on labour exploitation. She explains this in the context of the UN World Day against Trafficking in Persons on 30 July. 'In reality, the perpetrators are often families or owners of small companies, who to some extent are operating with the consent of the victims. That can make it complicated to pursue a perpetrator. It's by no means simple to prove that force is involved.'

Laundry

Van Meeteren mentions a recent example where refugees were working in the Netherlands in poor conditions in a laundry. The status holders were promised ten euros per hour. In reality they received 4.50 euros or nothing at all. As the amount they received was barely enough to pay for bus fares to and from the asylum centre, they slept in the laundry among the washing and the mice.

Not aware

Although such treatment is punishable in law, in many cases the exploited workers do not always see themselves as victims. They earn a little extra money, and the working conditions are often better than in their country of origin. The employers are also often not aware that they

are doing anything wrong, let alone that the courts can convict them of human trafficking.

Categories of exploitation

In her research - financed with a Veni award - Van Meeteren tries to divide the different types of labour exploitation in the Netherlands into categories. This will give more insight into the grey area between poor treatment by employers and criminal labour exploitation. It will also contribute to a better and broader understanding of human trafficking. She is examining the fifty or so dossiers of cases of [human trafficking](#), some of which resulted in a conviction. She will also at a later stage be talking to victims and perpetrators.

Large-scale exploitation

Van Meeteren will be working on the project for another two years, but she feels confident about predicting the first results. She makes a clear distinction between large-scale exploitation and individual exploitation. 'With the first of these, victims are often deceived or misled,' Van Meeteren says. 'Think of Polish women, for example, who work here picking mushroom, and who earn less than the minimum wage because they are paid a very low piecework rate.'

One-on-one exploitation

Individual exploitation is completely different. The victims are often people who have suffered some form of abuse; they may have been neglected as children, for instance. That makes them easy victims for the perpetrators. Van Meeteren mentions the example of a Hugarian Roma couple on a camp site in the Netherlands who treated a victim as a personal slave. 'The victim had to hand over his wages and sleep

outdoors, but at the same time he idolised the couple exploiting him. This case shows just how complex this material can sometimes be.'

Provided by Leiden University

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