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Trafficked Women's Symptoms Akin to Torture Victims'

LONDON, England (Reuters) – Women and girls trafficked for forced sexual or domestic work suffer post-traumatic stress on a par with torture victims, researchers said on Wednesday.

In one of the first studies of health problems of women who have been trafficked, they found 95 percent had been physically or sexually abused and nearly 40 percent had suicidal thoughts.

“This research shows that women who have been trafficked into sex work emerge with very severe pain and injuries and they show psychological health problems that appear to be similar to those documented among victims of torture,” said Dr Cathy Zimmerman, the author of the report published by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

The International Labor Organization estimates that at least 2.5 million people around the world are in forced labour at any given time.

Zimmerman, a researcher in public health policy, said because of its underground nature it was difficult to get precise numbers.

“This is an international trade that is happening in virtually every corner of the world,” she said in an interview.

“The majority believe they are getting a job doing something like waitressing, being a nanny or working in a bar. Most of them are tricked into the situation.”

Zimmerman and her team studied 207 women from 14 countries who had been released after being trafficked.

The women, aged 15-45 years old, were being treated in seven countries by aid agencies. Most were between 21-25 years old and 12 percent were under 18.

The vast majority of the women with children were single mothers. Sixty percent experienced some form of violence before being trafficked, and 56 percent reported symptoms suggestive of post traumatic stress disorder. Headaches, fatigue, dizzy spells, back pain, memory problems, anxiety and depression were common.

“If you can image a situation of confinement and abuse and systematic rape over a periods of months or a year it is not surprising that people are coming out with symptoms that might be at similar levels to those persons who are tortured,” said Zimmerman.

She added that women needed professional health and support services immediately after they were freed and in the long term.

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