

Acting Sergeant Florina Rus, left, and PC Joanna Nowakowska with "Anna", a sex worker they believe to be a victim of slavery

# SLAVE TRADE: ON THE FRONT LINE

Tens of thousands of vulnerable people are being trafficked into Britain and forced to work in brothels, cannabis farms and car washes. *Steve Boggan* joins a specialist task force trying to free them from the gangs that control their lives. Photographs by *Andrew Testa*

# A

woman opens the door to a flat. She is ready for work in fishnet stockings, an orange boob tube and a pussycat headband. In her bedroom, where the curtains are closed, condoms, lube and tissue paper are on display: the tools of her trade.

The woman, who is Polish, moves to the living room and sits on a sofa, resting elegant hands across her lap. She is about 30 and while there is a cold resignation about her, perhaps rooted in the decision to let us in, there is also determination to maintain her course, not to be steered to kinder shores.

In Polish, PC Joanna Nowakowska tells her that she isn't in any trouble with the law but if she is in danger from anyone else, they can whisk her away now, take her to a place of safety. Perhaps save her life.

"No," she insists, looking at her hands. "I don't need help."

In the kitchen is a sign that reads "Make Your Dreams Happen". Another, in the hallway, offers comfort with "Be Brave, Be Kind to Yourself". And in the bedroom, positioned on top of the wardrobe, visible to whoever might be lying face up on the bed, is an ornament in the shape of the word "LOVE".

I'm at this flat in west London after being granted rare access to observe the work of the Modern Slavery and Child Exploitation unit of the Metropolitan Police. It's an eye-opening assignment, one of the most depressing I've experienced in decades of reporting.

The woman — we shall call her Anna — confirms she is a sex worker and claims she was installed in the flat by "friends" just two days previously. She can't name them. She says she receives £40 an hour to have sex with men, and this rings alarm bells: the going rate is three or four times that, which means somebody is taking most of her earnings.

And this is when we notice the cameras. There is one high on the wall in the living



room, pointed at Anna on the sofa. The other is in the hallway, aimed at the bedroom door. They're there to monitor her. She watches us staring at them, registering our horror.

"Do you know who is watching?" Nowakowska asks.

"No," Anna whispers.

In one of her ears there is a hearing aid. She is asked whether she needs medical help. No, she says, she has all the medication she needs... for her epilepsy. Until now I had thought Anna, who is talking in Polish, had some kind of speech impediment. It is only when she replies to some questions in English that mild cerebral palsy reveals itself.

On a sideboard in front of her is a calendar and stuck to it is a photograph of a little boy. Is he the reason Anna is doing this? Does he have cerebral palsy, too? Does he need medical help? She won't say; she won't even admit he is hers.

All Anna's circumstances scream that she is a victim of modern slavery, two words that are easy to understand but which house a concept that is sometimes very difficult to convey. Modern slavery is defined by the UK government as "the recruitment, movement, harbouring or receiving of children, women or men through the use of force, coercion, abuse of vulnerability, deception or other means for the purpose of exploitation". It is a crime under the Modern Slavery Act of 2015, introduced by Theresa May when she was

**THERE IS A CAMERA HIGH ON THE WALL POINTING AT ANNA. DOES SHE KNOW WHO IS WATCHING? "NO," SHE WHISPERS**

home secretary, and carries a maximum sentence of life imprisonment.

The reason it can be a difficult concept to understand is that victims are often paid to some derisory extent for the work that they do — and it is not uncommon for them to see themselves as neither exploited nor enslaved, which makes them reluctant to give evidence against the criminal gangs profiting from their labour.

"If you are from some desperately poor corner of the world and someone offers you work for more than you could earn at home, you don't see yourself as being exploited," says Detective Superintendent Andy Furphy, head of the Met's modern slavery unit. "But the organised crime groups [OCGs] that exploit these people know the real value of a person's labour and they take advantage of it. They are into everything — prostitution, construction, cannabis farming, car washes, nail bars, agriculture, fishing, hotels, food production... they're everywhere. Modern slavery is an enormous business where vast profits are made and where people are treated like commodities to be used and abused."

It is impossible to say exactly how many such exploited people there are in the UK, but best estimates by police, academics and NGOs put the figure at about 100,000 at any one time. In 2018 the Global Slavery Index, compiled by the human rights group Walk Free, said it could be as high as 136,000. And levels of poverty and joblessness caused by the pandemic have served only to make matters worse.

The campaign group Unseen, which runs a modern-slavery helpline for victims and members of the public to report abuse, says it received calls reporting 273 cases of sexual exploitation last year compared with 218 the year before, an increase of 25 per cent. Reports of criminal exploitation cases, where victims are forced into committing crimes, were up from 179 to 254 — an increase of 42 per cent.



The numbers worldwide are staggering: according to the United Nations' International Labour Organisation (ILO), there are more than 40 million victims of slavery globally.

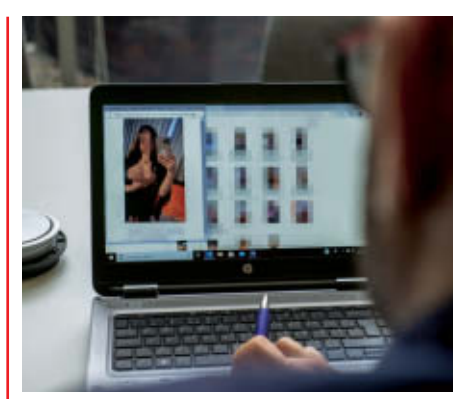
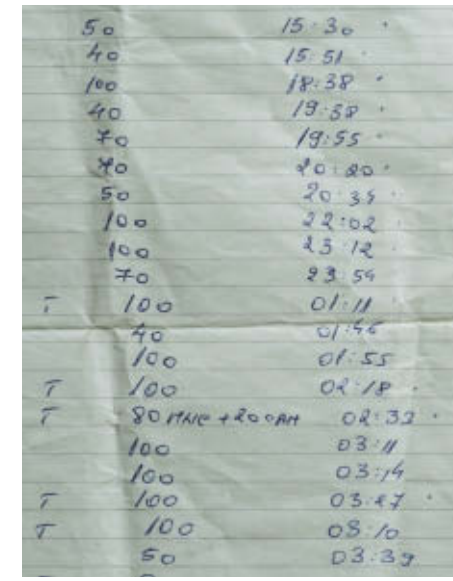
"In 2014 the Home Office published a figure of 10,000 to 13,000 for victims of modern slavery in the UK," says Andrew Wallis, Unseen's CEO. It put the cost to society of modern slavery in the UK — for policing, support for victims, criminal enterprises and the grey economy associated with it — at between £3.3 billion and £4.3 billion. But if the victims number more like 100,000, the cost could be closer to £40 billion. For context, spending on defence last year amounted to £54.5 billion.

According to Furphy, threats of violence — either to victims or their families abroad — keep those enslaved in check. So, too, does debt bondage, where a person has agreed a fee to be smuggled into a country where they believe their prospects will be brighter.

"Once they get to that country, the OCG will make them pay for their passage by working, usually for a pittance," he says. "They will also be charged for accommodation, food, electricity and so on until they have hardly anything left to pay off their debt. This means they can be in enforced servitude for years. Victims' passports or identity papers are usually taken from them and they are told they are illegal immigrants, so they aren't go to the police.

"If they run away, their families at home will be at risk from the OCG. And their debt is never written off prematurely. Remember the 39 Vietnamese people who suffocated in the back of a lorry while being trafficked into the country in 2019? Any debt owed for their passage will not have died with them. Somebody, probably their families, will still be paying."

During the three weeks that the photographer Andrew Testa and I spent with the modern slavery unit, we



accompanying officers on raids and were given access to inquiries into sexual exploitation, forced labour in cannabis farming, county lines drug dealing and car washes. Charges were subsequently brought relating to 25 offences, including holding a child in slavery or servitude, child abduction, possessing indecent images of children, human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, controlling prostitution and modern slavery.

The team has just rescued a 16-year-old English girl who had been missing from a children's home for more than two weeks and trafficked for sex by a criminal gang. Officers cannot reveal the covert and electronic means by which they located the girl, but Detective Constable Chloe Wilson is given clearance to play us bodycam footage of the minutes after her discovery.

The victim, whom we shall call Mary, has

**IF A SEX WORKER HAD TEN CLIENTS A DAY EACH PAYING £70, SHE WOULD BE WORTH ABOUT £220,000 A YEAR TO AN ORGANISED CRIME GANG**

**FROM FAR LEFT** The London flat in which Anna entertains clients; the modern slavery team talks to a woman in a suspected brothel; a ledger from a brothel run by a Romanian gang shows transaction times and payments; monitoring the Adultwork site

been installed in an outhouse less than 50ft from one of west London's busiest high streets. Passers-by go about their shopping, oblivious to her plight. She has been lying on a filthy mattress surrounded by used condoms. Underneath it is a knife.

"When I'm by myself, I get paranoid," she tells her rescuers when they find it.

The walls are stained, the room nightmarishly strip-lit. There is a tiny, dirty kitchen and a dank shower room with tiles missing from the walls. Officers believe Mary has been having sex with perhaps a dozen men a day. She is asked whether she is free to come and go, and produces keys to the outhouse door. However, at the end of the alleyway that conceals her billet is a solid steel gate inside a similarly solid steel wall some 10ft high and topped with spikes. She doesn't have a key to this.

"When did you last eat?" she is asked. It is just before 8pm.

"Last night," she says. "Why are you overreacting like this?"

Wilson says this is not an unusual response when a minor with a troubled past has been groomed, plied with cannabis and cocaine and has mistaken exploitation for some kind of friendship.

"She is a very damaged girl with a traumatic family life, and somebody has taken advantage of that," she says. "She was having sex with ten or more men a day, men she had never met or given consent to, she was being moved to different locations for this, and yet she told me she didn't think she was being sexually exploited."

The day before I was shown the footage, Testa and I were present in south London when one of Mary's alleged traffickers was arrested by a team led by Wilson. Officers suspect he has been having sex with Mary since she was 14. He seemed unperturbed as he was taken into custody. Twenty-two men have since been charged in connection with the case. Mary is now in a secure home and receiving counselling.

Pages from a ledger bear witness to the profitability of modern slavery, even when those being exploited refuse to bear witness in person. I am shown some recovered from a brothel in west London — one of ten set up by a Romanian OCG — and they are a record of one day's business for the five women working there.

The first transaction of the shift is recorded at 3.30pm. It is a payment of £50 to the OCG for sex with a named woman — we shall call her Worker No 1 — and, according to Detective Sergeant Jon Knox, who is engaged in trying to convict the women's traffickers, this will ➤➤➤



**FROM TOP** The modern slavery team forces entry into a house in the Midlands; a suspected victim of exploitation is apprehended after fleeing; police make a further arrest during the Midlands raid



cover the cost of 15 minutes of intercourse. Each visit is logged and timed, and the amount of cash paid by the client faithfully written down next to the names of Workers 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. There are 28 encounters in all, with the last one timed at 7.35am the next day. The most common payment is £100, which is for anal sex.

The total income for the evening is £2,775, of which the women are paid £595 between them. This comes after charging them for accommodation, food, “security” and even condoms. One of the women was involved in nine of the transactions, including six for anal sex. She was paid £135.

“The pages give you some idea of the extent to which these women are being exploited and abused, and the amounts of money being made by the OCGs,” Knox says. “This one was running 40 to 50 girls at a time and we believe they were making up to £5 million a year from the operation.”

The women’s services are usually advertised on legal adult sex websites such as Vivastreet and Adultwork. The cost of



the advertising is deducted from their wages. At the time of writing, 3,842 sex workers were advertising on Adultwork in London, and that is just one of several similar sites. Not all the sex workers are being exploited by criminal gangs, but detectives believe a large proportion are.

“The women are usually from very poor communities, they are poorly educated and have very few prospects at home,” Knox

says. “I’ve visited places in rural Romania where many of these women come from, and their living conditions are terrible. Poverty is rife. They live in breeze-block homes with corrugated iron roofs, wells for water and poor sanitation.

“So to be offered work here — even sex work — where they can earn £25,000 to £30,000 a year, means they can send money home to their children and wider family. Most of their money is taken from them by the OCG, and they often still can’t see how much they’re being exploited because, to them, the money’s good.”

If a sex worker had ten clients a day — not unusual — each paying an average of £70, then that woman would be worth about £220,000 a year to an OCG, less the money the group paid her after deductions. This, if she works just six days a week — most women are expected to work seven.

“It’s all about money, greed and exploitation,” Knox says. “The women may come into it with their eyes open to some extent, but they will have no idea of the sheer amount of abuse they will be subjected to. They have no idea of the horrible world they’re entering.”

**A**lthough sexual exploitation may be the most horrific example, modern slavery is carried out by crime gangs everywhere, in what detectives call poly-criminality. Often, as with Mary, it is right under our noses.

If you have just scored some cannabis, bought a ridiculously cheap item of clothing or had your car washed at a bargain price, the odds are modern slavery has played some part in its delivery and its cost. According to the United Nations 2020 Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, while 50 per cent of victims become engaged in the sex trade, the rest are trafficked into forced labour, criminal activity, begging, forced marriages, baby-selling and organ removal. The UN estimates that, globally, one in every three victims of trafficking for the purposes of modern slavery is under 18.

We are with officers from the modern slavery unit when they raid two houses linked to cannabis production in a small Midlands town. The contrast between the two is stark. Quartered in one is a handful of men who try to run away as we approach. They are captured and seem bedraggled, confused and scared. There are no luxuries in this house; they are workers who have been trafficked and trapped in debt bondage.

“I paid €13,000 to get here,” one, an Albanian, tells an officer. He looks scared. He is being treated as a victim, not a ➤➤➤



**LEFT** On the trail of traffickers, Detective Constable Chloe Wilson leads a raid on a suspected brothel in London

criminal, but will be handed to immigration authorities who will decide his future... and he will still owe €13,000.

In the other house, police find notebooks recording income, expenditure and figures relating to production in kilograms. The numbers run into the thousands. Officers handcuff two men. While the workers appear peasant-like, these two, slickly dressed in designer gear, are urbane and relaxed. In one bedroom is Giorgio Armani scent and Dior Sauvage aftershave while downstairs is a carrier bag containing a receipt for designer clothing worth more than £500. The receipt shows it was paid for in cash.

This is part of a countrywide operation that cannot be described in full for legal reasons. By the end of the day, there have been 21 arrests, the discovery of six cannabis factories and more than £130,000 in cash seized.

**W**here officers identify trafficked individuals as victims, they can offer them protection, legal advice and help with accommodation under a process called the National Referral Mechanism, overseen by the Salvation Army in England and Wales. Numbers entering the mechanism are increasing, but as many as 90 per cent remain too afraid to accept the help.

Acting Detective Chief Inspector Jo Gresham shows me bodycam footage of the discovery of a vast underground cannabis factory in Deptford, southeast London, in late 2019. Four Vietnamese farmers, thought to have been in debt bondage to an OCG, were arrested at the scene. Two had head injuries inflicted by another gang trying to locate the cannabis plants they were tending — police found thousands of them in cavernous spaces and tunnels accessed by a trapdoor in a bathroom. The site was thought to have produced £40 million worth of the drug.

## OFFICERS HANDCUFF TWO MEN. THEY ARE SLICKLY DRESSED IN DESIGNER GEAR WHILE THE WORKERS NEXT DOOR APPEAR PEASANT-LIKE

“They were arrested as suspects and later released under investigation,” Gresham says. “They disappeared and haven’t been seen since. We don’t know what happened to them. If this had happened today, we would have treated them as victims, not suspects. If they’d accepted the help we’re able to offer victims, it might have been a different story. We’re learning all the time.”

In her latest annual report the UK’s independent anti-slavery commissioner, Dame Sara Thornton, raised concerns over the low numbers of prosecutions for offences under the Modern Slavery Act — they had fallen from 142 in 2017-18 to just 71 last year. (Instead, prosecutions most often focus on related offences involving drugs, guns, violence and so on, rather than actual slavery offences, which are very difficult to prove.) She told me the pandemic and closures of courts were responsible to some extent, but that the failure of some police forces to prioritise modern slavery was also a factor.

The reluctance of victims to assist detectives is a longstanding problem. However, there is evidence that a programme run by the charity Justice and Care, in partnership with police forces in London, Manchester, West Yorkshire, Surrey and Essex, along with the UK Border Force in Kent, is helping to break down the fear of police among victims and the denial of having been exploited.

The charity is providing trained specialists called victim navigators, who

form a bridge between victims and the police. When victim navigators get involved, 87 per cent of victims go on to engage with police, compared with just 33 per cent when they don’t.

Justice and Care’s CEO, Christian Guy, and Thornton both argue that more political will is needed internationally if modern slavery is ever to be defeated. Both praise Theresa May for driving the agenda forward but argue that it has slipped somewhat since her departure as PM.

“The will for this politically was very strong four or five years ago, but it isn’t yet being given the attention it deserves by many major governments and countries,” Guy says. “It relies too heavily on a politician in a certain country who has a passion to do something about it. At the moment, there are either too many countries ignorant to the nature and scale of the problem, or we tend to just assume this kind of crime is inevitable and too tough to tackle, and I don’t believe that. Not enough serious countries have yet accepted this is a top priority, and they need to if they’re ever going to bring this misery to an end.”

The Met’s modern slavery unit was first alerted to the plight of Anna, the sex worker installed in a London flat by “friends”, by a victim navigator who, in turn, had been tipped off by a person she had helped to break free from modern slavery.

Back in Anna’s flat, Nowakowska gently explains that help is at hand if she needs it. Her colleague, Acting Sergeant Florina Rus, who is Romanian, provides support. Many victims are Romanian and so she is familiar with the signs, the fear and reluctance of exploited sex workers to try to escape.

On the fridge, Anna has posted her rota. She is expected to work for 12 hours a day, 2pm to 2am from Sunday to Friday. On Saturdays she works for 13 hours until 3am.

“I’m worried about this girl,” Rus says. “And I don’t like the cameras. But if she doesn’t ask for our help, and she hasn’t committed any offence, then we can’t do anything. We have to leave.”

The officers promise to check in on Anna again, and I later learn victim navigators are visiting too. As we leave and I stop and stare into the hallway camera, it is difficult not to experience a sense of guilt. We are heading home to safety and comfort. She is left alone with only cameras for company, waiting for the next stranger to knock on her door.

Perhaps one day soon she will accept a helping hand, but if the boy back home is in need — or in danger — perhaps she won’t ■

*Some details have been changed to protect victims and their families. Further information can be found at [unseenuk.org](http://unseenuk.org), [justiceandcare.org](http://justiceandcare.org) and [antislavery.org](http://antislavery.org)*