

Combatting technology-facilitated trafficking

Speech by Dame Diana Johnson MP

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Thank you to Special Representative Richey and the OSCE for the invitation to participate in today's important event. I'm very pleased to be with you.

To begin, I would like to read the words of Elena, a young Romanian woman who was trafficked in order to be raped for profit by men in the UK. You can watch Elena share her experiences in the recent BBC documentary, *Sold: Sex Slaves Next Door*. Elena said: *"I didn't have any other choice but to come to the UK. He threatened to hurt my child and kill my mother. And in that moment I got scared."* When she arrived in the UK, Elena was locked in a flat. *"There were three of us",* she said. *"Me and two other girls. I had to do the same thing every day. Sleep with different men."* Asked how many men would pay to rape and sexually abuse her each day, Elena revealed: *"I'd say around ten or twenty. There were some who'd stay even five or six hours, especially the drug addicts. I was spied on from every angle. He knew everything. When I went to sleep, what time I woke up. How much money we all made. How we made it. In a day, I was making a thousand pounds. Sometimes I made more. All the money I made, I gave to him."*

Many individuals were involved in perpetrating this horrific abuse. The dozens and dozens of UK men who paid to rape Elena. The man who trafficked Elena to the UK and pocketed the money sex buyers handed over to rape Elena. All of these individuals should be held to account, and Governments around the world should adopt robust legislation to prohibit paying for sex and hold traffickers to account.

However, there is another key group of individuals who facilitated the crimes against Elena – and who should be held to account in the UK and around the world.

The countless men who paid to rape Elena didn't know her or her trafficker. So how did they know where to find her? The answer is that Elena's trafficker forced her to place an advert on a very specific type of website. Elena explained: *"It was kind of a website called Vivastreet. ...it was a website where you uploaded your photos. Or if not your photos, then some fake ones."* Elena was listed alongside thousands of other women who are advertised for prostitution each day on pimping websites.

Pimping websites are commercial websites dedicated wholly or partly to hosting adverts for prostitution. Vivastreet is one of them. Men looking to pay for sex can peruse pimping websites anonymously and for free – whilst the websites profit by charging individuals to place a prostitution advert or enhance its prominence on the site. The operators of these highly lucrative websites openly and knowingly host prostitution adverts. And shamefully, they are currently able to profit from this online pimping with impunity in the UK.

The presence of Elena – a trafficking victim – on one of these pimping websites was no aberration. An inquiry conducted back in 2018 by the parliamentary group I now chair found that pimping websites are key to the typical business model of sex trafficking. But not only do pimping websites facilitate sex trafficking, they incentivise it.

How do pimping websites incentivise sex trafficking? In the UK, a small number of pimping websites dominate the online marketplace for prostitution advertising. They are the go-to websites for sex buyers across the country wanting to locate a woman to sexually exploit. As a result of this market dominance, pimping websites centralise and concentrate nation-wide demand from sex buyers online.

Through the quick and simple act of placing an advert on one of these pimping websites, traffickers can immediately connect with sex buyers across the country. They can also easily target their advertising at men in particular geographical areas through the location and filtering functions on the websites. This is ideal for facilitating the movement of victims around multiple locations – something commonly observed in trafficking operations in the UK. In short, by making it quick and easy for traffickers to connect with sex buyers, pimping websites lower the practical and financial threshold for would-be traffickers to engage in this highly lucrative crime, thereby incentivising this type of exploitation.

The operators of pimping websites have insisted they take active steps to combat traffickers using their sites – and that they should be allowed to continue profiting from advertising prostitution as a result. To give you an idea of how seriously the operators of Vivastreet have taken the issue of sex trafficking - the website that Elena was advertised on - consider this: in 2018 a police force reported to my parliamentary group that a trafficker they convicted had spent £25,000 advertising victims on Vivastreet. Vivastreet had responded to this man's high rate of spending on prostitution adverts not by contacting the police – but by giving the man his own account manager.

Let's be clear, even if there was any real will among these websites to stop traffickers from using them, there is no way to actually do this. Pimping websites simply cannot know if the individual being advertised for prostitution on their sites is being coerced, controlled or otherwise criminally exploited by a third party. Elena's case highlights this. To avoid leaving an evidence trail, Elena's trafficker simply forced her to upload her own advert. Pimping websites are a key tool in traffickers' armoury because they centralise and concentrate demand from sex buyers online. To bust the business model of sex trafficking, we must outlaw this online pimping. That's why I am calling on the UK Government to make it a criminal offence to enable or profit from the prostitution of another person – regardless of whether this exploitative activity takes place on a street corner or on a website.

There are some who claim that criminalising pimping websites would just displace the problem of sex trafficking, rather than reduce its scale. But these claims fail to recognise the unique role of pimping websites in actively incentivise sex trafficking. Traffickers and sex buyers require no technical expertise to use legal, openly operating pimping websites. The industrial scale on which sex trafficking currently takes place is enabled precisely by how easy these websites make it for traffickers to connect with sex buyers.

Let's not forget, the size and scale of the prostitution trade is not constant. It is context dependent. And pimping websites hold distinct advantages over other methods of advertising victims that actively incentivise this horrific crime. For example, if women are advertised to sex buyers by standing on the street, they are more visible to the local community and, thereby, the police and support services. Women being advertised for sexual exploitation on the street can also only be seen by sex buyers who physically walk

or drive past that location, in contrast to an advert on a pimping website which can be viewed - anonymously - by sex buyers across the country.

It is all too clear that in order to disincentivise sex trafficking, and reduce its scale, we have to outlaw the pimping websites that so effectively and efficiently facilitate it.

We have a choice: to look away from this problem or face the hard reality. And the reality is that 'ordinary' men are paying on mass to rape vulnerable women, and traffickers and pimping websites are getting rich from facilitating it. They must be stopped.

I would like to thank the OSCE for its outstanding leadership on combatting trafficking for sexual exploitation. I want to congratulate you on the important report you are publishing today, and I look forward to continuing to work with you to bust the business model of sex trafficking.