Modern-day slavery in focus

First slavery 'super-complaint' accuses police of fuelling victims' trauma

Report into police response in England and Wales found failure to handle cases sensitively hinders prosecution of traffickers

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Categoric police failings are hindering the prosecution of human traffickers and barring victims of modern slavery from the support they are legally entitled to, according to a new super-complaint to the HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services.

The super-complaint - the first on modern slavery - has been submitted by London-based charity Hestia. It outlines how some police officers are not reporting cases of modern slavery to the Home Office and that a failure to sensitively handle cases of modern slavery is discouraging victims across England and Wales from supporting criminal investigations against their exploiters. The super-complaint system allows organisations to raise concerns on behalf of the public and confront fundamental issues.

“In our experience, victims of modern slavery who have a negative experience with the police are too afraid to complain about it for a number of reasons - fear of the authorities, worrying that the outcome of their conclusive grounds decision might be affected, or simply because they don’t

believe they deserve any better," said Ella Read, area manager for Hestia's modern slavery response team.

"The super complaint is allowing us to bring to light a systemic issue in the way that many frontline officers with insufficient experience and training in working with victims of modern slavery respond to these victims."

In 2018 there was a 250% increase in modern slavery investigations by police forces across the UK. Despite this, only 7% of recorded cases were referred to the Crown Prosecution Service.

It is the third super-complaint to be issued to the national body since the system, which covers police forces in England and Wales, was launched in November.

It was first used in December by the human rights campaign groups Liberty and Southall Black Sisters over the practice of police sharing data on crime victims with Home Office immigration officials. A second super-complaint was launched last week by frontline charities on the failure of police to protect victims of domestic and sexual violence.

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A report into the response of police forces to modern slavery across England and Wales by Hestia found that there is a huge variance in the response of officers to victims, fuelled by a lack of understanding of the crime and underpinned by chronic shortages of professional training.

The charity says that although the government has poured millions of pounds into anti-slavery strategies, the majority of police officers still receive minimal training and do not have the skills or the experience to sensitively manage interviews with victims.

A freedom of information request submitted by Hestia to all 39 police forces across England on their training requirements found that of the 29 who responded, only two included training on modern slavery as part of their continuous development.

As well as hindering prosecutions, badly managed interviews can also compound and fuel the trauma of victims who have often experienced sustained and significant abuse and exploitation at the hands of their traffickers.

The report said that the establishment of specialist modern slavery units and a Modern Slavery Police Transformation Unit (MSPTU) have seen marked progress in police response in the last year. It outlined examples of best practice where police had exhibited an understanding of the deep trauma and sexual, psychological and physical abuse that victims of modern slavery have experienced.

However reports of bad practice included victims feeling like they were not believed, officers focusing on immigration offences rather than evidence of exploitation, interviewing sex trafficking victims using male interpreters, and police not informing victims that they were dropping criminal investigations into their traffickers.

Law firm Duncan Lewis, which represents victims of trafficking across the UK, said it will bring a legal challenge on behalf of clients who have had negative experiences of police forces. It said many of the firm's clients reported negative and traumatising experiences of the police, which stopped them from pursuing criminal cases against their exploiters.

"In almost all of these cases, the police completely ignore any trafficking indicators and focus on them instead as immigration absconders," said Karen

Staunton, a caseworker at Duncan Lewis.

"In one instance, one of our clients self-reported to a police station saying that he had been trafficked to the UK and forced to work. He was not referred into the national referral mechanism, which identifies and provides support to potential victims of slavery, but was instead referred to immigration enforcement, and shipped off to detention the next day."

The National Police Chiefs' Council has said it does not comment on super-complaints.

'Rosa': trafficked into sexual exploitation in the UK

"I was trafficked to the UK by a lady who promised me a better life and helped me to get away from my husband who was abusive to me in my home country. On getting here she made me do strenuous chores and claimed I owed her £30,000. She also said I had to start sleeping with men to pay her the money I owed. I managed to escape and went to the police.

"When I arrived at the police station it was as if they did not want to open the doors for me because they kept asking me who I was. They told me that I may have to go back to wherever I was coming from if I couldn't speak clearly into the intercom ... I was crying and cold and could barely even speak. I was left outside in the cold with my son and I was heavily pregnant.

"Two officers finally came down to open the door. There was a male and a female officer. The female officer took my details and went into a room to verify the information I had given. She took about 30 minutes and in that time I was left with a male officer in the waiting room. He made me feel like I should run away. He was asking, 'How come you speak English? Do they speak English in Africa? How come you are wearing a coat and it fits?'

"There were other questions he asked that I don't want to talk about. He went as far as asking me to take off my coat and raise my top. I felt terrible in the 30 minutes I was left with him. He told me point blank, 'I do not believe you.' I felt very scared they would send me back to my trafficker. Finally the female officer came and after that I was given the right help and referred to the Home Office but I didn't feel comfortable talking to men in authority after my encounter with the male police officer. I was also scared to continue cooperating with the police for further investigations. I honestly do not ever want to encounter the police again."

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