

Police raid 'slave' warehouse

By Bronwynne Jooste
Staff Reporter

The city's Vice Squad has rescued five teenage girls believed to be the victims of a suspected human trafficking ring operating from a small warehouse in Parow.

The squad, acting on a tip-off, entered the warehouse last night and found them huddled together in a corner, clutching their possessions. Old mattresses were scattered across a cement floor, bedclothes tossed over them.

One of the young women told officers that she had had a miscarriage last week, but had not received any medical attention.

They said they had been lured to Cape Town from towns like Prieska in the Northern Cape after being offered good jobs and salaries.

Instead, they alleged, they had been forced to work in a woman's house and her friends' shops.

They claimed that they were fed only dry bread slices in the morning, with baked beans for supper.

Niel Arendse, spokesman for the city's Specialised Law Enforcement Services, said an officer from his unit had been attending to a dispute in Clarendon Street, Parow, on Wednesday evening.

"The people who were fighting told her there were young girls locked in that (ware)house."

In a matter of hours, the Vice Squad and police put the rescue operation in place. When they arrived, they spoke to the young women through the warehouse window.

The building's owner, whose name is known to the Cape Argus and who lives in Parow, was called to open the warehouse on the corner of Market and Clarendon streets.

She said on Thursday morning that her employment agency found young women for domestic work. Until they found employment, the company provided them with food and accommodation in the warehouse.

"It is explained to these women on their arrival in Cape Town that they can leave the agency at any given time."

She said the women were not held against their will and the property was locked at night for their own protection.

As soon as the warehouse door was opened last night, the teenagers rushed around the warehouse gathering their belongings. They were taken to a city shelter, a move that was organised by two NGOs.

The young women - four are 18 and one is 19 - said they had been promised a better life in the city. But, they said, they had been held captive, some of them since January.

"We either worked in her house or in shops. But she knows the people," said one of them.

"Sometimes they tell us we made a mistake with the till in the shop and they take R70 or R200 off our money.

"Some of us have not seen money since we got here in January."

The girls painted a bleak picture of their life in Cape Town. They said those who were lucky enough to work in the woman's house would receive the occasional portion of rice and meat.

"She didn't leave any food here (at the warehouse) for us. If we tried to tell her she mustn't lock us in, she would scold us," said one of the girls. "She also told us we must stay at the back (of the warehouse) and not go near the front."

But they managed to alert a few residents to their situation and one told the officer.

"I don't care about work any more, I just want to get home," said one girl.

The girl, who said she had suffered a miscarriage last week, said she had been told by the warehouse owner that it was "not her problem".

The unit's officer said: "Now we need to make sure she gets to a doctor urgently."

Aldred Charles, who heads the city's Substance Abuse, Safety and Security Specialised Service Unit, said the woman could face charges of human trafficking and exploitation.

He said they had found documents showing that the operation centred on recruiting young women from rural areas.

Charles said human trafficking, for both labour and sex, was a growing problem in the city.

The Vice Squad had planned to crack down on a suspected sex trafficking ring last night, involving foreign women without residence permits, but the women had been moved before the squad could act.

Arendse said the squad had uncovered a similar operation in Table View last month. Here, women from Mozambique and Zimbabwe were allegedly being trafficked.

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