

Elena's story

Hi, my name is Elena* and I am 18.

I learnt about human trafficking at school in Eastern Europe. Of course, like all the other girls, I thought 'it could never happen to me'. I thought I was invincible.

About three years ago at a cousin's party a man approached me. He shouted at me and punched me and said he was going to take me away. He made threats towards me and my family, and forced me to go to the police station to get an identity card so that I could leave the country. He forged my mother's signature on a form because I was under 18 and you can't travel without consent of parents. He told me to pack a bag. I wasn't even allowed to tell my mother that I was leaving or to say goodbye. As far as my mother knew, I had just disappeared.

I was put on a bus and told I would be met at the other end. It was one o'clock in the morning. Sitting on a cold bus, feeling so alone, so scared. Not knowing where they would take me or what they would do to me. Next, they put me on a minibus, where the driver was paid to drive me across Europe and on to a ferry to the UK. The bus finally stopped in London after I had travelled for 28 hours. We were moved to various places, and they took pictures of me. It was only then that I realised that I would be forced to work as a prostitute.

I almost collapsed - I hadn't eaten for days. I asked them for food but they said I didn't need anything as I needed to lose weight. I was so alone - imagining my mum at home, not knowing if I was dead or alive. Imagine - no contact with your mum, your family or your friends. Imagine being scared, every second of every minute of every day.

They forced me to be a prostitute - sleeping with a lot of men every day, and having to do some terrible things. Customers paid to sleep with me, but I got nothing. I was forced to take drugs like cocaine, ketamine and cannabis. At one point I was sold to another group of people - I was told they had paid £6,000 for me, which I would have to pay off through prostitution.

When I told my captors that I wanted to leave they flew into a rage, shouting and threatening me. They punched me and slapped me around my stomach - so much that I could hardly breathe. They threatened to cut my legs off if I tried to leave. I felt so weak that I thought I would collapse with the pain, but they wouldn't allow me to seek medical treatment. I thought they were going to kill me. I have never been so scared in all my life. Of course, they made sure that they didn't leave any marks on my body so that I could still continue to work. Then they moved me to another city.

Other girls told me to go to the English police - they said the police were not like those back home. I was scared but it was worth the risk - I would prefer to die than continue to live like this. I planned my escape. I couldn't risk anything going wrong.

I was allowed to go to the local petrol station alone to buy a drink, and on the first occasion I returned immediately so that I could gain the trust of those who were holding me. On my third visit to the petrol station shop, I got the courage to ask the man there to call the police. Eventually, I found myself at the local police station and after ten minutes' wait - the longest ten minutes of my life - a female police officer took my statement. The police were very helpful and supportive.

Soon I was in the care of The Salvation Army. Eventually, the police tracked down the people who had trafficked me and forced me into prostitution. They were arrested, charged and sent to prison. Since being with The Salvation Army, I have worked as a volunteer, gone to college and found work. I have friends and a boyfriend. Soon, I am moving on. Although I will be sad to leave, I know it is for the best and I now feel ready to do so. I need to get on with my life, to move forward and start again.

When I came to The Salvation Army I was a young, frightened girl. I leave an independent, confident, determined and educated young lady with a bright future ahead of me. I have a future which I have chosen and which I have mapped out.

* Elena's name and personal details have been changed, but her story is unaltered