

# Dubai: a City of Hope?

by Lina Abirafteh

**The City of Hope is an organisation offering refuge for abused women in Dubai, the largest city of the United Arab Emirates. Dubai has started to acknowledge the social problems accompanying its phenomenal economic growth but is it doing enough to tackle the scourge of human trafficking?**

Sharla Musabih came to the UAE from the USA in 1983 to be with her Emirati husband. In 1991 she took in a woman who was a victim of domestic violence. What initially appeared to be an isolated case revealed itself as an epidemic. As the population of the UAE grew in numbers and nationalities, increasing social problems – and social consciousness – also grew.

“I could see a need for a shelter,” Musabih says. “I wanted to provide those in need with a temporary place to breathe, until their problems are solved.” So she set up a shelter – the City of Hope – while also working to rescue child camel jockeys and raising government awareness of these problems. She reports that the government has been very receptive to the idea of a women’s shelter. “I have been so amazed at the cooperation and respect I have received from the highest level of the government of the UAE. Working with them on very sensitive issues has been like having a magic wand. My wish is their command.”

City of Hope supports women of all nationalities and ages. The shelter houses up to 50 women and includes victims of domestic violence, trafficking and other forms of discrimination. The shelter provides women with a safe place to live, counselling, training programmes, education, medical care and legal support. Those supported are given help to become self-sufficient. Musabih explains that some women have got married or found jobs and remained in the UAE, while others have been repatriated to their countries of origin. “We try to work around what they want to do,” she says. Women hear of the

shelter through police, immigration, embassies, media and word of mouth. Due to the City of Hope’s popularity and increased demand, a second shelter is opening in the neighbouring Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah.

Elena (not her real name) is a 16-year-old Uzbek girl lured to the UAE with the promise of a lucrative job in a boutique. Instead, she found herself imprisoned in a home with several other women, condemned to work as a prostitute. To stop her family in Uzbekistan searching for her, the traffickers – Uzbek men – forced her to call them to say that she had run away with a boy. As her family and community believe the story of her elopement, she is now ostracised and stigmatised. Elena lost hope and began to fear that, like the many other women trafficked into Dubai, she was condemned to a life of prostitution. Fortunately, she was found by the police and now lives in a shelter run by the City of Hope. She is taking English courses and hopes to return to Uzbekistan soon. Counsellors are working with social workers in Uzbekistan to explain the situation to her family and facilitate her return home.

## Shelter or brothel?

Unfortunately, segments of the local population have been less receptive. A smear campaign spearheaded by the husbands of the women in the shelter has led to accusations that Musabih is running a brothel. Musabih is hitting back at critics and their unsubstantiated accusations. “They call the police and say the villas are brothels. The police quite rightly investigate and

in the end find out exactly what we do and the situation is fine. But by spreading these horrible rumours these people cause a lot of pain.” Some lower-ranking policemen have been persuaded to endorse the allegations but there is consistent support from the police authorities and the government. The concept of shelters is also endorsed by Islam.

In October 2004, the UAE ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>1</sup> Article 6 commits signatories to “take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.” However, the UAE does not fully comply with internationally-recognised standards for the elimination of human trafficking. According to the US State Department, the UAE is “a destination country for men, women, and children trafficked from South and East Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Middle East for involuntary servitude and for sexual exploitation. An estimated 10,000 women from sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, South and East Asia, Iraq, Iran, and Morocco may be victims of sex trafficking in the UAE.” The US notes that the UAE fails to screen women prostitutes to determine if they have been victims of trafficking. Instead, these women are detained and deported. Prosecution for sex traffickers is rare, although increasing. In 2005, only 22 of the 100 reported complaints resulted in convictions.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, the UAE has taken major strides to combat human trafficking. The Dubai police established a human trafficking division to maintain a closer watch on the problem. This division also maintains a website and 24-hour hotline, and has recently launched an awareness campaign informing people of their rights and available resources. Despite this increased awareness of the city’s social problems, women continue to feel

stigmatised, particularly when the perpetrators are men from their home countries. Many victims therefore fear retribution by traffickers or pimps if they report the crime.

In late 2006 new legislation was passed under which human traffickers may be jailed for life and fined up to a million Dirhams (approximately \$275,000). The UAE Penal Code criminalises prostitution and enticement into prostitution. It also prohibits establishing a place for prostitution. Further, there is a special decree preventing single women from various Central Asian countries from entering the UAE unless they are over the age of 31, accompanied by a male relative or on official business.

Noora (not her real name), an Emirati woman working on local gender issues, explained that there are other women's shelters in the country. Two in Abu Dhabi operate secretly but are sanctioned and supported by the government. She explains that the City of Hope has been a very controversial undertaking, due in part to the fact that Musabih is not Emirati. Her status as an informed outsider sometimes seems to work against her, despite her knowledge of Islam and the Emirates. Noora pointed out that the City of Hope is acknowledged by the government but is not official or necessarily legal. The concept of a non-governmental organisation is new to the UAE and NGO laws and operating procedures do not yet exist.

### Dubai's reputation

As an international aid worker who spent four years in the male-dominated humanitarian community of Afghanistan, I was privy to many discussions planning weekend getaways to Dubai. For many expatriate men, Dubai has become synonymous with prostitution. Several websites and blogs describe how to find prostitutes in Dubai, 'party capital of the Middle East'. One anonymous writer stated that he is "happy to say that prostitution in Dubai is very alive and well". Another noted that "prostitution is commonly found in Dubai. Prostitution seems to be complementary to the economy as it supports the

hospitality industry which is almost fully owned/sponsored by the locals." The review continues with a breakdown of the various women available – by nationality, availability, location and price. One well-known nightclub/brothel describes itself as the 'United Nations of Prostitution'.

Traffickers are usually natives of the victims' home countries, not Emiratis. Many of the pimps operating in Dubai are women from the former Soviet Union, suspected of having Mafia links. Upon arrival in the UAE, trafficked women have their passports and possessions seized and are forced to work as prostitutes to repay their travel and living expenses. These large debts become even less manageable because the women receive little or no payment for their work. Traffickers also sell their victims to other traffickers. And the victims' debts continue to grow.

### will it become a city where trafficking is silently tolerated in order to meet international demand?

The government's commitment to addressing social issues is evidenced by the fact that they have recruited independent consultants to train social workers to work with victims of abuse. The UAE remains progressive on many fronts, and battles that continue to be fought in other countries do not apply. The 1971 constitution clearly stipulated that women and men receive equal pay for equal work – a battle not near resolution in many seemingly liberal countries.

Conscious of foreign criticisms, the Emirates have resolved the problem of child camel jockeys. In a 2005 agreement with UNICEF, the UAE agreed to return these children – many of them under 10 years of age – to their countries of origin. Legislation now prohibits the use of children under 18 and remote-controlled robots are being used instead. The scourge of trafficking of women, however, has yet to be tackled.

Noora, like other Emirati women, is worried what the outside world thinks of the UAE but also concerned about double standards. "Prostitution and trafficking exist everywhere. But the US feels that it can criticise others without cleaning its own closet, so to speak." Noora's concern is that such negative press only feeds a frenzy about the Arab and Muslim world. "All the American media is interested in is how oppressed women are in the Arab world. Meanwhile, Emirati women are quite progressive and in fact feel that Western women are not able to recognise their own oppression. The world digs for controversies, particularly concerning women. This breeds fear and misconception doing little to advance understanding based on truth and fact. Social change is a process that takes time. We should work together to build capacity and address social issues. The Western world could benefit from spending more time understanding Muslim societies and less time fearing them. Enough 'invading' and 'liberating'," Noora concludes.

As Dubai becomes a world capital, it is at a crossroads: will it become a city where trafficking is silently tolerated in order to meet international demand? Or will Dubai confront social issues openly and directly, accepting that it might lose some of its tourist appeal as a result? It is clear that the UAE is working to address social issues and that changes are gradually taking place. A new climate of debate and discussion is emerging. But will Dubai win a reputation as a veritable 'city of hope'?

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1. [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw)  
2. [www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2006](http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2006)