

Trafficking permeates Europe

Human-traffickers are in full flow. Poverty in Eastern Europe and a lackadaisical attitude towards international police cooperation and on the part of some governments is contributing to hundreds of thousands of girls, often minors, being sexually exploited. Traffickers also support begging networks and illegal work in the agriculture and construction industries. How can we combat these forms of modern-day slavery?

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According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), it is the second most lucrative business after gun running.¹ Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall, human trafficking has continued to reach new levels. Prostitution claims the most victims with hundreds of thousands of women having been trafficked since the end of the Soviet era.² In this context, the size of trafficking networks varies widely: large criminal organizations along the lines of the Sicilian mafia are active in the area although in several sending countries including Russia and Ukraine, some networks are much smaller, consisting of just a few individuals. Their technique is simple: the recruiter (often a woman) tries to gain a young girl's trust by promising her a decent, well-paid job abroad: when the girl agrees, the recruiter makes the travel arrangements (papers, visa, tickets, etc.). So the victim leaves her home country with confidence. In most cases, the recruiter or one of her friends accompanies the girl to her destination country where she is handed over to someone else, unaware that from that moment she has been sold to a procurer. Another commonplace scenario involves the girl travelling alone but being told by the recruiter that there will be someone there to meet her when she arrives at the bus station, port or airport in her destination country. This

"someone" then introduces her to her employer, who turns out to be a procurer. In either case though, the actual trafficking is organized by two or three individuals, sometimes members of the same family, for example a husband, wife and cousin. The vast number of these tiny independent networks makes the job of police officers extremely difficult.

Once sold by the trafficker to the procurer, the net closes completely around the victim. All victims start to cry as they realize what will happen to them over the next few hours and all manner of threats rain down on them: if they refuse to prostitute themselves, or if they turn the procurer in to the police, their parents or their children left behind in their home country will be killed. Recrimination too comes quickly on any girl who refuses to be pushed around. The procurers will use every ounce of sadism to try and make her crumble: cigarette burns, hitting her until her teeth smash, depriving her of food and sleep and raping her until she gives in. Photographs are then taken of her naked and the procurer threatens to send them to her parents. And if she still refuses to surrender, her life will be in grave danger. In Turkey, two Ukrainian girls who had refused to prostitute themselves were pushed out of a window by their procurer in front of other prostitutes as "an example".

Slavery to pay off a “debt”

It is virtually impossible for girls who have become caught in a trafficker's net to escape without outside help. In many cases, the procurer who buys the girl from the trafficker in the first instance will tell her how much she has to pay back but as soon as she has reached this amount (a prostitute can easily bring in €15,000 a month for her procurer) he sells her on to another procurer and she must start repaying the debt all over again.³ Frequently, too, arrangements are made for the girl to move to different towns and countries on a regular basis to prevent her building up any attachment to a particular client who may be inclined to try and save her, or to the police and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and so on. For many girls, alcohol and drugs become a daily refuge, all the more so since they are sometimes forced to consume them either to encourage customers in bars to do the same or to make the girls themselves more docile. Between February and the end of August 2002, of a total of 88 Ukrainian victims taken in by the IOM rehabilitation centre on their return to Kiev, all but 20 were addicted to or regular consumers of alcohol or drugs. Over 60 were suffering from pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), while a similar proportion had contracted sexually transmitted diseases and/or had developed psychological problems.

Apart from Western Europe, common destinations for victims trafficked from Eastern Europe include Turkey, North America, the Balkans and Arab countries. Promises of marriage or a job are the standard bait used to lure victims into the trap. “You can be sure that if there was even the remotest possibility of being able to live a decent life in Ukraine, I would never have tried my luck abroad,” admits Lesia, a Ukrainian victim who returned to the country after eight months of forced prostitution in the former Yugoslavia. More and more often, it is minors who are falling victim to trafficking. The IOM also tracked down an 11-year-old Ukrainian girl who had been taken to the United Arab Emir-

ates for prostitution. The UAE Government does nothing to help victims: in fact on the contrary, it considers them criminals because they have prostituted themselves, even though they have been forced to do so, and sentences them to several months in prison. It is up to the girls themselves to pay for their return home but they have neither the money nor the required travel documents. Many Eastern European girls are currently being left to rot in prisons in the United Arab Emirates, desperately hoping that their consulate or a humanitarian organization will help them.

Some Western countries have all but stopped trying to combat traffickers. Greece, which is a major destination and transit country for girls from the former Soviet bloc, is often criticized by human rights organizations for its lack of action in this area, preferring to send victims straight back to their home country rather than tracking down the traffickers. This is especially unfortunate since victims' return to their home country can be planned in cooperation with an NGO or the IOM so that they can be met on arrival, be given medical and psychological examinations, vocational training and temporary accommodation, all of which would reduce the chances of them falling back into the hands of traffickers.

“But that would never happen to me!”

In an attempt to prevent trafficking, the IOM, together with several NGOs and Eastern European governments has launched major information programmes on the dangers associated with offers of work in Western countries. Campaigns have been focused on schools and the media with large-scale distribution of information booklets and freephone numbers set up to deal with questions from those thinking of leaving. Some girls either have doubts about the offers of work they receive or know that it will involve prostitution but believe that they will be able to make a tidy profit, unaware that they will have to hand over most of their

One victim's story after returning from hell in Turkey

Nineteen-year-old Marina comes from a small town in the Odessa region in southern Ukraine. Traffickers forced her to prostitute herself for four months in Turkey. When she returned to Ukraine, she was put up in a rehabilitation centre run by "Faith, Hope, Love", an NGO working in partnership with the IOM, where we met her.

"When I finished high school, I wanted to go on to university but I couldn't afford it. I went to Odessa where I met a guy I vaguely knew and he offered to help me get the money together. He introduced me to a Moldovan woman who could find me work in Turkey as a babysitter or waitress in a restaurant. She sorted out all my travel documents and told me that someone would be there to meet me at the port in Istanbul when I arrived on the boat. I left on 1 May 2002. A Turkish man called Ali was indeed there with my name written on a piece of paper. He took me to a hotel telling me it was so that I could get some rest and take a shower before going to meet my employer. But once we got into the room, he took my identity papers and told me I wasn't there to be a waitress but to be a prostitute. Without any papers and in an unfamiliar country, what could I do? He kept me in the room for three days, time enough to bring in five other girls, mainly Moldovans. Then he took us to the procurer's house where we were raped. The men threatened to hit us if we resisted. Customers would telephone and a driver would take us to their hotel and bring us back again to the procurer's house. Trying to escape and going to the police was risky because we were told that some Turkish police rape girls before sending them straight back to their procurers. In the end, it was actually during a police check that I managed to escape this hell: the police carried out a routine check on the driver's car and I was arrested because I didn't have any papers. After a week in prison, the Turkish authorities sent me back to Ukraine."

earnings to their procurer. In the short term, it is difficult to reach the entire population with these kinds of programmes, but their impact is already becoming evident, especially in Ukraine: "We are noticing that fewer and fewer of the trafficking victims coming back to the country are from the capital Kiev," says Oksana Horbunova, IOM Programme Coordinator in Ukraine. "This is because information on the risks involved in trafficking is more widely available there and also because the standard of living in the city is better." Many girls frequently take the attitude that "it's happened to other people, but it won't happen to me!" But a higher level of education or income is no guarantee that women will not fall into the trap. "We have already had teachers coming into our rehabilitation centre," says Horbunova. "And in the Dniepropetrovsk region, although the economic situation is much better in Kriviy Rig than in Zhoti Vodi, this does not prevent the trafficking of girls being a much bigger problem in Kriviy Rig, quite simply because there are good recruiters there."

Several routes are currently used by traffickers to bring victims to Western Europe. One leaves Russia via the Baltic

States for Scandinavia and Germany while another goes from Russia or Ukraine to Poland and the Czech Republic and then on to Germany or Austria. The Balkan route crosses Romania and Bulgaria on the way to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Yugoslavia, where victims are prostituted before being sent on to Italy or Greece. Cooperation between police in the home, transit and destination countries is being improved in an attempt to combat international human trafficking; little progress has been made although things are gradually moving in the right direction. There are many obstacles though: language difficulties, not being used to working with foreign law-enforcement teams, and different priorities, working methods and legislation, to mention but a few.

"The mutual assistance that should result from international cooperation between police forces is extremely archaic, bureaucratic and slow. It is not at all appropriate to the needs of twenty-first century investigations in the fight against international organized crime," pointed out Paul Holmes, a former British police inspector and international law enforcement coordination expert at the IOM. "The Council of

Europe and all the key players in Europe on this issue, especially the head prosecutors, agree on this. Tangible measures have been taken at various European levels to improve cooperation, but progress has been too slow." Here is just one example of this lack of communication: there are currently some 20 cases that cannot be wrapped up in Ukraine due to information not being sent by police forces in other countries. However, in 2000 Ukraine set up special units to counter human trafficking with financial support from the IOM and adapted its legislation to make it easier to prosecute traffickers. Since then, the number of legal actions has been steadily increasing: there were 107 in the first seven months of 2002 as compared with just 42 in the whole of 2000, but this is still just the tip of the iceberg.

Risking your neck for €30 a month

The fight against traffickers, particularly in Eastern European countries, is hampered by the deprived conditions in which police officers in home countries have to work. Some even accuse police forces in these countries of sometimes taking bribes. "Lack of resources is an obstacle to investigations, but arresting traffickers does not depend solely on having computers in police stations," says Paul Holmes. "Of course investigations are more effective when you have the right resources, but it is still possible to work without state-of-the-art equipment. In terms of pay, it is scandalous that a police officer should be receiving only €30 a month for doing a job as dangerous as fighting organized crime, but integrity has nothing to do with income: any police officer tempted to accept money from traffickers will accept it whether you pay him €30 or €1,000 a month because the profits reaped by the people behind these networks are so huge that they could pay him €1,500 a week if that is what it takes."

The job of the judicial authorities is made easier if trafficking victims agree to reveal the members of the network exploiting them. But testifying to this requires

great courage on the part of victims because they are justifiably afraid of terrible reprisals against themselves or their family if they talk. To encourage victims to speak out, several Western countries have adopted legislation allowing victims to be issued with residence and work permits in return for cooperation with the country's judicial authorities. Italy offers this protection to all victims of human trafficking even if they refuse to give evidence in court. In Eastern Europe too, some governments are taking steps to provide improved protection for victims brave enough to expose their traffickers. But no police force in the world can guarantee witnesses and their families complete safety in the long term and as such, it will always take great courage for victims to speak out.

It doesn't stop at prostitution

Aside from prostitution, trafficked men and women from Eastern Europe often end up in the agriculture or construction sectors. As in the case of prostitution, Ukrainians are lured to southern European countries in particular by the promise of well-paid jobs. These workers often have all manner of qualifications, and there are especially large numbers of doctors, who would earn no more than €50 in Kiev. They obtain a tourist visa and board coaches bound for Italy and Portugal in particular. A go-between is there to meet them when they arrive and takes them to a farm, for example. Some receive a meagre wage there, but others are never paid and when they complain to their employer, they are either promised that they will be paid or challenged to go to the police, which of course they will never do because they are working illegally. So all the profit goes to the employers and the go-betweens who set up the network.

Police authorities in several countries in Western Europe are also looking in detail at the problem of the growing number of beggars from former Soviet-bloc countries in major towns, around crossroads and shopping centres. Various arrests carried out

this year have revealed that children and disabled people, primarily from Romania, are being trafficked and forced to beg in these towns, although it is still too early to hazard a guess as to the magnitude of the problem. Eastern Europeans are also becoming trapped in a web of domestic slavery, especially in France. Although there are far fewer of them than there are African or Asian women being exploited in this way, their situation is no less dire: imprisoned in the private homes of employers who threaten them and have confiscated their papers and in countries where nothing is familiar, it is difficult for them to see anything good coming from their trying to escape. At the same time, they are hidden away from organizations that, following the example of the Committee against Modern Slavery (CCEM) in France, are trying to help them.⁴

Since you started reading this article, scores of trafficking victims will have been raped. How can we reduce trafficking? Poverty in victims' home countries is not the only root of the problem. More international cooperation in countering traffickers, procurers and their accomplices is vital if we want to prevent there being further victims. The idea of impris-

oning girls because they are prostitutes or because they do not have valid residence permits is one of the counter-productive approaches that needs to be ruled out since it will drive prostitution further underground and will penalize victims even more when what they really need is help. It is those who are profiting from such activities (customers, employers, etc.) who need to be made to face up to their responsibilities and be severely punished if they abuse victims of trafficking.

Notes

¹ International Organization for Migration (<http://www.iom.int>).

² The very nature of trafficking means that it is impossible to ascertain the exact number of victims, but Europol estimates that around 500,000 people enter the European Union illegally every year and half of those are helped in doing so by organized criminal networks. According to IOM figures, between 500,000 and 700,000 women and children are trafficked worldwide each year.

³ For example, in the Czech Republic, a procurer buys a girl for around €1,500 but makes her pay him back a far greater sum. In Belgium, some prostitutes are obliged to repay a "debt" of somewhere in the region of €15,000 to their procurer.

⁴ Web site: <http://www.ccem-antislavery.org/>