

The "Natasha" Trade: Transnational Sex Trafficking

by Donna M. Hughes



Trafficking in women and girls for the purpose of sexual exploitation is a shadow market valued at US \$7 billion annually. Women are trafficked to, from, and through every region in the world. This highly profitable trade poses a relatively low risk compared with trades in drugs or arms. The moneymakers are transnational networks of traffickers and pimps who prey on women seeking employment and opportunities. These illegal activities and related crimes not only harm the women involved; they also undermine the social, political, and economic fabric of the nations where they occur.

Countries with large sex industries create the demand for women; countries where traffickers easily recruit women provide the supply. For decades, the primary sending countries were in Asia. But the collapse of the Soviet Union opened up a pool of millions of women from which traffickers can recruit. Former Soviet republics such as Belarus, Latvia, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine have become major suppliers of women to sex industries all over the world. In the sex industry today, the most popular and

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valuable women are from Russia and Ukraine.

This article focuses on the trade originating in Ukraine. It examines the scope of the problem, the factors that create a climate ripe for trafficking, the methods traffickers use, and the people who profit from the trade in women and girls. It concludes with some strategies to address the problem of trafficking and discusses the role that policymakers, researchers, and law enforcement officers in the United States can play.

Scope of the Problem

It is difficult to know how many women have been trafficked for sexual exploitation. The trade is secretive, the women are silenced, the traffickers are dangerous, and not many agencies are counting. Also, the word “trafficking” does not have

a universal meaning, resulting in different estimates depending on the definition used. This article uses the following definition:

Trafficking is any practice that involves moving people within and across local or national borders for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Trafficking may be the result of force, coercion, manipulation, deception, abuse of authority, initial consent, family pressure, past and present family and community violence, economic deprivation, or other conditions of inequality for women and children.¹

This definition accepts that trafficking occurs even if the woman consents, which is consistent with the 1949 United Nations convention prohibiting it. Narrower definitions of trafficking require acts of violence or coercion.

Exact numbers are unknown, but international agencies and governmental bodies estimate that each year over 1 million women and girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation in sex industries.

In the last decade, hundreds of thousands of women have been trafficked from Central and Eastern Europe and the republics of the former Soviet Union into prostitution throughout the world. The U.S. State Department estimates that 50,000 to 100,000 women and children are trafficked into the United States each year for labor or sexual exploitation, primarily

“Can people really buy and sell women and get away with it? Sometimes I sit here and ask myself if that really happened to me, if it can really happen at all.”

— A Ukrainian woman who was trafficked, beaten, raped, and used in the sex industry in Israel. After a police raid, she was put in prison, awaiting deportation.

The U.S. Response and Role

Until recently, trafficking in women in the United States had never been systematically studied, and the U.S. lagged behind Europe and Asia in recognizing and addressing the problem, especially as it occurred within this country. In the last 2 years, the United States has vigorously responded, making the trafficking of women a top priority. In 1998, a Memorandum on Steps to Combat Violence Against Women and the Trafficking of Women and Girls was issued that directed the

Secretary of State, the Attorney General, and the President's Interagency Council on Women to expand their work against violence against women to include work against the trafficking of women.

The strategy to combat trafficking has been implemented as a program referred to as the three P's: Prevention of Trafficking, Protection and Assistance for Victims, and Prosecution and Enforcement Against Traffickers.

from Southeast Asia, the Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe.²

The Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior estimated last year that 100,000 Ukrainian women were trafficked during the previous decade. The International Organization for Migration estimated the number to be four to five times higher. Popular destination countries include Canada, the Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Yugoslavia. Large numbers of Ukrainian women are trafficked into Korea to be used as prostitutes near military bases. In some parts of the world, such as Israel and Turkey, women from Russia and other former Soviet republics are so prevalent that prostitutes are called "Natashas."

Climate for Trafficking

The growth of shadow economies and criminal networks in the Newly Independent States of the former Soviet Union arises from expanding economic, political, and social transnational linkages increasingly

beyond local and state control. Members of organized crime rings establish contacts with collaborators in diaspora communities and work within migrating populations to build criminal networks. Increased migration also serves as a cover for traffickers transporting women.

Privatization and liberalization of markets have created wider and more open marketplaces. Computer technologies also have enabled the increased volume and complexity of international financial transactions, increasing opportunities for transnational crime and decreasing the probability of detection. This technological aspect of globalization allows money gained through trafficking in women to be transferred and laundered.

In the former Soviet Union, the state economy didn't supply the goods and services the public needed or wanted. The shadow economy began to meet those demands decades before the collapse of communism. When the Soviet political and economic system weakened and collapsed, existing organizations leaped to fill the vacuum. Privatization allowed previously illegal markets to operate legally and expand, but they retained their

business methods, which were based on corruption and protection schemes. The independent states that emerged lacked organized and efficient regulatory agencies to hinder the growth of crime networks.

In Ukraine, people who were no longer able to support themselves with one salary or who weren't being paid for long periods sought additional work. But the only jobs available were in the privatized criminal businesses. The result has been a criminalization of the economy in general and an expansion of organized criminal networks. By 1995, the shadow economy accounted for 50 percent of Ukraine's gross domestic product.

Transnational trafficking of women from the former Soviet Union had its beginnings during perestroika in the mid-1980's, when international travel restrictions were eased. The disintegration of the Soviet Union opened borders for travel, migration, and privatized trade, all of which facilitated the operations of criminal networks. Transnational crime networks from the Newly Independent States organized to meet the demand for women to be used in brothels, massage parlors, bars, and street prostitution in receiving countries.

Strategies and Tactics

Hundreds of trafficking victims have recounted their experiences to nongovernmental organizations, reporters, and police. Although individual variations exist, the themes of manipulation and violence from the traffickers and further persecution by police appear repeatedly.

Irina, aged 18, responded to an advertisement in a Kyiv, Ukraine, newspaper for a training course in Berlin, Germany, in 1996. With a fake passport,

she traveled to Berlin, where she was told that the school had closed. She was sent on to Brussels, Belgium, for a job. When she arrived, she was told she needed to repay a debt of US \$10,000 and would have to earn the money in prostitution. Her passport was confiscated, and she was threatened, beaten, and raped. When she didn't earn enough money for the first pimp, she was sold to another pimp who operated in Brussels' red light district. When she escaped with police assistance, she was arrested because she had no legal documentation. A medical exam verified the abuse she had suffered, such as cigarette burns all over her body.³

Lena, aged 21, was recruited by a woman who said her daughter was working in Greece and making a lot of money. When Lena arrived in Greece, her passport was taken away and she was put into a small room in a brothel, guarded by two dogs. She was sold in prostitution each night from 9 in the evening until 6 in the morning. When she escaped and returned to Mykolayiv, she had US \$55.⁴

Tatyana, aged 20, is from a small town in Lugansk Oblast in Eastern Ukraine. She could not find a job there because the economy is very poor and the factories are closed. A friend of her mother's told her that she could earn US \$4,000 a month working as a maid for a rich family in the United Arab Emirates. When she arrived, her passport was taken and she was sold to a brothel for US \$7,000 and forced into prostitution to repay the purchase and travel costs. When she escaped and went to the police for help, she was arrested and sentenced to

3 years in prison for working in a brothel.⁵

In addition, a number of trafficking rings have been uncovered, revealing the tactics, financial rewards, and transnational reach of such networks.

In March 1999 in Sevastopol, Crimea, Ukraine, two men and a woman were arrested for selling 200 Ukrainian women and girls, aged 13 to 25, for the sex industry in Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus. The traffickers received US \$2,000 for each woman. The women were held in debt bondage until they repaid their expenses. If they complained, their debt was tripled.⁶

In Poland, 70 percent of the Ukrainian women in the sex industry are monitored at all times by guards. The women are sold from one agency to another for US \$4,500 to \$11,000, and each time the woman incurs a debt that must be repaid.⁷

In September 1999, a psychology teacher from Cherkasy, Ukraine, was charged with being head of an international trafficking ring that sold young Ukrainian women into the sex industry in the United Arab Emirates. Along with criminals from Kazakhstan, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates, she promised 30 young women jobs as dancers, waitresses, or domestic servants, and then sold them to buyers in the sex industry.⁸

Recruitment Methods

Sex industries use up women—both physically and emotionally—necessitating regular fresh supplies of women, which keeps trafficking profitable. Recruiters, traffickers, and pimps have developed common operating methods. One strategy is

advertisements in newspapers offering lucrative job opportunities in foreign countries for low-skilled jobs, such as waitresses and nannies. Some advertisements promise good salaries to young, attractive women who will work as dancers and hostesses. An estimated 20 percent of trafficked women are recruited through advertisements.

Another method of recruitment is through "marriage agencies," sometimes called mail-order bride agencies or international introduction services. According to a report by the International Organization for Migration, all mail-order bride agencies with women from the former Soviet Union are under the control of organized crime networks.⁹ Recruiters use "marriage agencies" to contact women who are eager to travel or emigrate.

But the most common way for Ukrainian women to be recruited is through a friend or acquaintance who gains the woman's confidence. "Second wave" recruiting occurs when a trafficked woman returns home to draft other women. Once a woman has been trafficked and trapped in the sex industry, she has few options. One of the few means of escaping the brutality of being forced to have sex with multiple men each day is to move from victim to perpetrator.

Entrapment in Prostitution

Whatever the recruitment method, the majority of women do not expect the sexual exploitation and violence that await them. After a woman has reached the destination country, the trafficker or pimp tells her that she is not going to work as a waitress, nanny, or whatever more agreeable opportunity was offered, but will be in prostitution. The methods used to control women

once they reach the destination country include confiscation of travel documents, violence, threats to harm family members, and debt bondage.

Pimps in Western Europe and Israel can buy Russian or Ukrainian women for a few hundred to a few thousand dollars, then make several thousand dollars from them by selling them in prostitution. The women get to keep little, if any, of the money. Women must repay their purchase price and travel and other expenses before they are allowed to leave. A woman may be sold from one pimp to another, at which time her debt starts all over again. Often, the only way out of the sex industry is a police raid, which results in deportation. There are indications that pimps, working with officials, tip off police on the whereabouts of a woman just about the time that woman has earned enough money to leave, resulting in the woman being arrested and deported and the pimps keeping the money.

Even when women know they will be in prostitution, their expectations are usually far from the reality. One woman who knew she would have to engage in prostitution thought it would be like the film "Pretty Woman," where one man would support her.¹⁰ Women don't realize the lack of control they will have, the level of the violence that will be used against them, and the small percentage of money they will receive.

According to Narcisa Escaler, Deputy Director General of the International Organization for Migration:

[M]any migrants...are eager to escape poverty or political and social insecurity, and...are unaware or unmindful of the pitfalls of irregular migration. [I]n many instances, trafficked migrants are lured by false promises, misled by misinfor-

Officials' acceptance of prostitution and trafficking exacerbates the problem. According to Kateryna Levchenko, coordinator of La Strada-Ukraine, "Complicity on the part of government and law enforcement officials is as much to blame as financial difficulties [for facilitating recruitment]."

mation concerning migration regulations, or driven by economic despair or large-scale violence. In such cases, the migrant's freedom of choice is so seriously impaired that the "voluntariness" of the transaction must be questioned.¹¹

The networks' tactics mimic those of slave traders. For example, in Milan, Italy, in December 1997, police uncovered a gang that was auctioning women from the former Soviet Union. The women were stripped partially naked, displayed, and sold for an average price of US \$1,000.¹² Traffickers and pimps also use extreme violence to control their women and territory. In Italy, police report that one woman in prostitution is murdered each month.¹³ Women are mutilated and murdered as warnings to competing traffickers and pimps and as punishment for refusing to engage in prostitution. In two reported cases, women who resisted were killed as an example to other women. In Istanbul, Turkey, two Ukrainian women were thrown off a balcony and killed while six of their Russian friends watched. In Serbia, a Ukrainian woman who resisted was beheaded in public.¹⁴

Trafficked women get little assistance once they are under the control of traffickers and pimps. In receiving countries, they are treated as criminals, either as prostitutes or illegal immigrants.

Many people view the women as complicit in the trafficking, as immoral, or as workers —a wide span of perspectives, all of which ignore the harm to the victims and many of which blame the victims for the crimes committed against them. Officials often minimize or deny the severity of the problem, the violence and coercion used in trafficking, and the harm to victims. One official in Ukraine was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "women's groups want to blow this all out of proportion. Perhaps this was a problem a few years ago. But it's under control now."¹⁵

Officials' acceptance of prostitution and trafficking exacerbates the problem. According to Kateryna Levchenko, coordinator of La Strada-Ukraine, "Complicity on the part of government and law enforcement officials is as much to blame as financial difficulties [for facilitating recruitment]."¹⁶ In

Russia, an undercover investigation by the Global Survival Network implicated government officials in collaborating with trafficking networks.¹⁷

Profit and Corruption

Once a woman is under the control of a trafficker or pimp, she can be exploited to make a large profit. Pimps can make 5 to 20 times as much from a woman as they paid for her. An International Organization for Migration study of women trafficked into Germany found that the trafficker or pimp requires a payment of US \$3,000 to \$30,000 from a woman for her travel expenses and her purchase price. Then she must pay for her room and board in the brothel as well as the pimp's fees, lawyer's fees, doctor's fees, and sometimes private living expenses. Even after a woman has paid off her debt, she must turn over 50 to 75 percent of her earnings to pimps.

The *Kyiv Post* reported that a Ukrainian woman in a massage parlor owned by a Russian in Silver Spring, Maryland, was allowed to keep only 30 percent of the US \$70 price for a massage. If she wanted more money, she had to engage in prostitution for tips.¹⁸

Le Monde reported that during a 3-month stay in Germany on a tourist visa, a woman can make US \$20,000 for a pimp, according to German police. An Eastern European woman can earn more than that for a pimp or trafficker in Japan, where Eastern European women are considered exotic.

Le Monde further reported that Oksana Ryniekska, a Ukrainian doctor, operated a brothel with non-English speaking women from Eastern Europe in Essex,

UK, for 8 months before she was arrested. During that time she made more than US \$210,000.¹⁹

The money made from the sexual exploitation and enslavement of trafficked women enriches transnational criminal networks. According to Michael Platzer, of the United Nations Center for International Crime Prevention, trafficking in women has one of the highest profit margins and lowest risks for criminal groups in Eastern Europe. Mikhail Lebed, chief of criminal investigations for the Ukrainian Ministry of the Interior, told the *Kyiv Post*, "It is a human tragedy, but also, frankly, a national crisis. Gangsters make more money from these women in a week than we have in our law enforcement budget for the whole year."²⁰

The corruption of officials through bribes and the collaboration of criminal networks with government officials enable traffickers to operate. In Russia, the Global Survival Network found evidence of government collaboration in the Interior Ministry, the Federal Security Service, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²¹ As the influence of criminal networks deepens, the corruption goes beyond occasionally ignoring illegal activity to providing protection by blocking legislation that would hinder the groups' activities. As law enforcement personnel and government officials become more corrupt and criminals gain more influence, the line between the state and the criminal networks starts to blur, making it difficult to intervene in the succession of corruption, collaboration, crime, and profit.

Trafficking in women brings prosperity neither to individual women nor to the communities the women come from. The money the criminal networks make is laundered through bank accounts of criminal bosses in

financial centers, such as the United States and Western Europe or in offshore accounts.

In Israel, for instance, organized crime groups from the former Soviet Union invested profits from trafficking in women, along with other illegal activities, into legitimate businesses. Between 1990 and 1995, some US \$2.5 to \$4 billion had been invested in Israeli banks and another US \$600 million had been invested in real estate.²²

Moreover, trafficking in women has been found to be part of broader transnational criminal schemes. From early 1998 until mid-1999, US \$10 billion was laundered through the Bank of New York. The account belonged to Ukrainian-born crime boss Semion Mogilevich, who the FBI and Israeli intelligence reported was involved in prostitution, weapons and drug trafficking, and investment scams. According to one source, Mogilevich headed a large prostitution ring that operated in the nightclubs in Budapest and Prague.²³ Mogilevich's crime network operated in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Ukraine, and the United States.²⁴

Strategies for Change

Although trafficked women can be found almost anywhere, the destinations for most trafficked women are countries and cities where there are large sex industry centers and where prostitution is legal or widely tolerated. Legalization of prostitution, pimping, and brothels causes an increase in trafficking to meet the demand created by a legitimized sex industry.

Most approaches to the problem of trafficking have focused on the sending countries. In the former Soviet Union, prevention education projects are aimed at potential victims of trafficking, and non-

governmental organizations have established hotlines for victims or women seeking information about the risks of accepting job offers abroad.

Less attention is focused on curtailing demand. For example, in 1998 a Training Program to Combat Trafficking of Women from Ukraine was held in New Jersey, where hundreds of Ukrainian women have been trafficked into strip clubs and massage parlors. Twenty representatives from Ukraine government ministries, law enforcement, social services, the media, and nongovernmental organizations attended. An INS agent told this audience, "This is your problem that you are going to have to solve. It is like drugs -- you have to get at the root of the problem, which is overseas."²⁵ He ignored the possibility for action against the illegal sex industry in the United States.

Legalized prostitution makes it difficult to hold traffickers accountable for their activities. Traffickers evade prosecution by claiming that the women knew what they were getting into, and prosecutors generally have a hard time establishing the line between voluntary and forced prostitution. When prostitution is legal, the prosecution's case depends upon proving that the woman did not consent. Considering women's vulnerability in these slavlike circumstances and the fact that some women do initially consent to travel or even to work as a prostitute, such cases are much more difficult to prove.

According to Michael Platzer, head of operations for the United Nations' Center for International Crime Prevention, "The laws help the gangsters. Prostitution is semi-legal in many places, and that makes enforcement tricky. In most cases punishment is very light."²⁶ In the Plan of Action Against Traffic in Women and Forced Prostitution

for the Council of Europe, Michele Hirsch stated, "where only forced prostitution is illegal, inability to prove constraint has repeatedly led to international procurers being acquitted by the courts."²⁷

In 1949, the U.N. General Assembly Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others stated that "prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and endanger the welfare of the individual, the family, and the community" and that consent of the trafficked person is irrelevant to the prosecution of the exploiter. Ukraine is a signatory to the Convention (1954), as are the Russian Federation (1954), Belarus (1956), and Latvia (1992). The Convention was not widely ratified and did not create a monitoring body, so there has been no ongoing evaluation of its implementation or effectiveness.

The Convention is under attack by those who favor legalized prostitution and "consensual trafficking." The trend toward legalization of the sex industry and definitions of trafficking that require proof of coercion or force will make conviction of traffickers even more difficult and will benefit transnational criminal networks.

Another approach to ending trafficking is to intervene in the demand. In 1998, Sweden passed a law that created a new offense: "gross violation of a woman's integrity." Prostitution was included as a type of violence against women. The "purchase of sexual services" is prohibited and is punishable by fines and/or imprisonment up to 6 months. The government was clear that this new offense marked Sweden's attitude toward prostitution as an "undesirable social phe-

nomenon." This law is the first that aims to protect women from violence by holding men accountable and thereby addressing the demand for women to be trafficked for prostitution.

Policies and laws in the United States need to change to recognize the victimization of women who have been trafficked into prostitution. In most cases, the women are treated as criminals and/or illegal immigrants when in fact they have been the victims of violent crimes and are desperately in need of medical, legal, and social services. There needs to be aggressive intervention against illegal prostitution in the sex industry to curtail the trafficking of women to meet the demand. More research is needed to support a new understanding of prostitution and the trafficking of women, instead of relying on old rationales based on sexist judgments of women's lives and experiences.

Trafficking in women for sexual exploitation has become such a large and severe crisis, affecting not only women's well-being but also the security of nations, that strong interventions are needed at all levels and points in the trafficking process. This modern slave trade benefits only criminals.

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Notes

1. This definition of trafficking was modified slightly from that put forth by the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, an international nongovernmental organization.
2. Visit the Secretary of State's Web site at <http://secretary.state.gov/www/picw/trafficking/index.html> for more trafficking information.
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4. Bird, Chris, "100,000 Ukrainians Slaves of West's Sex Industry," *Reuters*, July 6, 1998.
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6. "Ukrainian Police Arrest Sex Trade Gang," *Newsline* 3(54), Part II (Prague, Czech Republic: Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, March 18, 1999). Regional Security Office, U.S. Embassy, Kyiv, Ukraine, *Crime Digest*, March 1999, <http://www.usemb.kiev.ua/rso/CrimeDigest9903.html>.
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9. International Organization for Migration, *Information Campaign Against Trafficking in Women from Ukraine —Research Report* (Geneva, Switzerland: International Organization for Migration, July 1998).
10. Hyde, Lily, and Marina Denisenko, "Modern-Day Slavery Traps Local Women," *Kyiv Post*, October 9, 1997.
11. Escaler, Statement.
12. Specter, Michael, "Traffickers' New Cargo: Naive Slavic Women," *New York Times*, January 11, 1998.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. La Strada is a nongovernmental organization in Ukraine working to prevent trafficking in women

For More Information

- Todd S. Fogelson and Peter H. Solomon, "Crime, Criminal Justice and Criminology in Post-Soviet Ukraine" (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, forthcoming spring 2001).
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- MiraMed Institute, "Who Is Trafficking CIS Women?" *Preliminary Survey Report on Sexual Trafficking in the CIS*. (Moscow MiraMed Institute, June 1999).
- Visit the Trafficking in Women From Ukraine Research Project, part of the US–Ukraine Research Partnership, Web site at <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/ukraine>.

17. The Global Survival Network was an organization focused on illegal trafficking of both humans and other animals. In December 1999, the Network's directive was altered to include only wildlife conservation issues and its name was changed to WildAid. Although the group's emphasis has changed, information dealing with human trafficking still is available from WildAid. Contact the organization at <http://www.WildAid.org> or call 415–834–3174.
18. Hyde and Denisenko, "Modern-Day Slavery Traps Local Women."
19. Paringaux, "Prostitution Takes a Turn for the West."
20. Hyde, Lily, "Women's Groups Battle Sex Slavery," *Kyiv Post*, January 23, 1998.
21. Global Survival Network, *Crime and Servitude* (Washington, DC: Global Survival Network, 1998).
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23. "Les Nouvelles Mafias d'Europe de l'Est," *Marianne en ligne*, December 5, 1997. Accessed at <http://www.marianne-en-ligne.fr/12-05-97/dessus-b.htm>.
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