



What Dreams May Become: Trafficked Women and Their Resultant Health Issues

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Today, 10 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russians still dream of traveling abroad and seeing the world. This dream emerged in response to the restrictions of Soviet times when only a small faction of the citizenry—and only those who had joined the communist party—had the opportunity to travel outside the country. The lucky few who did brought home fairy-tale-like stories of wealth and plenty that filtered through the iron curtain where Soviet teenagers traded on the black market for American blue jeans—the symbol of a better life. In the 1980s, Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika reforms brought democratic change and an expanded openness, increasing attraction to the previously “forbidden fruits” of the West, while economic collapse put material goods—like washing machines and refrigerators—out of the reach of many families. Still, the dream of the West survives, even as the Soviet Union has collapsed.

In the past decade, the Russian mass media has inundated consumers with Western soap operas and advertisements filled with happy housewives fluttering between luxurious dwellings, glamorous parties, and high-priced beauty salons. The cultural impact of globalization sustains the myth that the West is a sacred land of joy and pleasure, but the iron curtain has been replaced with an economic curtain, one that still excludes many Russians from the West. This article looks at how the economic plight of many girls and women leads them into the dangerous world of trafficking and explores the resultant health consequences. While it focuses on Russia, much of this holds true for any of the Newly Independent States (NIS) or countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Lure of Opportunities Abroad

For a new generation of Russia youth, and particularly for young women, travel abroad remains an unattainable dream. At the same time, economic transition has shattered many women's hopes for gainful and fulfilling employment in contemporary Russia. According to the National Report on CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination



Photo: Suzanne E. Grimman.

While many girls fantasize about being a princess when they grow up—as witnessed in this drawing by a homeless girl at the Way to Home shelter in Moscow—few realize such a dream. Unrealistic ideas about foreign places and possibilities often make young women vulnerable to promises of golden opportunities by traffickers.

against Women) Implementation, women make up more than 70 percent of the unemployed in Russia.¹ Not surprisingly, parents, hoping that their children will have more chances in a Western country, not only support but encourage them to seek jobs or marriages abroad. For some women—especially those caught in the trap of domestic violence or the economic responsibility of single parenthood—work abroad is a matter of survival. Many of these women believe that a job “overseas” will allow them to remit money home and build a better life for their children. Surveying the grim employment opportunities where they live only makes the lure of work abroad more potent.

Job advertisements in Russian newspapers and magazines that target women and girls read as invitations to a new, bright world. They whisper magic promises like “you can have a well-paid job,” “you will see the world,” and “maybe you will find a husband.” Desperation to find a job and myths about life in other countries, combined with a lack of alternative opportunities, makes it possible for traffickers—those who make a prof-

it from the illegal transportation of humans—to trap women in their nets. Would-be babysitters, models, nurses, sales girls, waitresses, sex workers, and masseuses who respond to these advertisement have almost no knowledge of international and national labor legislation and regulations. They believe the promises they read and are told. They do not expect to be fooled. They do not expect to become an illegal commodity.

Due to the lack of legal services in Russia and a mindset that does not make consulting legal representation a priority, most women do not turn to any official representative to learn about the proposed employment contracts. Instead, they trust the agents making arrangements for their trip and visa. Indeed, everything looks legal, and the documents all appear to be official. Throughout the process, traffickers spin tales of wealth in the other countries, telling women, for example, that “People in the United States are so wealthy that they do not know what to do with all of their money and so they have decided to hire a non-English-speaking babysitter from Russia to help their child learn another language. You will work several hours a week and have a salary of \$40,000 a year.” Who would refuse such an offer? For girls and women who cannot afford decent food and clothing for themselves, their children, and/or their elderly parents, this proposal is an answer to their prayers.

These women have no access to data on the average salary in the United States, the US employment market, visa restrictions, or job qualifications, nor do they suspect that an agent’s promises are lies. While some women do suspect that they may be employed as sex workers, and others explicitly agree to do so, they have no idea that they will be sold as chattel, abused, held in debt bondage, and treated as slaves. As was noted in an Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) report,

“many young women who are trafficked know that they will be working in the sex industry, but are deceived about the nature or conditions of their work.”² It is important to stress that even

when women are offered employment in the sex industry, traffickers deceive them with fictions about good salaries or marriage to a wealthy client.

Trafficking Defined

According to the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act passed by the US Congress in 2000, “severe forms of trafficking in persons” are defined as: “(a) sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or (b) the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery.”³ Although sex industry trafficking by far receives the most attention in the press, men, women and children are trafficked into domestic servitude, sweatshop labor, forced begging, forced agricultural labor, and other forms of forced labor and servitude every year.

Women and girls trafficked around the world are bought, sold, and resold. It is difficult to estimate the actual number of men, women, and children trafficked globally. This type of crime has a very concealed nature. However, some statistics exist. A report by the US State Department issued in July 2001 estimates that annually at least 700,000 persons—primarily women and children—are traf-

ficked worldwide. Approximately 50,000 women and children enter the United States this way each year.⁴ According to a 2000 Congressional Research Service Report, “the former Soviet Union is now believed to be the largest new source of trafficking for prostitution and the sex industry, with more than 100,000



Photos: Suzanne E. Grinnan.

Any of the girls found on the pages of this article could one day fall prey to traffickers who use enticements such as promises of huge salaries to lure victims in to virtually slave-like living and working conditions.



trafficked each year from that region.”⁵ In Moscow alone there are about 200 companies involved in the trafficking of women.⁶

How Trafficking Works

Traffickers typically use very similar tactics. According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), “traffickers tend to target people in countries or regions where socio-economic conditions are difficult and opportunities extremely limited.”⁷ They lure their victims with promises of a better life and provide assistance with visas and documentation. Sometimes traffickers provide their victims with passports—often false—and airline tickets. The moment of truth usually comes when a young woman arrives in the country of destination. After passport control, traffickers usually confiscate her passport “for registration purposes”—a practice she doesn’t question because of the still-prevalent Soviet system of registering one’s presence in an NIS country. The woman never sees her passport again. It is at this point that a woman loses control of her situation and it is when she is usually told that she has been sold into forced labor of one kind or another.

Some former victims report that when they were told what was happening to them, they did not fully understand what it meant. Slavery, they say, disappeared more than 100 years ago. How could they be sold into slavery in the modern world? But their new reality sets in and the traffickers make it painfully clear to the women that they are in debt bondage and have to remain in servitude without a salary in order to pay it off. The debt is typically exaggerated and gets larger as expenses and fines for punishment for any slight disobedience mount.

Traffickers also keep the girls and women trapped by telling them that they are in the country illegally and will be arrested and imprisoned if the local police find out. Russian women, having faced corrupt and indifferent policemen at home, generally do not try to seek help from law enforcement. As demonstrated by Dostoevsky, to be Russian is to comprehend retribution and punishment, but not justice. Laws exist on paper only, and one simply does not turn to the state law enforcement structures

for protection. Rather, these official structures are themselves sometimes perceived as violators. Fear of arrest is a very powerful tool to keep women under control. Additionally the trafficked women fear for their own lives and the lives of their loved ones; traffickers frequently threaten their victims with violence against family members at home and break the spirit of any woman who attempts to resist.

At this stage in the trafficking chain, some of the girls and young women are physically and sexually assaulted—again, often as a means of control. They are literally imprisoned and watched by guards. Olga, a victim of trafficking, said that her

traffickers imprisoned groups of young women in a small house near a brothel in the Czech Republic.⁸ Six women had to share one little room and the traffickers often beat them on any pretext. The women also suffered humiliation and sexual violence. Their guard would pick one of them every day and rape her in front of the others. Furthermore, the brothel’s clients could be extremely violent and forced the women to have any type of sexual interaction they demanded. Adding to the women’s fears, their clients sometimes included police officers who provided protection to the owners of the brothel.



Photo: Suzanne E. Grinnan

In some cases women trafficked for the purpose of domestic servitude are not sexually assaulted, but they may still experience severe forms of physical and/or psychological violence, starvation, humiliation, and/or isolation.

Ultimately, many victims of trafficking are unable to ever return home because their families or communities refuse to accept them once they’ve been “damaged.” Even if they do escape to their original homes, these girls and young women are always at great risk of being recruited or forced into a trafficking situation again. One victim reported that after she had been trafficked to Spain and worked there for three years she was deported back to Russia by local police. Six months later another trafficking agency approached her and offered to send her to the United States. She wanted to refuse, but the traffickers threatened to kidnap her younger sister if she said “no,” so she had to agree. Again she was raped, beaten, and isolated.

Admittedly, some survivors of trafficking agree to work abroad again. Their reasons are all the same: lack of employment opportunities and no support system. In most NIS/CEE countries, there are no special rehabilitation or other services for these survivors. There is no place to find shelter, nowhere to go to get psychological help, and no social service that can help these women take back control of their own lives. Consequently, some go abroad or turn to prostitution for lack of any other alternative.

The Health of Trafficked Women

Trafficking girls and young women is not just a pressing social, human rights, or criminal problem, it is also a women's health issue. The shock women feel when they learn that they have been sold, combined with the extreme violence they experience and witness, causes great trauma, trauma that has tremendous immediate and long-term effects on their health. These effects include physical, reproductive, and mental health problems. The trauma they experience can lead to the adoption of negative coping behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse. Indeed, some traffickers use drugs to control the women they have enslaved to ensure their continued compliance.

In addition, trafficked persons frequently suffer physical injuries. The level of physical violence routinely experienced by these victims is difficult to even imagine and ranges from minor bruises to serious disability and even death. According to the ODIHR report, "NGOs and law enforcement officers have reported cases in which young women committed suicide or were killed by their traffickers, sometimes as a warning to other trafficking victims."⁹ Nina, another victim, described how imprisoned girls on a Greek island were forced to witness one of their own being chained and brutally beaten to death as punishment for her attempted escape from a brothel. "After that we all were afraid even to think of escaping," she said.

Effects on Reproductive Health

A woman's reproductive health is put at high risk by trafficking as access to contraception is usually very limited or denied. Trafficked women are often forced to have sex with as many as 15-20

clients per day without the use of condoms or other contraceptives and some women also face repeated rape by traffickers or clients.¹⁰ Svetlana, for example, says that the number of clients she saw each day was unlimited because her "owner" wanted her to bring in as much money as possible and that these men were not required to use condoms. In general, traffickers prohibit the use of condoms and, as a consequence, forced prostitution increases the rate of sexually transmitted infections and HIV among its victims. According to one study, trafficking is one of the main causes for the increasing rate of HIV among Russian women.¹¹

Trafficked women also report forced and illegally performed abortions. Traffickers use abortion not only to control a woman's re-

productive behavior, but also to prevent "damage" to their business. Damage to the women's health due to botched abortions, however, is not considered a big deal. Natasha, who called a crisis center in Russia for help, reported that she had been pregnant three times in 18 months and that she was forced by her trafficker to undergo an illegally performed abortion in the brothel by a local doctor. This "healthcare provider" did not even bother to give her proper treatment or painkillers. She was also treated by this doctor for gonorrhea, which she contracted while working for

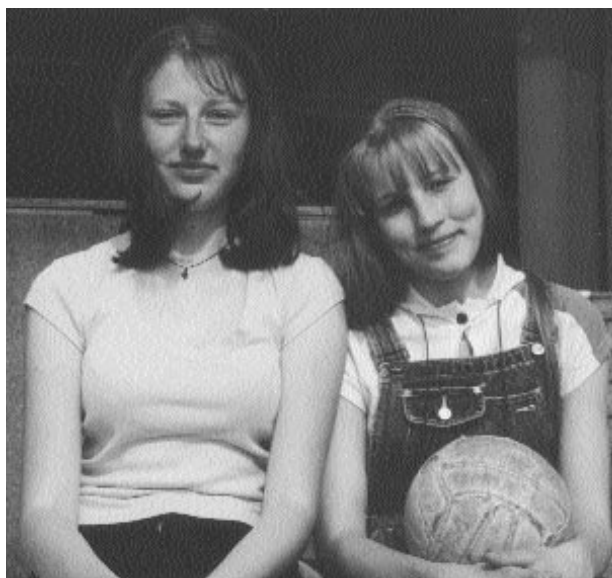


Photo: Suzanne E. Grimman

the traffickers. All too often, these traffickers add insult to injury by forcing the women to pay for this "healthcare" themselves.

Some of the health risks related to the trafficking of women are similar to those experienced by all victims of abuse, such as common gynecological disorders like chronic pelvic pain caused by sexual and physical violence. According to research by healthcare experts, women with a history of sexual or physical abuse account for about 50 percent of chronic pelvic pain cases. Other gynecological disorders associated with the traumatic experience of forced sexual intercourse include painful menstruation, irregular vaginal bleeding, vaginal discharge, pelvic inflammatory disease, and sexual dysfunction.¹²

Mental Health Repercussions

Not surprisingly, trafficking seriously erodes a woman's mental health. The experience of slavery and forced labor totally destroys the victim's self-esteem and almost all trafficked women



experience depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. In the cases we have encountered, even women who escaped from trafficking several years ago still suffer from anxiety attacks and depression. Furthermore, victims of trafficking sometimes attempt suicide as a way to escape the burden of abuse.

It is important to note that most trafficked women do not have the resources or ability to seek professional healthcare. Usually traffickers prevent their victims from seeing doctors and other providers unless it is absolutely necessary. Women are kept in isolated, guarded, and totally unhealthy conditions that can cause different diseases. As the International Organization for Migration says, “many victims of trafficking find themselves at risk of ill health caused by overcrowding, substandard housing, and sanitation.”¹³ One young victim explains that in her situation, the girls lived in the back room of a bar, with six to each room. The room had no windows to the outside and only one little window with an iron bar on it in the door. The girls slept on the floor and could not go out during the day; only at night, after the bar was closed, were they allowed to go to the interior yard for 15 minutes—and only if they did not have a client.

Stopping Trafficking

Combating trafficking requires strategies coordinated among many sectors of the community at the local, national, and international levels. By its very nature trafficking is an abuse of international human rights. It takes the willingness and cooperation of governments, NGOs, and law enforcement officials from around the world to overcome the differences in laws, political views, and cultural customs that sometimes make its illegality difficult to enforce. To combat trafficking successfully and to make it possible for victims to feel safe and come forward to tell their stories, the victim's human rights must be protected. And when these girls and women serve as witnesses, they must be protected.

Unfortunately the reality now is that criminals operate with impunity, ignoring borders, laws, and human rights. They cooperate more successfully among themselves than do those tasked with fighting this scourge. Sometimes they operate with official complicity and assistance from state officials; indeed, trafficking could not flourish without some level of institutional corruption. As traffickers and dishonest officials become wealthy, women and girls suffer, not daring to trust the government to protect them from retaliation by traffickers. Many trafficked women fear reporting the abuse they have suffered to the authorities, believing that this would only endanger them more. Even those who manage to escape often prefer to suffer in silence.

This silence sends a message to us all. It teaches us to be more

active in combating trafficking, in unmasking the corruption, in promoting new legislation. It leads us toward the creation of more services for victims to protect their human rights and restore their dignity. Healthcare providers and other who work with young women and girls can play a very important role in this process. They need to be vigilant in disseminating information about the threats of trafficking, as well as in recognizing the physical and mental manifestations of this type of abuse. During routine screening procedures, healthcare providers who recognize the signs of abuse associated with sexual violence (see “Understanding Intimate Partner Violence as a Physical and Mental Health Issue,” in *CommonHealth*, Fall 2000, page 34) and should ask their female patients about it in an appropriate way. Most women will readily talk about the violence they are experiencing if they feel safe and supported. Instead of blaming these women for the situation they find themselves in, healthcare providers should express their support and willingness to help. It is essential to have an updated list of local women's service organizations, such as crisis centers, and other community resources to give these women. When encouraging women to call these organizations, healthcare practitioners provide women with very important information about sources of available help.

There is no quick and easy way to end trafficking. We all must work together to show that trafficking is unacceptable. We must create a circle of help, safety, and assistance for its victims. It will take time, but that is the only course we have. ■

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8. While the names and locations of victims have been changed to protect their identity, their stories are all true and were gathered by staff of the crisis centers located throughout the Russian Federation who are members of the NGO “Stop Violence: The Russian Association of Crisis Centers for Women.”
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