

Modern day slavery

**“On The Line,” *Voice of America*
29 November 2002**

DATE=11/29/2002
TYPE=ON THE LINE
NUMBER=1-01234
TITLE=HUMAN TRAFFICKING
INTERNET=Yes
EDITOR=OFFICE OF POLICY 619-0037
CONTENT=
THEME: UP, HOLD UNDER AND FADE
Host: Modern day slavery . Next, On the Line.
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Host: More than seven-hundred thousand people were pressed into forced labor or sexual slavery last year. This from a State Department report on the illegal business of buying and selling human beings. Secretary of State Colin Powell said that “Here and abroad the victims of human trafficking toil under inhuman conditions in brothels, sweatshops, fields, and even in private homes.” According to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, human trafficking is now a multi-billion dollar business for organized crime. And the modern slave trade does not always involve the transport of people across international borders. Thousands in Sudan continue to be abducted into forced labor. Joining me to talk about human trafficking are Donna Hughes, a professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Rhode Island and Lisa Thompson, liaison for the abolition of sexual trafficking at the Salvation Army. Welcome. Thanks for joining us today. Donna Hughes, how big a problem is it?

Hughes: That’s a good question. We really don’t know. Because it’s clandestine, victims are very frightened because often the people that traffic them are organized crime or vicious pimps. They don’t like to talk. There’s a lot of corruption [in] a lot of countries. That also makes it frightening for women to try to come forward to talk about it. Also, we just haven’t had a lot of money spent on research so that a lot of organizations haven’t been counting. So we really don’t know how many women—men, women, and children—are out there enslaved.

Host: Lisa Thompson, how does the State Department then arrive at this figure of greater than seven-hundred thousand and then in the report says perhaps as many as four million.

Thompson: I don’t think any of us know. It’s interesting that, as Donna said, I think there is definitely a cause for much more research into how we come up with these numbers. There are numbers for certain countries have been cited for probably five, ten years that you keep seeing the same numbers recycled in terms of the amount of human beings being trafficked. Actually, in our estimate though, I would say that the seven-hundred-thousand number is rather low from the range of numbers that you see circulated among people who fight trafficking. The low is seven-hundred-thousand, the high is four-million

women and children and men trafficked into different types of either sexual slavery or forced labor.

Host: Well, how do you do your estimate?

Thompson: We don't do an estimate. We take the estimates that are out there that are put forward by UNICEF Or I-O-M, the International Organization for Migration, provides a lot of statistics and they've been doing more research, and so their work has been very instrumental in helping us come to grips with some sort of the overall scale of the problem. But we just use the numbers that are put out by the State Department and these other respected institutions.

Host: Donna Hughes, where are people being trafficked from mostly these days?

Hughes: Really, women and children, especially, are trafficked from, through, and to almost every country and region in the world. There are some regions that tend to be sending regions, which are places where there is poverty, high unemployment, lack of opportunities and, most important of all, where traffickers recruit. Because we certainly know that there are poor places around the world in which traffickers don't recruit and so there's not a problem there.

Host: Why do traffickers recruit in one area but in not another area?

Hughes: They target certain areas. Once they get a hold in one particular place they can expand their businesses there. For example, I've done a lot of work on Russia and the Ukraine, where we know that there is a Russian Mafia, actually, several different types of Mafias in the Ukraine and Russia. And because they're operating there and this is a lucrative business, they're in this business.

Host: Lisa Thompson, women and children, for example from Russia and the Ukraine. Where are they being trafficked to?

Thompson: That we think is a very fundamental question of this whole problem is what is, why are the women being trafficked? What are the real causes? Now, there are factors that put women and children at risk, things like poverty, things like economic instability, political unrest, things that Donna already alluded to. But where they end up, is what we think is very critical to this overall trafficking in women and children. So they end up in, at least in the instance of sex trafficking, in the sex industry working in prostitution or other forms of commercial sexual exploitation. Typically in the countries of the West, where there is a significant demand, there are well-established sex markets, countries like the Netherlands and Germany come quickly to mind.

Host: Donna Hughes, how does this actually work in practice? Are the women who are trafficked from Russia, are they told they're going to Germany or the Netherlands to engage in prostitution?

Hughes: Rarely. Usually what happens is the woman is searching for a job and she is told that she can go abroad and make a lot of money—usually at a low skill job because she knows what skills she has—but the problem is that when she arrives in that particular country, sometimes she arrives in the place where she's actually told she's going and sometimes somewhere else. But when she arrives at the destination, she is told no, in fact

you're not going to be a waitress, a nanny, you know, whatever job, a dancer maybe, that we told you. You're going to be in prostitution and you don't have a choice.

Host: And how is that enforced on the women that they don't have a choice?

Hughes: Often their passports, visas if they have them, are confiscated so that they can't return. They are often beaten, raped, literally locked in buildings, food withheld from them until they give in.

Host: Lisa Thompson, Donna Hughes mentions visas and passports and things. In most cases are women who are being brought into these countries being brought legally or are they being shipped through illegal immigration channels?

Thompson: Well, I think you definitely have instances of both and to the extent where you have more of one than the other it is really still another question that needs a lot of exploration. There's a lot of corruption in countries like Bosnia where you have a tremendous amount of civil instability. There's some rife corruption there and it's easy. These border patrol officers, they don't make—their incomes are very low. So, the opportunities to make a lot of money and facilitating trafficking are very huge and so they opt for making a buck. So, corruption plays a part in trafficking, but then there's just the instances where women overstay their visas. So they go through a process which the traffickers facilitate, in which they apply, get a visa and then, perhaps oftentimes as entertainers, which is a common way of trafficking women into Canada—just this category of visa type that's for entertainers. And they come in, purportedly for some type of entertainment which ends up being working in the dance clubs or the fronts for brothels.

Host: Donna Hughes, how long are women kept in these conditions?

Hughes: It varies a lot. It depends on whether they might be rescued—I use that word cautiously—rescued by a police raid. Although, sometimes when there is a police raid they're treated as criminals so they're arrested, so you can, you know, decide whether you want to use the word rescued. But at least they get out of that particular situation. Sometimes they'll stay as long as it takes to pay their debt off which can be a number of years, several years.

Host: Now when you say "pay their debt off," what sort of debt is that.

Hughes: Of course the women are poor, they don't have money to go abroad. So, the trafficker says, "I'll take you to England where you'll work as a waitress and then you'll pay me back the cost of the travel fee." And the woman says yes. And then when she arrives in England, they say, "Well, okay, we've taken your passport so you can't leave. We'll beat you up if you don't do what we want and you owe us thirty-thousand dollars. And you can be in prostitution until you pay that off." And so they usually control all the money and keep all of her money or a significant portion of it until all that amount is paid off. And then sometimes they do release the women. Other times, if the woman can't earn as much for the pimp as he likes, he sells her again. And so that, I've interviewed women who have been sold four and five times. Of course, the problem with this is that their debt starts all over again. The new pimp says, "Ah, now you owe me ten-thousand dollars," and the next pimp says, "Ah, now you owe me twelve-thousand dollars." So she simply

just gets sold over and over again. I've heard of cases in which there were women rescued who had been there for twelve years.

Host: Lisa Thompson, what happens when women are able to get out of this business, either escape or be rescued? If they've overstayed their visas, does that mean they're facing deportation?

Thompson: In the case of the United States, that's been a very serious problem. The women were typically criminalized. These weren't women who had the opportunity to walk out the door of the brothel where they were being kept. These were cases where the police for some reason or other got wind of the situation. They did an investigation and they go in and along with the traffickers, they arrested the women, because, as you point out, they were there illegally and they were also engaged in a crime, the crime of prostitution. So you have instances where these women who had been lured, lied to, brutalized, raped on a daily basis, were actually being put in jail, pending the outcomes of these cases, or they were summarily deported. So it was really their bad luck. And there was no due process for these women, but a new law has passed in the Congress, passed in October of 2000, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, and that provides new protections for women who are trafficked to the United States. They can now apply for a special visa type so that they can have legal status to reside in the United States. There are some qualifications that they have to meet, but overall it's a much better scenario than it was prior to 2000.

Host: Donna Hughes, what's the situation like in Europe for women who get out of the business, are able to escape, or are finally released?

Hughes: Well, it varies from country to country. In some countries, even in Europe, they're still very much treated as illegal immigrants or prostitutes and simply deported. Other countries are starting to get temporary visas so that they can stay and receive services.

Host: Is this situation, Lisa Thompson, any different in countries where prostitution is illegal as opposed to countries where prostitution is tolerated or openly available?

Thompson: Well, I do think there is a difference in the situation. The Netherlands is a good example. The Netherlands had tolerated [illegal] prostitution for many years. But in 2000 it legalized prostitution. And that has had some very disastrous consequences which I think were unanticipated by those who were advocates for legalization. The idea that is postulated is that somehow by legalization, you can reduce the harm that women encounter in prostitution. That somehow, by regulating it, by making, having health check-ups, that somehow or other this will ease the harm of the experience, that there will be less violence against women and so forth. But in fact, all it's done is created different tiers of prostitution and you have those who are being trafficked. They are there illegally. They're not going to be working legally and they're going to be facing some of the worst types of abuse imaginable in the sex industry.

Host: Donna Hughes, does the legalization of prostitution encourage this kind of trafficking?

Hughes: Yes it does. Because, not only do we have sort of sending and receiving countries, but there's also you can think of the women as being involved in a process of

supply and demand. And the countries that create the demand are those that have either large sex industries or a demand for prostitution. For example, in Kosovo, where there are a lot of peacekeeping troops there who are using women in prostitution. What happens when you have a large demand for women in prostitution is that you don't have enough local women who are able to fill up all these slots that are needed, so the pimps have to start looking abroad. And what they do is they then place orders with the traffickers saying, "I need a couple more Russian women. I would like to have some Thai women." You know, whatever is, what is either available or the market is demanding at the time. So what you have is the more prostitution increases or the tolerance of it increases, the greater is the demand and there therefore has to be an increased supply to meet that demand.

Host: Now you mentioned peacekeepers in Bosnia frequenting prostitutes. Has anything been done by the superior officers of the militaries involved to discourage that or punish it?

Hughes: Well, at least whether our U-S troops—resembling I can give you the example of [U-S troops in] South Korea—it says that it is against the military code of conduct for men to engage in prostitution. The State Department has made very strong statements saying that it does not condone this behavior, but it's one thing to say those things are on the books. It's another thing to enforce them and I don't believe it's being enforced at all.

Host: So, Lisa Thompson, what's being done in the larger sense to stop trafficking by the United States?

Thompson: By the United States. Well, I think the groundwork has been laid with the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. As I mentioned earlier, it lays out some protections for women and children who are trafficked to the United States. They can apply for visas to stay. But in addition to that, it increased penalties for traffickers. So, in the past, where traffickers when they were caught, would get very light sentences—less than five years in many cases—now they can do time that is more commensurate with penalties with kidnapping and rape. So, that's a significant deterrent because we have to drive up the cost of trafficking. The human profit, the margins that they can make in terms of trafficking. And also the fact that humans are a commodity that you can sell again and again, as Donna already mentions, that made the profits exceedingly high and the risks were very low because there wasn't much law enforcement or attention on this. So increasing the penalties is very important. And then also the law provides for protection so that the victims not only can stay here legally, but they can get services for help. Because you can imagine the types of trauma, the extent of trauma that women in these circumstance have been exposed to and the total just ripping of their very soul that happens and the extent of services that are needed. So, you would need language training, skills training, job skills. The S-T-Ds [Sexually Transmitted Diseases] of course are horrible. A lot of these women have faced forced abortions. It's exceedingly brutal, so they need lots of love and tender care.

Host: Donna Hughes, what about in Europe? What's being done to discourage trafficking?

Hughes: Well, different countries have passed individual anti-trafficking laws, but perhaps the most significant thing internationally was in 2000, the United Nations had a

convention against transnational organized crime. And along with that was a protocol against trafficking in people, especially women and children and also a protocol on smuggling. But, right now, a number of countries, especially European countries, have signed that protocol on trafficking and it's in the process of being ratified. And once it's ratified in different countries, then they will have to make sure that their national laws come up to the standards that are set in the new U-N protocol.

Host: Now, internationally are there countries that have turned a blind eye to this that have done less than others to try to discourage trafficking either into their countries or out of their countries?

Hughes: Russia does not have a law against trafficking at all. And so, that, I think that they are working on that now, but that's one example of a country that doesn't even have a law against it and has one of the worst problems in the world.

Host: Lisa Thompson, how much of a problem is not sexual trafficking but rather forced labor of one sort or another, people who are brought not to work in brothels but rather to work either in restaurants or sweat shops and still put under the same treatment of having their passports taken and being unable to leave until they pay off some debt?

Thompson: I really don't know of any segregated numbers that break out trafficking for the purposes of sweat shop labor versus sexual slavery. So that may be an area again where there needs to be a lot more work to try to break out. That would give us the ability to see which markets, which economies are driving this better. But we do know that there's just a tremendous amount of trafficking into the sex industries. There's just case after case and story after story from around the world that indicates it's just tremendously high. India, for example, the United States Department of State in its annual Human Rights Report cites a figure that there are 2.3 million women and children in prostitution against their will at any given time. So that's a staggering number. That means that those women over time have all been trafficked into the sex industry.

Host: But not necessarily trafficked from one country to another?

Thompson: There is intra-country trafficking as well. So you have trafficking from the Northern regions of India to the Southern regions where there's a big market for women. And that's typically serving the men of that country. But then you also have the international trafficking, so you have women say, from the Philippines in Japan or women from Mexico or Eastern Europe in the United States. So you have both intra-country and international trafficking.

Host: What are non-governmental organizations like the Salvation Army and other faith-based organizations doing in their efforts against trafficking?

Thompson: I'm really glad you asked that question. We're working really hard both to advocate for policy, for laws that will protect women and children from this. But in addition, we're working equally as hard to develop services so that when they've fallen through, they've slipped through the cracks and this has happened—actually they're more like gapping crevices, that are allowing millions of women and children to be victimized—but when that happens, we want to be there to help try to put the pieces back together. But we're not stopping there. As I mentioned, we are very much interested in policy and law so that we can prevent this from happening in the first place. So, we have

a project, in particular it's called the Initiative Against Sexual Trafficking. It's a partnership of more than thirty faith-based human rights, children's rights groups, all in varying degrees of involvement with the trafficking issue, but they've all said this is something we really care about and that we want to have our voice heard in opposing this. And so, we're really framing a new abolition movement. We see this as the modern-day anti-slavery movement.

Host: Well, I'm afraid that's going to have to be the last word for today. I'd like to thank our guests, Donna Hughes of the University of Rhode Island and Lisa Thompson of the Salvation Army. Before we go, I'd like to invite our audience to send us your questions or comments. You can e-mail them to On the Line at ibb-dot-g-o-v. For On the Line, I'm Eric Felten.