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Nyet to Trafficking

Russians show political will to fight prostitution.

By Donna M. Hughes

For the last two years, Russia has received a failing grade from the U.S. State Department for its efforts to combat human trafficking. That's the grade it deserved, because each year, thousands of women and girls are trafficked for prostitution in Russia. The total number over the past decade is estimated to be over half a million. Organized-crime groups run the trafficking networks that have sold Russian women and girls into prostitution in over 50 countries around the world, including the U.S. Any effort to combat this modern-day slave trade has been crippled by the fact that Russia does not have a law against the trafficking of persons. Fortunately, that may soon change.

The leaders in the fight against trafficking have been nongovernmental organizations, operating on shoestring budgets, or as volunteers. They have carried out prevention campaigns to warn potential victims and provided minimal services to returning victims.

The leading anti-trafficking organization, [the Angel Coalition](#), comprised of 43 NGOs from 25 regions of Russia, issued a report on trafficking of women for 2002. Members documented a representative handful of trafficking cases. Of the 15 known victims from Chelyabinsk, a city at the base the Ural Mountains: One girl returned from Cyprus with a psychological disorder and had to be placed in a hospital in Moscow. Another girl resisted a pimp and refused to become a prostitute. The traffickers subsequently burned her parents' home. Of the 50 known victims from Kazan, a city in the Muslim republic of Tatarstan: Two girls were burnt alive in Turkey; another returned from Turkey an invalid. Of the 30 known victims from Vladivostok in the Far East: Three girls were trafficked to China, one girl jumped out of the hotel window and killed herself, one girl was murdered by an overdose of drugs; another was sold several times before being forced to carry drugs across the Chinese border. She was caught and sentenced to death.

Women are also trafficked into Russia, particularly to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Traffickers recruit them in rural areas of Russia and the former Soviet Republics, such as Ukraine, Moldova, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. According to an official source, there are 130,000 to 150,000 women and children in prostitution in Moscow. Pimps working for organized-crime groups control them.

The Angel Coalition has lobbied for years for an anti-trafficking law. It has been an uphill battle against officials who denied that trafficking existed in Russia and groups who lobbied for an anti-trafficking law that would normalize prostitution by redefining it as "sex work."

The Russian Federation was galvanized to take steps to combat trafficking when it was ranked in Tier 3, the lowest ranking, in the State Department's Trafficking in Persons reports. At the end of 2003, any country with a failing grade risks the loss of non-humanitarian funding from the U.S.

The present version of the anti-trafficking law is strong legislation. In addition, the Duma plans to amend the criminal code to make procuring and pimping felonies, which will protect women and children from being recruited by pimps and traffickers into prostitution. The legislative working committee bravely rejected attempts to use the new law to normalize prostitution by referred to prostitution as "sex work" or "sexual services."

Last week, I was in Moscow and heard Tatyana Kholshchevnikova, representative of the Russian Duma's legislative working committee, speak about the new law and the position of the legislative working group. She said, "Prostitution is a socially dangerous activity that humiliates women and treats them as commodities. Prostitution is not work; it is an activity of organized crime. We reject the legalization or decriminalization of prostitution that would recognize it as work."

During the last year, the city of Moscow has also begun to address the escalating problem of prostitution, particularly the sexual abuse and exploitation of children in Moscow, and the associated health-care costs of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. Last year, some high-ranking officials were favoring the legalization of prostitution as a way to get control of the problem. They were also probably eyeing the large revenue legalization would make for the city. Fortunately, along with the Federal Duma, the city officials are rethinking the impact that would have on the welfare of women and children.

Last week, the Moscow City Duma's commission on social policy held a hearing on child prostitution in Moscow at which I made a presentation on how the legalization of prostitution would increase child prostitution, including the production of child pornography and child-sex tourism from foreign pedophiles.

The commission members voiced their opposition to the legalization of prostitution and called for penalties against pimps, procurers, and the so-called "customers." With a few exceptions, they also agreed that the women and children involved in prostitution are victims and should not be treated as criminals.

Russian leaders have increasingly found the political will to fight the traffickers and pimps. Officials have moved beyond denial and blaming the victims. Both federal and city officials are increasingly aware of the physical and psychological devastation to individual victims and society as a whole. There is commitment to finding ways to combat the breakdown of values in their community and country.

In response to the new political will shown by Russian officials, the U.S. State Department gave Russia a passing grade on the 2003 Trafficking in Persons Report, which was issued on Wednesday. Since the new law still has not been introduced into or passed by the Duma, this passing grade seems to be based more on faith than substance. Let us hope that Russian officials match the faith put in them with action, by passing the new federal law and providing services to victims.

— *Donna M. Hughes is a professor & Carlson Endowed Chair at the University of Rhode Island.*

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