

Supplying Women for the Sex Industry: Trafficking from the Russian Federation

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SEXUALITIES IN POSTCOMMUNISM

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“We have thankfully watched the fall of the Berlin Wall, but unfortunately the wall fell on women’s heads.” Comment by participant in State Duma meeting on the status of women in the Russian Federation (Piper, 2000).

Introduction

The Russian Federation is a major sending country for women trafficked into sex industries around the world.¹ Russian women are known to be in sex industries in over 50 different countries (Global Survival Network, 1997). The number of women who have become victims of this criminal trade is unknown, but are estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2001).

Women are recruited from sending countries, such as Russia, by various means, but upon reaching the destination country, they find that the promised job or circumstances is really prostitution under brutal and exploitative circumstances. The traffickers and pimps control women by confiscating their travel documents, battering, rape, threats to harm them or family members, and debt bondage (Hughes, 2000).

Trafficking is an activity of Russian organized crime groups and their partners that operate prostitution and trafficking rings throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America (Global Organized Crime Project, 2000, p. 42). Corruption of officials through bribes and even collaboration of officials in criminal networks enables traffickers to operate locally and transnationally.

Trafficking women for the sex industry is a supply and demand trade, in which countries with large sex industries create the demand, and countries where women and girls are easily recruited provide the supply. There are a number of conditions that facilitate the recruitment of women. Traffickers target regions and countries where conditions enable recruitment.

This paper will focus on the conditions in Russia that facilitate the recruitment and trafficking of women and girls. They are: economic collapse and unemployment, the criminalization of the state and economy, increased organized crime, violence against women, and the promotion of western glamour in the media. These factors will be examined for how they have contributed to 100,000s of women becoming commodities for foreign sex industries.

Collapse and Criminalization of the State and Economy

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 presented many opportunities for reform within a new democratic government and a market economy. Instead of building a system based on rule of law, officials acting with the new “entrepreneurs” and criminals squandered these opportunities and engaged in a self-enriching resources grab.

As Russia moved from a state controlled economy and state ownership of industries and natural resources there was no infrastructure of regulations to oversee the privatization and business transactions (Cohen & Schwartz, 1998). Nor did the market economy proponents from the US and other Western countries who advised the process

of privatization offer any ways to limit or regulate the flow of resources from state to private hands.

The unregulated seizure of resources, industries and profits from the sale and export of resources and products manufactured at low “Soviet” cost earned those controlling them enormous profits. Almost none of these profits have been reinvested in Russia. Most of the profits were sent to bank accounts abroad, resulting in “capital flight” of much of Russia’s wealth. In 2000, the Institute of International Finance estimated that US\$140 billion dollars was transferred abroad in the previous nine years (“Russia: Over 140bn,” 2000). Those trying to characterize what has happened in Russia have coined terms and phrases: “bandit capitalism,” “kleptocracy,” and “crony capitalism.”

In 1996, the Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated that 40 percent of private businesses, 60 percent of state-owned enterprises, and more than half of the country’s banks were controlled by organized crime (Jenson, 1998). Russian organized crime groups have in many ways replaced the state in providing, employment, protection and security. The majority of private enterprises are compelled, by force if necessary, to pay protection of up to 30 percent of their profits to organized crime” (Jenson, 1998).

Today, the problem is not so much the increase in crime and criminal groups in Russia, as the criminalization of the entire state and economy. The Russian Federation as a whole has been described as “criminal-syndicalist state,” defined as “a state controlled by a tightly interlinked cadre of corrupt officials, crooked businesspeople, and criminals” (Center for Strategic and International Studies Task Force Report, 1997, p. 26).

The criminalization of the state and the lack of political will to change this situation has resulted in the state of Russia being reluctant to acknowledge that there is a trade in women. State agencies often will not recognize the crimes or the victims, choosing to view the women as voluntary workers or criminals. For example, according to a researcher in Irkutsk, the Director of Passport and Visa Control in the Department of Organized Crime Control said that there are no criminal groups in Russia who traffic women to other countries (Personal communication with NGO Representative, Irkutsk, Russia, August 14, 2001). All efforts to pass laws aimed at stopping sexual exploitation and trafficking of women have been defeated in the Duma.

Under these conditions, trafficking in women by organized crime groups has flourished. Russian organized crime groups operate prostitution and trafficking rings throughout Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and North America (Global Organized Crime Project, 2000, p. 42). In June 1996, the Russian Interior Ministry reported that 110 Russian organized crime gangs operated abroad in 44 different countries, either independently or in cooperation with foreign partners. Most of them had permanent bases abroad, and about 30 of them included prostitution and trafficking operations (Dunn, 2000, p. 63-87). By 2000, the number of large Russian organized crime groups had increased to 200 groups operating in 58 countries. In recent years the countries of increased activity were: United States, Canada, Israel, Brazil, Colombia, Austria, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, and Sri Lanka (Global Organized Crime Project, 2000, p. 7). The transnational scope of organized crime groups originating in Russia explains the distribution of trafficked Russian women in dozens of countries around the world.²

Government officials assume the state and their positions of power are to be used for personal advancement (Konstantinov, 1999). The criminal syndicalist state has evolved to protect itself and prevent interference with its money making activities. There is no legal definition of corruption. All members of the Duma and the regional governors who comprise the Federation Council have legal immunity from prosecution. There have been two results: 1) some of the most powerful criminals have sought seats in the Duma and Federation Council to protect themselves from prosecution and ensure their activities can continue without interference, and 2) all legislation meant to stop corruption, organized crime and money laundering has failed to pass, been watered down, or been vetoed (Global Organized Crime Project, 2000, p. 25). In 1998 surveys by the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development and the Control Risks Group, ranked Russia among the top three most corrupt states in the world (Jensen, 1998).

The collapse of the Soviet Union followed by the creation of a criminalized state and economy has resulted in ten years of severe economic decline. The end of the Soviet Union brought an end to the social welfare and health care systems, leaving most Russians without social benefits or adequate health care. Lack of maintenance and investment for many years had allowed the infrastructure to crumble. The failure of the state and economy resulted in an almost complete withdrawal of the social safety nets.

The Russian Federation took the first step toward a market economy in January 1992 by ending fixed prices. State subsidies on all food, except bread and milk and a few other items, were eliminated. Prices rose overnight and inflation followed. As a result, people's savings were spent buying staples of life and the standard of living sharply declined. (Hoffman, 2002, p. 211-213).

From 1994 until 1998, the economy was fairly stable, but continued to contract. In August of 1998, Russia defaulted on billions of dollars in foreign loans, causing banks to fail, and the value of the ruble to collapse. The savings that people had managed to accumulate were gone. Following the crash of 1998, real per capita income fell by 26 percent of what it was in 1996 (The Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey, 1992-98, 1999).

After eight years of market economy, the 1999 Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was estimated to be 58 percent of the 1989 level. In 2000, approximately 41 percent of the population lived below the poverty line or subsistence level of 1,138 rubles (approximately US\$40) a month. The average monthly wage in Spring 2000 was 2,038 rubles (approximately US\$71) per month (Russian and Eurasia Program, 2000).

Many people have suffered since the collapse of the Soviet Union, but women and children have suffered disproportionately. Women who have tried to participate in the new market economy by starting businesses for themselves are not immune from the threats and control of organized crime groups. When women open businesses, even small ones, such as selling produce in the market, police and organized crime groups demand "protection" money in order to allow them to do business there (Personal communication, NGO representative, women's business development organization, Moscow, Russia, October 2000).

Some women cite corruption and organized crime as their reason to try risky opportunities to leave Russia, such as meeting western men through marriage agencies. A

woman accountant in St. Petersburg, who was attending “socials” organized by bride agencies in search of a foreign husband, said she wanted to leave Russia because, “My profession is very dangerous here, and I can’t change it. I know a lot of financial information, and I’m caught between my boss, the Mafia, and the tax police” (Maganini, 2000).

One of the features of these changes in the largest country in the world is the rapidness of the decline and change. Previously, the people of Russia had a secure standard of living. According to the director of St. Petersburg’s Eastern European Institute for Psychoanalysis, “Only 20 years ago, 90 percent of the population thought they lived in the best country in the world” (Maganini, 2000). Following the collapse of the state and lack of progressive reforms, people are depressed, desperate, and hopeless. One woman said:

“Before perestroika, even without a man, I would have been able to support my family on my own, but now the wages don’t meet my standards. Now, many state enterprises are closed, and many private enterprises have an age limit of 35 or demand people who are computer-literate and speak a foreign language. You can lose your job without any notice and for no reason” (Maganini, 2000).

Ten years ago, this woman never thought of leaving Russia, but now she said, “I don’t want to live here” (Maganini, 2000).

Economic Inequality for Women

Women’s locations in the workplace made them especially vulnerable to becoming unemployed. Due to the constitutional obligation to work in the Soviet Union, the percentage of employed women was probably the highest in the world. Women were not permitted to leave the work force, except for pregnancies and childbirth. Under the Soviet system, equality between men and women was proclaimed, but in fact, there were many structural and institutional practices that created social, political, and economic inequalities between men and women (Azhgikhina, 2001, p. 218). At the beginning of the transition to a market economy, women’s wages were only 70 percent of men’s. Under the former Soviet system, social benefits were provided to all, many of which benefited women and children.

During the Soviet era, women’s wages were suppressed by occupational segregation, in which certain types of jobs became “women’s jobs.” Almost 80 percent of women worked in these “women’s jobs.” These jobs paid less than comparable work performed by men. Occupational hierarchy, in which women are concentrated in the lower ranks that are lower paid, also suppresses women’s income (Bridger, Kay & Pinnick, 1996, p. 7). Through the period of transition to a market economy, certain occupations have shifted in their prestige and earnings. As this has happened, more men have entered these occupations pushing out the women who previously worked there (Multidisciplinary Advisory Team for Central and Eastern Europe, 1996a).

Occupations that employed a disproportionate number of women include: medicine (86%), education and science (73%), planning and accounting (88%), trade and catering (89%), services (89%), communications (84%), textiles (83%), and clothing

manufacturing (93%) (Bridger, et al., 1996, p. 42). Industries, such as aviation and defense, large sectors of the Soviet economy, employed large numbers of women in positions such as scientists and administrators (Maughan, 1996).

Most education was equally available to women and men in the Soviet Union, resulting in many highly educated and trained women in Russia compared to other countries. Unemployment has disproportionately affected these educated women (Rukavishnikov, 1999). The appearance of highly educated Russian women in sex industries abroad has been one of the unique phenomena of trafficking in women from Russia. Elsewhere, trafficked women are usually less well-educated women.

The contracting economy has caused a sharp rise in unemployment for women and men of Russia. Often the first people to lose their jobs were women, as it was seen as less important for them to have a job than men (Multidisciplinary Advisory Team for Central and Eastern Europe, 1996a). Also, workplace benefits that assisted women were lost. Childcare facilities in the workplace were closed, then these facilities was given as the reason for firing women before men and not rehiring them when there were job openings.

Women are currently discriminated against in hiring throughout Russia and there is little women have been able to do to resist this trend (Human Rights Watch, 1995). Although there are laws prohibiting discrimination, there are no mechanisms for enforcement or sanctions if the laws are violated (Moscow Helsinki Group, 2000, p. 228). There have also been reports of paying women only 15 percent of their monthly salaries until they have completed a three-month probation period. Contracts are frequently broken at the discretion of the employer (Multidisciplinary Advisory Team for Central and Eastern Europe, 1996a).

The actual percent or number of unemployed women and men is unknown. International experts claim the Russian government's official unemployment statistics for both men and women are too low. The unemployment rate has been estimated to be 13 to 15 percent, about six times as high as the official reported rate (Multidisciplinary Advisory Team for Central and Eastern Europe, 1996a; Rukavishnikov, 1999). The United States Information Agency (USIA) estimates that half the adult population is out of work (The Exploitation and Export of Women from Russia: Scale and Scope, 1999). Various studies indicate that women make up between 60 and 80 percent of the registered unemployed and, in some regions, maybe as many as 90 percent (Maughan, 1996; Multidisciplinary Advisory Team for Central and Eastern Europe, 1996; & Kliatchko, 1994).

Unemployment for women strikes hard at many families. In the late 1990s, women made up more than 80 percent of single-parent, single-income heads of families raising children and among that population group, over 80 percent were unemployed (Engel, 1998). Over half of the children under age six were living in poverty at the end of 1998. Those who are employed are frequently not paid on time or only given partial wages. According to different reports, between one half and two-thirds of workers were owed back wages (The Russia Longitudinal Monitoring Survey, 1992-98, 1999 & The Exploitation and Export of Women from Russia, 1999).

Unemployment is a significant contributing factor to the trafficking of women from Russia. Unemployment creates a pool of women, some of them quite desperate, who can be recruited with promises of jobs and good incomes outside their region or the country. Numerous Russian women in the sex industry abroad cite the need to support children or mothers as the reason for them being in prostitution.

Regional Variation in Unemployment

The planned Soviet economy structured entire regions around specific types of industries. There were a number of planned towns that were built around one large factory. Under the new economy, if one type of industry failed or greatly reduced its production, an entire city or region was devastated. If that type of industry employed a disproportionate number of women, unemployment in that sector caused large numbers of women to be unemployed in those cities and regions.

The following are a few examples of cities, oblasts, and regions known to have a higher percentage of unemployed women. These cities and regions are prime locations for traffickers to recruit.

Textiles and clothing industries were primarily located in the Ivanovo Oblast, northeast of Moscow, employing 45 percent of the industrial workers in the Ivanovo Region. Men often left the area for “men’s jobs” elsewhere, resulting in this region becoming known as a *zhenskii krai* or “women’s region” (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 44). Another region with large textile industries was in Cheboksary in the Chuvash Republic, where over 90 percent of those employed were women (Sperling, 1999, p. 159).

From 1990 to 1994, there was a 67 percent decline in textile production. (Multidisciplinary Advisory Team for Central and Eastern Europe, 1996b). Sometimes the factories are at a standstill for months at a time (Sperling, 1999, p. 158). Ivanovo became one of Russia’s regions with the highest unemployment.

In 1999 in Ivanovo there were delayed payment of wages and state allowances. In addition, there were interruptions in running hot water, heating, and electricity for up to eight hours per day (Alekseeva, 1999). Women from Ivanovo have left home to look for work. A woman from Ivanovo in prostitution in Moscow said she would stay there for six months and then return home. She was earning money to support her two children (“Moscow struggles,” 1999).

The Soviet Union’s economy and industrial production was highly militarized. One third of all industrial enterprises with 5,000 or more employees were arms manufacturers (Gaddy, 1996, p. 128). Women made up 50 percent of the industrialized labor force, especially in the defense production industries. In some oblasts, over 55 percent of the employment was from military industrial plants. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the defense industry production dropped sharply. From 1989 to 1995, 5 million Russians lost defense industry related jobs (Gaddy, 1996, p. 129). The first to be laid off were women engineers (Samarina, 1997).

Rural women have been hard hit by the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the Kaluga area in Kaluzhekaya Oblast, just southwest of Moscow, one NGO conducted a biographical survey of rural women.

“The rural women are one of the weakest social groups of society and the majority component of the population of villages. These women, feeding Russia for centuries, have appeared forgotten, without support and help in such difficult times. The result of the economic crisis of the agrarian sector is that more than half of the young able-bodied village women have appeared without working places and are in humiliating dependence with no provision for their children. They have no money to study in business schools, or purchase special periodic editions and literature to begin their own business and to change their life. They even don’t know how to protect their civil rights (Personal communication with representative of Selyanka, Russian Village Women’s Organization, Kaluzhekaya Oblast, October 2000).”

A report from the village of Domoslavl on the edge of the Valdai lake district in Tver reported a link between unemployment and prostitution. This area was referred to as “an economic wasteland.” The textile factories in the town ceased production, and collective farms collapsed (“Roadside girls,” 1999). Women in prostitution along the road in that area received 50 rubles (less than US\$2.00) for oral sex and 100 rubles (less than US\$4.00) for intercourse. A pimp, who controlled the women, watched and wrote down car registration numbers. The women were reluctant to talk about their situation (“Roadside girls,” 1999).

The economic and employment situation for women has been grave since 1992, but the economic crisis of 1998 severely deepened the problem. In the Volga region there were reports of hundreds of women – teachers, nurses, single mothers and even school girls – going into prostitution to survive (Stanley, 1998).

Women in these regions are increasingly trying to go abroad for jobs, having given up on finding employment in their own towns or regions. In Saratov, an NGO representative described her conversation with a woman who sought information about going abroad to work.

“The woman who came to me planning to work abroad had three children and did not have a good paying job. Need and concern for her children pushed her to agree to any kind of work abroad. This woman did not know English well and did not know anything about her rights and how to defend them. I tried to caution her...and told her everything I knew...but she nonetheless set out to work abroad” (Personal communication with representative of “Initiative” Women’s League, Saratov, Russia, October 2000).

The economy and employment in eastern Russia is as poor as in most other parts of Russia. In the Amur Oblast, north of China, the lack of jobs has caused women to sell their blood to blood banks to earn small sums of money to buy food and clothing for their children. As in other southern regions, women living in the countryside are increasingly growing poppy and hemp (Alekseeva, 1999). Drug traders often offer them children’s clothes and schoolbooks as payment for their crops. As women and girls come in increasing contact with criminals and organized crime groups that traffic in drugs, they

are more vulnerable to being trafficked, as criminal gangs engage in diverse crimes to make money.

Traffickers Recruiting Women for Work Abroad

Women's need for employment provides criminals with their easiest way to recruit women. Traffickers operate in employment and tour agencies in which they promise women work abroad, and assist them getting travel documents. In Moscow, there are almost 400 registered agencies, and in other regions, there are 475 registered agencies that offer work abroad or assistance in traveling abroad. There are also many agencies operating illegally (unregistered). The legal agencies are just as likely to be involved in trafficking in women as illegal agencies (Personal communication with representative of Angel Coalition, Moscow, Russia, 7 August 2001).

Representatives of NGOs report many suspicious advertisements for work abroad in villages and cities across Russia. For example, in a newspaper in Irkutsk, Siberia, in one day, there were 10 advertisements for work abroad. Less than half of them required English or another language, and none of them had educational requirements (Personal communication with NGO representative, Irkutsk, Russia, 14 August 2001).

Recruiters and traffickers use various deceptions to give themselves credibility in their advertising. For example, a series of advertisements in newspapers in Siberia claimed they offered foreign government contracts with high, stable salaries (US\$500 to \$800/month). The work hours were flexible. The foreign government would pay for lodging and food, and transportation was provided to and from work. NGO representatives contacted the embassies of these countries and found that the foreign governments had not placed the advertisements, and were not recruiting workers from Siberia (Personal communication with NGO representative, Irkutsk, Russia, 14 August 2001).

There are employment agencies that are legitimate, but it can be hard to tell them apart from the traffickers. The legitimate agencies frequently receive requests from suspicious agencies for their databases. Those with a good reputation refuse, but less discerning agencies sell their databases or cooperate with traffickers (Personal communication with NGO representative, Irkutsk, Russia, 14 August 2001).

A few local shops are known to cooperate with traffickers. In one scheme, young women respond to advertisements for clerks. After the woman works in the shop for a short time, the owner claims that money or goods are missing. The woman is told that she is responsible and will be turned over the police. She is then given the option of going abroad to earn money to repay the loss (Personal communication with NGO representative, Irkutsk, Russia, 14 August 2001).

A victim of trafficking from Chelyabinsk, Russia said she was hired as a secretary by a business while she was still in school. "I had no suspicions about the company at all. After working there for a time, they recommended that I go abroad to work for them. They got documents for me, which I now know were false." Before she left they causally told her that she might be expected to be a companion for a man – like an escort, but no "extra services," meaning sex, would be required. They required her to sign a contract. Upon her arrival in the destination country, she was taken directly to a brothel that had a

wire fence around the perimeter. She was not permitted to go outside. She was told she could not leave until she paid the debt for her travel expenses. The small amounts she was given for the prostitution were never enough to pay the debt that kept accumulating. Women were beaten if they refused to cooperate, so the women quickly learned to cooperate. They had to have sex even when they were bleeding from wounds. She saw some women become mentally ill. She said that the local police knew about the brothel, but did nothing to intervene (Personal communication with victim, Chelyabinsk, Russia, 9 August 2001).

Women are some times offered a “choice” whether to be in prostitution or do the work for which they were recruited. One woman was recruited from Chelyabinsk to be a dancer in another country. Upon her arrival, she found out that she had been sold to the owner of a bar and brothel:

“It was an old forlorn house that was supposed to be destroyed. It was cold and there was no hot water. Eight other women were there from Russia and Ukraine. They would not let us go outside, and there were grates and bars on the windows and doors” (Personal communication with victim, Chelyabinsk, Russia, 9 August 2001).

When she was told she would have to be in prostitution, she refused. The other women told her that she did not have a choice, but she insisted.

“I called the company in Chelyabinsk. I told them that I was supposed to dance, not be in prostitution. I said I’m leaving. They said, ‘Alright, then dance. If you make enough money to pay the debt, you can leave.’ I danced for one month, but I only earned enough to eat. I called the company at home again. This time the man yelled at me. He said, ‘You knew where you were going. You knew what you would have to do. You can come back, but we know your parents and all about you. Do the real work to pay your debt.’ That is when the really horrible things began. I did what I had to, but still they took my money” (Personal communication with victim, Chelyabinsk, Russia, 9 August 2001).

The most frequent deception used to recruit women is the offer of work abroad. When the woman reaches the destination, the situation changes, sometimes immediately, other times gradually. Even women who know they are likely to be in prostitution are not prepared for the lack of control, violence, and brutality they experience from being trafficked. Neither do they expect literal enslavement and debts that are so high they are difficult or impossible to repay.

Public and Private Violence Against Women

Violence against women in public and private spheres makes women desperate to escape these conditions making them vulnerable to recruitment by traffickers. Work abroad is some times seen as a solution to economic problems and a safe haven from violence and harassment.

According to Soviet ideology, inequalities among groups of people, specifically men and women, were eliminated. Consequently, violence against women was ignored. Women do not have equal social status to men in the Russian Federation. When women

have a lower status, they are more likely to be victims of violence and exploitation. They are also blamed for many social problems.

“Women are blamed for aggravating many social and demographic ‘problems’ -divorce, the movement towards smaller families, the fall in the birth rate, the rise in juvenile crime, prostitution, the spread of AIDS, HIV and sexually transmitted diseases and even for the increase in unemployment and the depreciation in the health of the nation” (Zabelina, 1996, p. 171).

There are many negative stereotypes that excuse or justify discrimination and violence against women, such as women are masochists who desire, or at least do not mind, violence and humiliation, and secretly would like to be raped. According to the Tat’iana Zabelina:

“The dominant stereotype of women as second-class citizens is encouraged by the fact that they are seen primarily as sexual objects whose role is simply to please men, both at home and at work” (Zabelina, 1996, p 173).

In the last decade, women have been documenting battering, rape and sexual harassment and learning slowly how to talk about these forms of violence against women and provide services to victims.

According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs there are 4 million domestic “disturbances” each year in Russia and 3,500 domestic homicides (Nadezhdina, 1998, p. 7). Lyudmila Zavatskaya, an American Bar Association Central and Eastern European Law Initiative (ABA-CEELI) lawyer, reports a much higher number of 12,000-16,000 domestic homicides per year (“Russian women face threat,” 2000). Sixty percent of the women murdered each year in Russia are killed by their husbands (O’Connor, 1997).

Police are known to ignore complaints of domestic violence and sexual assault, and there have been reports of police taking bribes to drop charges (Attwood. 1997, p. 103). A shortage in housing means that women are unable to find another place to live, and often divorced couples have to continue to live together (Attwood. 1997, p. 99-118).

Marina Pisklakova, the Director of the Moscow Women’s Crisis Center said that in surveys in which women were asked about what problems concerned them, one third of respondents said violence in their families (Nadezhdina, 1998, p. 7). Between 1994 and 1998, 8000 women called the Moscow Women’s Crisis Center. The calls were described as “a vast outpouring of people’s grief” (Nadezhdina, 1998, p. 7).

Domestic violence is often the reason children run away from home. These victims and witnesses to battering and abuse are especially vulnerable to be recruited for prostitution and trafficking. According to one report, “Girls who have seen their mothers beaten at home are particularly vulnerable. Many come to see women as inferior beings that men can use and abuse as they please” (“The ‘world’s oldest profession,’” 1999)

When there is no relief from the violence, women have to find ways to escape. Going abroad for work as become one way. A representative of an NGO in St. Petersburg said that in one short period four women came to talk to her about finding work abroad. All four said they wanted to find work abroad to escape battering perpetrated by their

husbands (Personal communication with NGO representative, Social-Legal Aid Service for Sufferers of Violence, St. Petersburg, October 2000).

The high level of alcoholism and increasing use of drugs among men also increases violence against women. The Russian Ministry of Health estimated that 40 percent of men (17 percent of women) suffer from alcoholism (“Alcoholism spreads,” 1999). Drug use and addiction are rising steeply. In the two-year period from 1997-1999, there was a 4 to 11 fold increase in drug use. In 1994-1995, there were four Russian regions with registered addicts numbering more than 10,000. By 1999, there were 32 regions so affected (“Drug addiction increasing,” 1999).

Sexual violence was not openly discussed during Soviet times. Consequently, there has been little research done on the topic and little support for victims (Zabelina. 1996, p. 169-186). Society in general and authorities in particular hold sexist attitudes toward women and victims of sexual violence. They blame the victims for assaults or indicate that they do not believe the victims. Representatives of law enforcement agencies, the courts and even academic researchers refer to the “provocative behavior” of the victim. During an international seminar on the contemporary family, one participant declared that “70 percent of rapes are associated with the frivolous or provocative acts of the victim,” such as “careless walks in the evening, agreeing to meet unknown people in secluded places, drinking alcohol and listening to music together” (Zabelina. 1996, p. 173). Women know these attitudes exist, and seldom report incidents of sexual violence. When women do report these crimes, the police and the official procedures often re-traumatize them with their callous and dismissive attitude towards their victimization (Moscow Helsinki Group, 2000, p. 253).

Many victims are afraid to talk about their experiences for fear of their friends, families, and neighbors finding out and condemning them.

These attitudes towards victims of sexual violence impair women’s access to the assistance they need to recover from trauma. A number of research studies and the experience of advocates who work with prostituted women have documented the connection between prior sexual trauma and entrance into prostitution.

Sexual harassment or “sexual terror” as it is called in Russia, was not recognized during Soviet times. Women say it is widespread and frequent on the street and in the workplace. An early small study in 1991-2 found that all 15 women interviewed for the study had been sexually harassed by male bosses (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 179).

The “sexual terror” experienced by women in the labor market is part of an overall social climate which has become increasingly sexualized and hostile to women. Women are usually expected to tolerate sexual harassment as part of their jobs, and often provide sexual services to their bosses. Job advertisements some times list one of the requirements of the job as “no hang-ups,” meaning the woman should be sexually liberal in the workplace. According to Marjorie Lightman, International League for Human Rights:

“Men hit on women and take payment in sex everywhere in Russia—from the office worker, the waitress, the hairdresser and the student... It is indeed a rare young Russian woman who doesn’t every day ward off some

man's leer, verbal or physical advance" (Global Survival Network, 1997, p. 14).

Now with high unemployment, women, especially those supporting a family, are vulnerable with few options. According to some commentators, "It is these women who are transformed into office prostitutes" (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 179).

The high rate of battering, sexual harassment, and sexual assault reveals the lower status of women in Russia. Lack of recognition and response to this violence in the past contributes to women's precarious status. Victims of these types of violence are more vulnerable to recruitment by traffickers as they seek to escape violence and may be more prone to say to themselves, "Nothing can be worse than this."

Western Glamour and the Sex Industry

The flood of western "glamour" and the sex industry into Russia during perestroika and after the collapse of the Soviet Union has contributed to a shift in women's social status and created the environment for the growth of prostitution and trafficking.

In contrast to the deteriorating conditions in Russia, the people of Russia have been bombarded with images of glamour and wealth from the West by TV shows, such as the soap opera *Santa Barbara*, and Hollywood movies. Many Russians believe they represent the average standard of living and way of life in the U.S. and Western Europe (Engel, 1998).

The decline in living standards, the accompanying psychological and attitudinal change of people, and the belief in a utopia in western countries has caused many women to seek ways to migrate for work or emigrate permanently. The favored destinations are often receiving countries for women trafficked for sexual exploitation.

Western glamour with its emphasis on women's appearance, cosmetics and fashion was quickly embraced by many women in the Soviet Union as a relief from the imposed drabness of communism. In the book *No More Heroines? Russia, Women and the Market*, the authors describe the change in Russian women brought about by the importation of Western glamour from communist worker heroine to sex object.

"[T]he new preoccupation with glamour and sexuality was the final element of the equation which was to determine the nature of change in women's lives as the planned economy moved towards its ultimate breakdown. With the relaxation of censorship from the mid-1980s, the Soviet media began with ever increasing boldness to discuss sex, display nudity and dabble with erotic imagery. The process of liberalization began very much as an attempt to sweep away the hypocrisy and prudishness of the post-Stalin years and in particular, to combat the widespread ignorance that was producing alarming levels of teenage abortion, sexually transmitted disease and hasty, ill-starred marriages. Yet, it almost immediately produced an entirely new iconography for Soviet women. In place of the woman worker in overalls and hard hat came the scantily-clad glamour model draped over a gleaming, usually foreign, car bonnet,

inviting the onlooker not to produce but to consume” (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 28).

By the early 1990s, Western style beauty contests were fashionable among women and society and profitable for the pageant promoters. The possibility of achieving the dream was reinforced when Irina Pantaeva, a Buryat from Siberia, became a successful international model (Pantaeva, 1998). Increasingly plays contained nudity, rock music videos displayed women’s breasts, and sexualized images of women were used to market consumer goods (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 30). Quickly, glamour turned to pornography and sexual exploitation. Imported and locally made pornography became widely available (Azhgikhina, 2001, p. 228).

“With the abandonment of controls, pornography in particular has become extremely high profile. The sheer quantity of images of female nudes on display in Russian cities is very difficult to convey: within months of Russia’s independence it had become commonplace for pornography to festoon virtually any public space where trading was taking place” (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 165).

Along with this came increasing employment recruitments based on appearance. Advertisements, such as these collected by NGO members were common: “Secretaries required: attractive girls with office experience, age 18-22, at least 168 cms. Tall”; “Pretty girl under 25.”

Sexual exploitation and the sex industry came hand in hand with Western style glamour to the Russian Federation. Even in the early beauty pageants, contestants reported that if they expected to win they had to have sex with the organizers and the judges, and in one case, even the lighting technicians (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 170). There was increasing sexual exploitation of models and the assumption by many that models were prostitutes. “Glamour modeling” became a euphemism for prostitution (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 165).

Prostitution was glamorized in Russian media by popular films such as *Interdevochka* (1990) in which a woman works as a “hard currency prostitute.” A much reported 1997 survey of 15-year-old schoolgirls found that 70 percent of schoolgirls said they wanted to be prostitutes. Ten years before, 70 percent said wanted to be cosmonauts, doctors, or teachers (Karina, 1999). Some people have claimed that this finding is an indication of the decline in moral standards or the social acceptability of prostitution. It is unlikely that many 15-year-old schoolgirls truly know the realities of prostitution. This finding is more likely an indication of how the media has glamorized and romanticized prostitution.

The biggest problem with influx of sexualized glamour was that few could differentiate between liberalization and exploitation. Women themselves were slow to respond to the insurgence of the sex industry. Most criticisms were aimed at the wide, public display of pornography, not the pornography itself (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 181). With feminism being demonized in the former Soviet Union, women, and society in general, were left without analytical tools to name and counter the increasing sexualization and exploitation of women. Women, young women in particular, had no opportunities to learn about the negative aspects of pornography, prostitution, and the sex

industry. According to some observers, “the lack of clarity in women’s own minds has resulted in what can appear to be extreme naivety” (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 170-171).

Some of the first women known to be trafficked from Russia were models. Women were offered contracts abroad “to model,” but their destination was the sex industry. By the mid 1990s, there were numerous reports in the Russian press of women going abroad for “modeling assignments” who were used in prostitution or the making of pornography by organized crime groups in Italy, Germany, Turkey and the United States (Bridger et al., 1996, p. 172).

The promotion of western glamour in the media has had a profound psychological effect on some women in Russia. Some women deeply believe in the fantasies portrayed by films and advertising. Representatives of anti-trafficking NGOs say that girls’ dreams and values have changed since perestroika. Now, many girls dream of becoming models, traveling or moving to other countries, and marrying rich men. According to one NGO representative, “Formerly, everyone was patriotic. Such wishes would have been shameful” (Personal communication with NGO representative, Irkutsk, Russia, 14 August 2001). Few of the young women comprehend the slim possibility of them becoming international models. If they are considered pretty in their families or towns, then they think becoming a model is possible. For these women, trafficking prevention programs are believed to be “scare campaigns” to keep them at home (Personal communication with representative of the Angel Coalition, Moscow, Russia, 7 August 2001). One psychologist reported that after some trafficking victims returned home they are prepared to accept another offer to go abroad because they are sure that their first experience was an anomaly and it couldn’t happen again (Personal communication with representative, St. Petersburg Psychological Center for Women, St. Petersburg, Russia, 18 August 2001).

When women from anti-trafficking NGOs give prevention programs in towns throughout Russia, they find that many women are “naïve” about the realities of offers to go abroad. Women strongly believe in the good life abroad, where they will easily make a lot of money. They are told that their travel expenses will be paid by “someone who wants to fund you.” Their destinations are described as “Hollywood fantasies.” One woman was told she would stay on a yacht, and only have sex if she wanted to (Personal communication with representative of Angel Coalition, Moscow, Russia, 7 August 2001).

Suspicious advertisements appear in newspapers for “attractive girls [who] want to work in sphere of fashion” (Personal communication with NGO representative, Irkutsk, Russia, 14 August 2001). There are legitimate modeling agencies, but some are fronts for traffickers. The agencies have contracts that the women sign, but once the women are abroad, the conditions of the contract change or are ignored. Some modeling agencies are known as “one day agencies,” meaning they open for business, recruit a number of women, and then disappear. They often reopen later in another location, under another name. They are known to be traffickers, but the police never interfere with their operation (Personal communication with NGO representative, Irkutsk, Russia, 14 August 2001).

Another tactic that traffickers use to recruit women is to organize fashion shows or modeling competitions for local girls. Some of them may be legitimate, but many of

them use these competitions to recruit girls and women to go abroad. A woman from Irkutsk said:

“My friend, who was a student, left three years ago. No one has heard from her since then. We asked the police to look for her, but they can tell us nothing. I think maybe she is dead now” (Personal communication with anonymous woman, Irkutsk, 15 August 2001).

There is a profound contrast between current standard of living in Russia and the glamorized images of the west that appear in the media. The belief that the wealthy western standard of living can be achieved by moving to or working in the west drives many women to accept suspicious offers of work or opportunities abroad. The traffickers prey upon the women’s dreams of a better future.

Conclusion

A number of powerful factors are operating in combination to create the severe problem of trafficking in women from the Russian Federation. The collapse of the state and the economy caused widespread unemployment for women. In addition, women lost many of the social welfare benefits previously provided by the state. The criminalization of the state and the economy has limited opportunities for women entrepreneurs and allowed organized crime groups to flourish. The corruption of state officials and police has blocked law reform and action to stop the recruitment and trafficking of women from Russia.

Russian officials refuse to take responsibility to stop the trafficking of women. The following is the comment of Mr. Goryainov, Ministry of Internal Affairs, on trafficking of women:

“The Interior Ministry is not particularly concerned about that problem as there are no criminal contents in it. All offenses against the women who departed are committed in the territories of the countries to which they go. That means it is those countries’ problem. In general, the discussion about trafficking women has come to us from the West. The noise on that occasion is maintained by audacious feminist organizations that promise help, but do not help the victims in any way. They receive grants and for the money disseminate information that does not correspond to the reality” (Moscow Helsinki Group, 2000, p. 259-260).

Women’s lives are often difficult because of domestic violence, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. Lack of recourse to end the violence and harassment also propels women to look for options to leave the city or country in search of work and safety abroad. Unfortunately, for so many they only encounter further violence and exploitation in sex industries.

Trafficking in women for sex industries is a supply and demand trade. This paper has focused only on the factors creating a supply of women who can be recruited by traffickers. No matter what the size of the supply, the trade in women would not exist without the demand from sex industries in destination countries. As long as unemployment, lack of opportunities, inescapable violence and harassment, and unrealistic expectations of the West exist, criminals will be able to recruit women from Russia and traffic them into sex industries abroad.

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¹ Trafficking is defined in the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, supplementing the *United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime*.

(a) ‘Trafficking in persons’ shall mean the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, or abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs;

(b) The consent of the victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.

(c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of sexual exploitation shall be considered “trafficking in persons” even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;

(d) “Child” shall mean any person under eighteen years of age.

² For a detailed discussion of organized crime and the trafficking of women from the Russian Federation, see Donna M. Hughes. (2002). *Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation: The Case of the Russian Federation*. IOM Migration Research Series, No. 7. Geneva: International Organization for Migration.