Trafficking Women After Socialism: From, To, and Through Eastern Europe

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1 This presentation is drawn from our chapter in a forthcoming collection on human trafficking edited by Sutapa Basu and Nancy Hartsock, University of Washington Press.
Abstract: The collapse of communism in 1989 catapulted the countries of eastern Europe into the global economy, moving them from relative isolation to the periphery of the marketized economy. With the region's borders more porous and labor more flexible, the commodification of sex has increased in scope and global reach. Political and economic liberalization as well as internal and international militarism have produced both a demand for and supply of sex workers in and from eastern Europe who provide new and mostly white "talent" for the global sex trade. Part of the ever-expanding global service economy, the sex trade has an invisible component: the trafficking of persons for prostitution that includes practices of debt bondage, deception and other forms of coercion. This paper reviews current trafficking patterns of women and girls from, to, and through eastern Europe, noting the structural significance of poverty. As human rights discourses circulate widely around the world, trafficking not only persists but has expanded.

The traffic in women for sexual labor is an ever-present feature of globalization, beginning with its first wave over a hundred years ago and continuing today. Its recent expansion in Europe is largely a consequence of post-socialist transformation and the integration of women and children from the former socialist states into the global sex trade. While the extent of trafficking and its geographic reach and routes have changed, its structural causes and organization remain remarkably consistent. Consider this quote from Human Rights Watch testimony presented on April 24, 2002, to the House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights on “Trafficking of Women and Girls to Bosnia and Herzegovina for Forced Prostitution:” The choice of testimonial example is arbitrary; it echoes the almost formulaic nature of such accounts around the world:

Trafficking flourishes throughout the world, aided by corruption, complicity, and neglect by states. Seeking better lives and opportunities, trafficking victims migrate only to find themselves trapped in debt bondage, forced labor, and slavery-like conditions. The UN has estimated that as many as 700,000 people

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2 Although men and especially boys are also trafficked, their numbers are far smaller. They are not, in consequence, a focus of this brief review. See, for example, the Liviu Tiparitu's clandestinely made documentary film, Easy Prey: Inside the Child Sex Trade, on boys who are prostituted in Romania and also trafficked from there; this film was aired on CNN on February 15, also on February 28 and 29, March 6 and 7, 2004.
are trafficked into forced labor and forced prostitution around the world each year...The investigations uncovered extensive trafficking into the country (Bosnia and Herzegovina), with traffickers luring women from their homes in Moldova, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and Bulgaria with promises of high wages and good jobs. Traffickers quickly broke those promises, selling the women to bar and nightclub owners for prices ranging from $231 to $2,314)...Trafficking of persons cannot flourish without the cooperation of state officials and law enforcement authorities (Vandenberg 2002).

In 1990, soon after the collapse of communism in eastern Europe, Professor Kligman participated in a plenary session for this annual conference of the Council of European Studies. Asked to reflect on what could be learned from the events in eastern Europe, she focused on the role of second economies in the undermining of those regimes and suggested that we should pay attention to secondary economic phenomena with respect to global capitalism: in particular, to underground trafficking in persons, drugs, and arms. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and others have added grim data on trafficking in organs as well to this list that darkens human rights all over the world.

One of the most striking images of the changes in eastern Europe soon after 1989 was that of women lining the highways across the region, offering sex for sale. Since the collapse of communism, political and economic liberalization --and upheaval --as well as internal and international militarism have created new opportunity structures and daunting economic uncertainties that have produced both a demand for and a supply of sex workers in and from eastern Europe. The majority of these sex workers are women and girls, the recent CNN report on boys trafficked from Romania notwithstanding. Whether working part-time to supplement income, full-time voluntarily or in a sex club, or forced in the context of trafficking, prostitution is a stable, ever-expanding feature of the global service economy.
While it is extremely important to focus on trafficking, it is also important to situate trafficking—largely invisible—in relation to the socially acceptable, visible aspects of the sex trade. As borders have become more porous and labor more flexible yet scare, the commodification as well as exploitation of sex have increased in scope and global reach. Since 1989, the sex industry in all of its diverse forms, ranging from phone sex, nude entertainment, pornographic magazines and films, and sex trafficking, has helped bring Central East Europe into the global economy, primary and secondary. Since the collapse of communism, eastern Europe has offered a steady supply of new workers for the sex trade without much threat of institutional regulation and enforcement.

One of the key features of post-socialist change has been the restructuring of the labor market and of social inequalities. This re-stratification of the labor market has been differentially sharpened according to gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and citizenship. It is especially striking how critical class is as a variable in trafficking: poverty, urban and especially rural, is a consistent factor. There is a strong correlation between poverty rates and source countries. Many women engage in the diversity of sex trade opportunities because of the potential for high incomes unobtainable from other occupations. Still others, enticed by seeming job opportunities elsewhere, find themselves sold into sex slavery. However women come to “sell their bodies,” doing so usually forms part of an economic strategy, often endorsed or encouraged by other family members. Equally often, they and the women in question are uninformed about the risks such job opportunities entail. There are few positive stories associated with trafficking.

Most recent reports on trafficking in the region concur in the patterns of source, transit and destination countries, although the numbers vary enormously. We can not
review them here, but mention some of the trends. The fast-track NATO and EU accession countries, especially Hungary and Poland, are variously considered to be source, transit and destination countries. The U.S. Department of State has classified Hungary as a Tier 2 country that does not yet fully comply with the minimal provisions of Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 but that is making efforts. Poland is classified as a Tier 1 country, fully complying with the Act’s minimum standard. The classifications obviously warrant critical scrutiny in that trafficking is alive and well in Poland as it is in the US, also listed as a Tier 1 country. For example, Tier 1 countries include those that deport victims and do not provide them with any assistance, as has been the case in Poland according to the report itself (U.S. Department of State 2003, p.121).

Poland finds women and girls trafficked from further east—Russia, Ukraine, Belarus—to and through Poland. Polish women are themselves trafficked primarily to Western Europe. Hungary is listed generally as more of a transit country than a source or destination country, with women from further east brought to and through Hungary en route to destinations further West. (Historically, Hungary at the end of the 19th century was a north-south transit country, not east-west as it is today.) Hungary is a good example of why prostitution in its diverse forms needs to be examined: Since 1989, Budapest has blossomed into a sex trade capital. Yet Hungary may not be viewed as a source country in large measure because so many Hungarian women are themselves involved in the sex trade there. In 1998, Budapest alone had an estimated 300 sex clubs operating. Tensions between the Ukrainian and Hungarian mafias controlling the trade and internal traffic—Roma women were among its victims—were heightened.
As to Hungary not being a destination country, it is rather difficult to believe. The war in Bosnia resulted in the emergence of brothels with local and trafficked women, especially in and around the town of Tazlar. Prostitution is found in and around military bases the world over. As US military planes landed in the Black Sea coast city of Constanta, Romania, at the beginning of the US war against Iraq, not surprisingly, prostitution burgeoned.³

The Balkans have long been described by scholars as the crossroads between East and West, and in the world of trafficking, the Balkans continue to function as such. Albania is a key source and transit country. Those being transited, mostly from Moldova and Romania, Ukraine, Bulgaria, continue on to Western Europe. And, not surprisingly, UNICEF notes that “the main trafficking routes into Albania follow the arms and drug smuggling routes, through Romania, Serbia and either Montenegro or FYR Macedonia” (Limanowska 2002; UNICEF Area Office for the Balkans 2000).

Bulgaria is similarly a source and transit country more than a destination country. The destinations vary, with Kosovo, the FYR Macedonia and Western Europe most prevalent today. According to Limanowska (2002), the number of Bulgarian women trafficked has declined, possibly in relation to increased enforcement. This may also correlate strongly with a somewhat more stabilized economy.

Bosnia is a destination point for women from Moldova, Romania, Ukraine as well as, if less so, from countries further east, such as Kazakhstan. The political and economic fragility of everyday life is conducive to trafficking—and arms and drugs are central there (as in the FYR Macedonia). A brief comment on numbers: IOM estimates that

³ Professor Kligman's comment about the likelihood of this emerging quickly was soon confirmed to her by an embassy staff member, as well as by a staff person at the SECI Center in Bucharest addressing
between 600-3000 trafficked women are in Bosnia and Herzegovina at any given time (International Office for Migration 2001). The variance is a bit too high to enable evaluation.

Romania is yet another source and transit country. Women from Moldova, Ukraine, and other former Soviet countries are trafficked to Turkey, Italy, Greece and the former Yugoslavia. Romanian women themselves are trafficked to France, or go more voluntarily as sex workers. The U.S. Department of State ranks Romania as a Tier 2 country making significant efforts to bring itself into compliance with the Trafficking Victim’s Protection Act’s minimum standards.

Western European countries, notably Germany and Italy, are prime destination countries. Estimates of the numbers of women trafficked there from across the globe vary enormously, as do estimates of the number of women from eastern Europe. At the end of the 1990s, Europol estimated that roughly several thousand individuals were trafficked into the EU each year for the transnational sex industry and that 90% originated from Central and eastern European states (Mameli 2002, p. 71). In 1998, the US Government estimated 175,000 women were trafficked from the former socialist countries annually, with 120,000 of them going to Western Europe. In March 2001, according to an IOM report, the European Commission reported some 120,000 women and children trafficked annually to Western Europe (International Office for Migration 2001). The State Department suggested in its 2002 report that 700,000 persons, mostly women and children, are trafficked annually across borders and in 2003, they increased the estimate to 800,000-900,000 (U.S. Department of State 2002; U.S. Department of State 2003).
Whatever the actual numbers, destination countries tend to be wealthier countries; again, class differentiation tells us a great deal, although not everything, about trafficking and the sex trade and who makes use of it. Yet, that said, Kosovo and Bosnia, as already mentioned, are considered to be destination countries and both are poor. However, in both Bosnia and Kosovo, war engendered the flourishing of trafficking—of women and girls, drugs, and arms under the auspices, to our knowledge, of competing mafias and complicit, corrupt individuals.

Needless to say, poverty is a primary factor in the lives of trafficked women and girls. Not surprisingly, Albania, Moldova and Romania, particularly the northeastern region, figure repeatedly among sending or source countries. Women are disproportionately affected by poverty globally, and in post-socialist countries, despite the historical commitment of the state toward the paid employment of women, this has also proven true.

Gendered labor market shifts have pushed women increasingly toward lower-paid and part time work. As industries are privatized, for example, men are increasingly dominating occupations and professions that had historically been inclusive of women, while women are being relegated to the shrinking public sector and the small-scale service sector (Gal and Kligman 2000, p. 61). Consequently, it is not surprising that we tend to see higher women’s unemployment rates compared to men’s, particularly in sending countries. For example, between 1994 and 1997, while Moldovan men experienced a slight decrease in their unemployment rate from 37% to 32%, Moldovan women’s unemployment rate went up from 62% to 68% (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, 2000, p. 10). In 1996, 70-80% of the unemployed in Ukraine were
women, 2/3 of whom had post high school degrees (Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights 2000, p. 11).

Within these countries, as elsewhere, rural women are believed to be represented disproportionately among trafficked women. For example, a UNICEF report on trafficking in human beings in southeastern Europe points out that the number of rural women has increased more recently (Limanowska 2002). It is worth underlining that agriculture in these countries has not been a funding priority in the post-socialist era and rural poverty has grown dramatically. (This has contributed also to Roma women’s incorporation into the sex trade and traffic throughout the region.) In her research on trafficking in organs in Moldova, Scheper-Hughes found in the course of fieldwork that while men were being enticed or duped into selling their kidneys, women and girls were being enticed or duped, often by the same intermediary, to sell their bodies. This is, again, not in the least surprising.

By way of conclusion, we want to again underscore that trafficking forms part of the global service economy into which women and children from the former socialist states have been incorporated, further diversifying the “labor pool.” In view of the heightened international attention to trafficking, it is often difficult to comprehend that women and girls do not necessarily know what awaits them. Professor Kligman’s interviews with a woman from Siberia dispelled any facile assumptions about awareness. Media are not as widespread as many of us presume, and the hope of a better life in the much fantasized west, for example, compels many to take risks when they are allegedly assured of job opportunities.
Yet awareness is surely an important factor in combating trafficking. In determining tier rankings, point three of the State Department Act of 2000 asks “whether the government has adopted measures, such as public education, to prevent trafficking.” This point strikes us as but one that warrants significant financial muscle behind it and concerted and coordinated efforts. In Moldova, a Tier 2 country, the IOM and the government have promoted a widespread campaign, using billboards and other media to advertise their message: “nu esti marfa.” You’re not a commodity (in essence, or "goods for sale"). Although increased awareness is not sufficient to eradicate trafficking since it does not combat poverty, it is certainly a necessary ingredient to any such process.

For example, the CDC in conjunction with Ministries of Health and NGOs throughout the region engaged in such campaigns to transform “abortion cultures” into contracepting ones and they have been reasonably successful. Similar public campaigns about and against trafficking, including in rural school curricula, churches and other institutions, would undoubtedly be beneficial. Funds would be better spent on such practical awareness campaigns (consciousness-raising used to be the term) than on expensive hotels for visiting experts.

As income disparities widen across the globe, it seems almost trite to state that poverty must be reduced rather than increased. The interests that drive trafficking in women and children are intimately related to those driving other dimensions of trafficking, including that in other forms of human labor. That forms of slavery continue to exist and are tacitly tolerated in the 21st century in which human rights discourses circulate across the globe is intolerable and hypocritical. Institutionally, it is fashionable to be against trafficking; being against it is necessary, however, it is not sufficient.
References


