Broken Lives, Desperate Choices

The Political Economy of Global Sex Trafficking

❍ Susan Runkle

In recent years, the Indian media has done several exposés on how global sex trafficking mafias have set up shop in India and how the women they bring from the former Soviet bloc countries and the collapsed regimes of Eastern Europe as sex workers are hot favourites with the nouveau riche Indian men because of their fair skin and western appearance. This article provides a glimpse into the factors and conditions that force women from these countries to be sucked into sex trade. This article is based on the author's field and archival research under very dangerous conditions in Armenia.

Millions of women throughout the world are trafficked each year, brought from their homes to perform sex work in conditions which often provide them with little to no pay, as well as inadequate food and housing. Often, they have initially been promised jobs that do not involve sex work. These women are victimised because they are poor, because they have little or no other prospects for employment, and, above all, because they are women. Definitions aside, the reality of the situation is essentially this: comparatively privileged men buy the bodies of poor women, because they can. Politico-economic analyses (e.g. Bishop 1998) have been particularly enlightening, as they allow for an analysis of the root causes of sex trafficking in specific historical and cultural locations.

Louise Brown succinctly describes the reasons for the existence of trafficking as transcending poverty, noting that it represents a macro-level view of the distorted power relations between men and women, the wealthy and the poor and those who have access to resources and those who do not.

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"The sex industry makes money because it buys cheap raw materials and packages them well" she notes, "It turns vulnerability into a commodity and that commodity into a profit" (2000: 60). This commoditization of vulnerability makes it all the more essential to draw a very sharp defining line between what constitutes labor migration and what it means to be trafficked for sex work.

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The Interpol Working Group on Trafficking in Women and Children, ratified by its 181 member countries in 2000, distinguishes migration from trafficking because in the case of trafficking "the intention is to exploit the victim after the illegal entry has been accomplished, whereas the smugglers' relationship with the victims normally ends once the illegal entry has been achieved." (2000). As such, it is clear that women who are victims of sex trafficking face a special set of issues that migrants do not, not least of which is the lack of option to return to their place of origin of their own free will.

A Crime against No One

In the case of Armenia, as in most areas where it is an issue of concern, sex trafficking is a problem with both multiple facets and limited scope for solutions. It is a product of a historical period in which criminal elements are able to capitalise on the economic and socio-political instability of the

countries of the collapsed socialist bloc through the relatively simple acquisition of forged passports as well as a pool of women who have few, if any, other resources with which to support themselves and their children.

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It is far too easy to condemn the actions of the traffickers, or, more insidiously, the women who choose to migrate to perform sex work, without understanding the context in which the problem itself has arisen. In Moldova, for example, 30 per cent of women who are returned to their place of origin after being victims of trafficking "disappear" within months of their return, as they find themselves in the same unstable economic situation that they initially sought to escape.

Factors that Facilitate

In 1920, the Red Army forced Armenia to accept a communist-dominated government in which Armenian autonomy was subjugated to Soviet rule. Since then, political and economic instability have combined with natural calamities, like the earthquake of 1998, to make a large proportion of the population internally displaced persons (IDPs) or migrants to neighbouring states like Russia. This added to the trend of seasonal migration of labour that has prevailed since the 1960s.

In September 1989, Azerbaijan and Turkey began a blockage of Armenian fuel and supply lines over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. The war over Nagorno-Karabakh produced 218,950 refugees on the Armenian side and 185,000 on the Azeri, with the creation of an additional 72,000 internally displaced persons. In the winter of 1991-1992, 80percent of industry and transport could not function due to a complete lack of electricityleading to more than 250,000 people leaving the country. The Armenian Diaspora numbers 5.5 million people, approximately one and a half times the population of Armenia, and since 1991, between 800,000 and 1 million people have emigrated out of a total population of four million.

Socio-political crises have resulted in the creation of a situation in which it has become relatively easy for traffickers to exploit existing weaknesses in a destabilised social structure. The dissolution of the Soviet Union meant that its population registration system was also destroyed, which makes it extremely difficult to ascertain the numbers of women trafficked each year from Armenia. Social structures which would have formerly served to support women have been fundamentally destabilised following the breakup of the Soviet bloc, and the privatisation initiatives of the Government of Armenia between 1998 and 2000 only further served to marginalize women, who cross-culturally form the bulk of the poor.

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Indeed, women have been most affected by socio-economic crises in Armenia. As an increasing number of men migrate for work, one-third of Armenian households are currently female-headed. Although women constitute 45 per cent of the workforce, they are also 66 per cent of the unemployed, and women's wages are just over half that of men's. 70 per cent of the officially registered unemployed are women, and women form the majority of workers in the informal sector. Such statistics are complicated by the existence of what are often termed "traditional" gender roles, which position men as the main economic unit in the household and further marginalises women who are single parents.

These inequalities make young, divorced or abandoned women particularly vulnerable to being trafficked. An unstable economic situation, limited opportunities for employment, coupled with gender norms which consider divorced

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women and single mothers abnormal and even "anti-family", positions such women as social outcasts who have to negotiate a larger social structure which effectively works against them at every turn. Migration is often seen as the only source of income with which to support themselves and their families.

A Desperate Choice

Women constitute the majority of illegal migrants from Armenia. It is impossible to ascertain the percentages of these women who are performing sex work, or how many undocumented workers exist. At some level, however, the numbers are irrelevant, as the existence of the problem itself warrants concern.

Psychological torture, the systematic deprivation of contact with others who are not clients, is another, particularly destabilizing, technique by which traffickers gradually assert complete control over their victims.

It is crucial to remember that women who choose to migrate to perform sex work, as well as those who are deceived by traffickers with offers of legitimate employment abroad only to be forced into sex work are not making irrational decisions. While their choice to leave their place of origin is definitely risky, it is also the result of a life situation in which there are often no other choices to be considered. As such, it is imperative that analyses of trafficking be sensitive to the fact that women who migrate are not making unintelligent decisions, but rather desperate ones.

Who are the Traffickers?

Sex trafficking is a high profit, low risk criminal activity in that it generates an enormous amount of profit for those in control of it while presenting very little possibility of prosecution. Because traffickers prey on the most marginalized members of society, poor women, their activities are often ignored. This is, of course, compounded by the fact that reliable documentation on the extent of trafficking is nearly impossible to ascertain due to its clandestine nature. Unlike drug trafficking, which presents a relatively high risk of being caught along with a high profit margin, sex trafficking can often be masked via the construction of false fronts such as employment agencies and marriage bureaus, enabling traffickers to justify the movement of women across borders without much interference at the state level.

Yet traffickers are as often a part of informal networks as they are of the large-scale organized criminal networks which operate mainly in Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Bulgaria. Such networks exist simultaneously, which allows for the loose organization of trafficking networks, a characteristic which enables them to fragment and reform quickly even when disrupted by police intervention. Above all, traffickers are criminal elements who thrive in situations of instability, war and economic hardship, exploiting human suffering to their own advantage.

Far beyond Armenia, sex trafficking is part of a global phenomenon which moves women from areas as diverse as Myanmar to Cambodia, rural to urban Thailand,

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Nepal to India, Ukraine and the CIS to Dubai and Turkey, the Philippines to Japan, China to Malaysia and Singapore. Ethnicity also plays a role in the demographics of trafficking, with the movement of women from Southeastern Europe to Southeast Asia, Eastern Europe to Central America and the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) to the Gulf countries.

In Armenia, an estimated 45 per cent of women have experienced domestic violence, a crime which can seriously compromise one's sense of self-worth. As such, it is essential to consider that many women who are trafficked are victims before they even leave the country.

Means of Control

Traffickers derive their power from a variety of sources, all of which combine to create a situation from which escape is often impossible. The primary source of their power lies in the system of debt bondage, in which women are forced to perform sex work without pay, sometimes for years, in order to "repay" the cost of being trafficked, including their plane fare and dubious fees which are more often than not fabrications. Traffickers also maintain control over women through physical and linguistic isolation.

Women's documents, especially their passports, are often taken from them once they reach their destination, which robs them not only of their proof of identity, but also of their sense of self. Without documentation, women are powerless to escape, even if they have the opportunity to do so. In addition to this, traffickers use violence and fear, as well as threats of reprisals against the victim's family, in order to guarantee their acquiescence. Psychological torture, the systematic deprivation of contact

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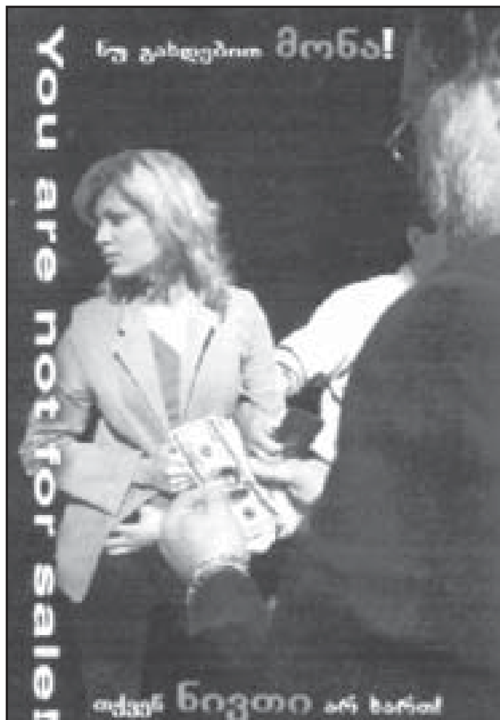
Despite these circumstances, however, women do survive the dehumanizing experience of being trafficked. This rhetoric of victimhood serves both to infantilize women and to obscure the realities of sex trafficking. Trafficking is not primarily about sex: it is about the systematic exploitation of those who have no



other choices in life. However, prevailing cultural assumptions about the nature of sex work often serve to complicate not only the lives of women who perform sex work, but also the efforts at combating the problem.

Fighting an Unseen Foe

On October 14, 2002, Resolution No. 591-A established the Inter-Departmental Committee on Trafficking in Armenia, which created protocols for the investigation and prosecution of traffickers as well as a pan-governmental board of individuals who will ideally work together to combat trafficking. This legislation defines trafficking as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person by means of coercion, or by abduction, fraud or deception, abuse of power or position of vulnerability" and proposes a punishment of three hundred to five hundred times the minimum national salary (which is currently at 13,000 drams, or approximately $23 per month), one year of public service, or imprisonment from one to four years. Sentences increase to prison terms of four to seven years if the trafficking case has involved a minor or use of force or threats against life, and to a period of five to eight years if an organized criminal group has been involved in the case, or if the death of the victim has been caused.

Yet the main question remains: how can formal legislation combat what is essentially a clandestine phenomenon? It is perhaps in recognition of this fact that the International Organization for Migration (IOM) concluded that the solutions to the problem of trafficking are five-fold. The first is awareness raising, which

includes public information campaigns, the sensitization of public officials (particularly those who work with travel documents which are necessary for the trafficking of women), media and NGOs and the training of staff working in Armenian embassies and consulates.

Throughout the CIS, awareness raising has taken the form of post-card size leaflets, designed for quick distribution in public places, which are extremely evocative in nature. The images on them are extremely graphic, as well as effective; from a picture of a doll-like woman trapped in a plastic box, the label of which reads "Lorena" to one of a woman covered by a bar code such as one would find on an item for sale in the grocery store, holding the bars and crying, these images convey the reality of trafficking. One of the most powerful images, however, is the least graphic: it shows a Georgian woman looking disturbed, yet resolute, as a male hand extends money toward her while another male hand tries to take her passport. The caption reads, in emphatic red Georgian and English letters, "You are not for sale!"

The second IOM recommendation to combat trafficking is, of course, the prosecution of traffickers. This is easier said than done due to the ability of the criminal elements who form trafficking networks to fragment and regroup much more quickly than law enforcement is able to respond. IOM advocates longer prison terms for those convicted of trafficking, as well as the development of legal mechanisms for the confiscation of the assets gained by traffickers in order to make them available as compensation for their victims. In addition to this, IOM suggests that the Government of Armenia regulate and monitor all companies that arrange for young women to travel abroad, as well as undertake greater measures to combat corruption at all levels of the government in regard to trafficking.

Third, IOM recommends the adoption of protection and assistance measures to victims via the establishment of links between various organizations, from NGOs to women's groups, in order to better serve women who have been victims of trafficking. This would further involve the creation of shelters, improved access to psychological and health care as well as assistance in finding employment. IOM also advocates the implementation of measures which would provide what they term "a safe and dignified return" of women to Armenia.

Additional IOM recommendations in order to improve the situation in regard to trafficking in Armenia are further research into the subject, as well as economic development in the region. Certainly, such broad-reaching, albeit important, recommendations underscore the extremely problematic nature of trafficking as a social phenomenon, and raises the question as to how to improve life for the most marginalized members of society when there is so very much else to be done.

Politico-Economic Roots

It would be ludicrous to assert that men have not also been victimized by the vast economic changes which have swept the countries of the former Soviet Union since 1991. The difference between the experience of men and women, however, is a profound one, and lies in the deeply embedded gender norms which are endemic throughout the world. When economic systems are in a state of flux, women's bodies, whether via their commoditization of the female form in institutions like the Miss India pageant (Runkle 2004) or the international sex industry (Chapkis 2002), are all too often viewed as objects for sale.

The problem of sex trafficking is not just about changes in an economic system, but something much more profound: a view of women that perceives them as items available for male consumption. Were it not for the existence of pre-existing gendered social structures such as sex work itself, sex trafficking could not exist. In looking for solutions it follows that broader understandings of what it means for women to survive in a gendered world need to be incorporated into the formulation of recommendations to ameliorate what is clearly a mere symptom of the greater disease of gender in equality.

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