



RISKY

Road To Nowhere A prostitute waits for customers along the main road to Germany in Pilsen, Czech Republic.



BUSINESS

The world's oldest profession invites new probing as human trafficking exacerbates the AIDS epidemic

By MEGAN QUITKIN

Often misconstrued as a thing of the past, human slavery is a current global phenomenon that thrives on poverty, corruption, and political unrest. The highly lucrative commercial trade of human beings forces innocent victims into work for which they receive little or no compensation, health care, or autonomy. People can be trafficked for a variety of purposes, but while men and older boys are usually trafficked for manual labor, women and children in several parts of the world, and particularly in some former Soviet states of Eastern Europe, are largely sold for sexual purposes.

2624917. PHOTO BY SEAN GALLUP/GETTY IMAGES

“Trafficked persons are disposable commodities,” says Maureen Greenwood, advocacy director for Amnesty International. “They’re forced into sex work for a few years, they’re broken, they contract HIV, and then they’re gone. These are human rights victims who are falling through the cracks.”

“It’s probably easier to smuggle human beings than it is to smuggle arms,” says Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director of Equality Now, which mobilizes public pressure to end violence and discrimination against women and girls around the world.

Apart from human trafficking’s assault on the personal dignity of a society’s most vulnerable members, its close link to the commercial sex industry is making it a flash point among campaigners battling the global spread of AIDS. But it is also

While there may be disagreements about how many individuals are affected, there’s little doubt about who is most vulnerable: Women and children living in an environment of poverty, unemployment, family (including sexual) violence, gender discrimination, and low levels of education. According to a March 2005 report sponsored by UNICEF, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, these are the conditions that currently make South Eastern European women a high-risk group.

To be sure, the issue is not restricted to Eastern Europe, but there is evidence the human trade there is expanding exponentially, though

notes that her country’s problem may now rival the situation that has been long documented in Asian countries. “Girls with a Slavic appearance are very in demand,” she says.

“[T]here’s an urban legend that women from Eastern Europe are particularly beautiful and model-like,” echoes Equality Now’s Bien-Aimé. “Also, these women are Caucasian so they blend easier in western countries.”

“Sixty to eighty percent of the women who phone our emergency hotline report that they were seeking jobs as babysitters, shop assistants or at hotel reception desks,” says Kateryna Cherepakha, the social programs coordinator for La Strada-Ukraine, a preventative NGO that assists rescued victims of human trafficking. Extremely manipulative, traffickers often rely

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spurring a heated debate on the nature of prostitution, with one side arguing that an end to sex for sale will put the traffickers out of business, while the other says empowering prostitutes through legalization and the more preferable decriminalization is a more reasonable approach. In addition, there’s new scrutiny on business travelers who patronize underage prostitutes on international trips, whose demand, it is argued, is a key factor that keeps traffickers on the hunt.

BY THE NUMBERS

Determining the precise number of trafficking victims isn’t easy. In its June 2005 “Trafficking in Persons Report,” the U.S. Department of State contends that between 600,000 to 800,000 persons are trafficked across international borders each year. But the United Nations sees that as a very conservative figure: it estimates that approximately 4 million persons are trafficked each year.

some suggest that increased regional research in the former Soviet states is simply illuminating statistics that were formerly unavailable.

“There’s been a great problem with human trafficking in Moldova, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, and Russia itself since the fall of the Soviet Union,” says Phil Lane, development director of Oasis, a Christian organization that works with poor urban populations around the world and has partnered with ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking in Children for Sexual Purposes) to sponsor the Business Travellers Against Human Trafficking campaign.

In Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States, some estimates say traffickers transport as many as 50,000 women for commercial sexual exploitation each year. Elena Yurova, public health director for the Angel Coalition, which works in Russia to prevent sexual trafficking and rehabilitate rescued victims,

on snowball sampling techniques—or word-of-mouth strategies—to attract groups of women who know each other. “Women often hear about these jobs from other women or friends of friends,” says Cherepakha. “The traffickers know where your family lives, and they can threaten you with that.”

“During the [Soviet] transition years... there was a lot of instability,” Oasis’ Lane adds. “Women were the first to lose their jobs, so if a trafficker offered a job in Italy, a woman was more likely to say yes because she needs to feed her family.”

BROTHEL BOOM

Eastern Europe may also be prone to trafficking due to its preponderance of international peacekeepers. In a report on Serbia and Montenegro, for example, Amnesty International found that almost immediately following the July 1999 deployment of international peacekeeping forces to Kosovo, the country became a major destination



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for women and girls trafficked into forced prostitution.

“When the peacekeepers first arrived in Bosnia and Kosovo, these were small backwater places that suddenly had thousands of international peacekeeping troops,” says Amnesty’s Greenwood. “The brothel business absolutely exploded in response...a small-scale local market for prostitution was transformed into a large-scale industry based on trafficking predominantly run by organized criminal networks.”

Amnesty found that by July 2003, Kosovo had more than 200 bars, cafes, restaurants, and clubs in which trafficked women were believed to be working in forced prostitution; the majority were forced to have unprotected sex, with only 40 percent reporting they “occasionally” used condoms. “A lot of these women weren’t being paid and were held in slave-like conditions,” says Greenwood. Notes Oasis’ Lane, “There have been a lot of well-known scandals where peacekeepers have been involved in trafficking or in the use of trafficked women.”

Not surprisingly, the brothel owners who purchase trafficked women have little regard for their health. “Most of the customers don’t like to use condoms,” says the Angel Coalition’s Yurova, who notes that medical check-ins are rare in brothels. “The service is customer-oriented: if the client wants to pay a bit more, the brothel owner will let him have sex without a condom.”

Needless to say, AIDS risks for trafficked women are quite high. “If a woman has no consent as to how to use her body and protect herself, she cannot say no to sex, let alone protected or unprotected sex,” says Equality Now’s Bien-Aimé. “She has no access to medical services. She doesn’t know the country she’s in; she has no documents; she doesn’t speak the language; and she doesn’t have access to phones or people who could help her. The HIV/AIDS risk is already tenfold for women and girls, but that number quadruples for trafficked women.”

Exacerbating the situation are ill-informed male customers taken in by common disease myths; some

Police Raid A group of young Chinese prostitutes weep and hide their faces after law enforcement agents break into their brothel.

believe, for example, that there’s an inverse relationship between age and AIDS vulnerability, so they seek out younger prostitutes thinking they are less likely to contract HIV—even though biological factors render girls much more likely to acquire the disease during sex than women with more sophisticated reproductive systems. In some countries, AIDS myths are so pervasive that men still believe sex with a virgin will rid them of their positive disease status. In India, for example, where Oasis’ Lane spent several years working with Mumbai street children, he found that young girls living on a railway station were often raped by men who were HIV positive. “This is a very popular myth all around the world,” he laments. “Girls sometimes get trafficked so HIV positive men can use them for this purpose.”

WANT SEX, WILL TRAVEL

According to UNICEF, an estimated two million children—mainly girls but also a significant number of boys—are part of the multibillion-dollar sex trade. ECPAT USA believes that outside of the United States, 25 percent of sex tourists—those who specifically travel to foreign countries for the explicit purpose of engaging in commercial sex—are American. Children make up a large percentage of the sex industry in countries like Cambodia and Mexico; the former, along with Thailand and the Philippines, is a popular destination spot for many of the sex tours one can arrange by simply typing those words into Internet search engines.

In 1996, *Business Week* magazine reported that the United States was home to at least 25 sex tour companies. Ten years later, Equality Now’s Bien-Aimé notes that it took her organization a staggering seven years to shut down the New York City-based Big Apple Oriental Tours. For \$2,195, BAOT promised its customers 12-day trips to the Philippines, including transportation, airfare, hotel, and the sex tourist’s ability to “select

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At the April 2004 North American launch of the “Code of Conduct,” UNICEF, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) and ECPAT called on travel professionals, lawmakers, educators, and the international community to protect children from sexual exploitation at all tourist destinations. Now, Christian NGO Oasis and ECPAT have joined forces to create Business Travellers Against Human Trafficking.

“There’s a lot of work being done against child sex tourism in general, but there doesn’t seem to be anything specifically targeting the business community,” said Lane, explaining the rationale for such a program.

Officially launched November 9, 2005, at the European Parliament, the campaign seeks to raise awareness about young women and child sexual exploitation and get business travelers to report—and voice complaints—if they suspect any child sexual abuse. A series of campaigns will be geographically targeted; Dubai is first and will be followed by Cambodia.

“When a business person says to a hotel, ‘I’m not happy with what’s going on,’ that has a great deal of weight because that person may travel frequently and may use premium services,” explains Lane, who notes that when he lived in Mumbai, 9-year-old girls were often sold for sex outside a major hotel. “Businesspeople are the exact clientele hotels want to attract. If they say, ‘This is not acceptable,’ it resonates.”

It is also important to focus on the private sector because paid sex is often considered part of the busi-

ness culture. Alluding to a phenomenon that the Global Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS’ executive director Trevor Neilson calls “corporate account sex,” Lane worries about businessmen engaging in sex with minors while traveling because it is seen as an acceptable part of business entertainment.

Sexual stereotyping of certain racial groups and rationalizing that sex with children in other countries is somehow permissible must be removed from the business mentality, Lane says. “People have a whole range of psychological justifications,” he notes. “They tell themselves that they’re in a poor country and they’re helping the girl’s family; that it’s essential to her survival.” The reality, of course, is that if business travelers—or any travelers for that matter—want to help impoverished children, there are a host of non-profit organizations that work toward this purpose without exploiting any individuals they serve. “It’s an absolutely ridiculous argument that we should abuse someone’s human rights to help them,” said Lane. “It hides the motivation for excusing sexual desires.”

The Business Travellers Campaign does not target specific industries, but Lane notes that businesses which isolate male workers from their families for extended time periods often become hotspots for trafficked women and children. In Brazil, for example, he

Boulevard of Broken Dreams A man is arrested on “the track” in Pomona, California after stopping his car to talk to a female police officer posing as a prostitute.



51738422. PHOTO BY DAVID MCNEWE/GETTY IMAGES



2624921. PHOTO BY SEAN GALLUP/GETTY IMAGES

Night Lights A neon sign advertises a brothel in Czech Republic, which has become a major transit point for human trafficking from eastern Europe to western Europe.

notes that many young Amazonian girls are trafficked to residential mining camps in the northeast of the country. Restructuring business so that men aren't separated from their families may require massive and time-consuming overhauls, but in the meantime the private sector can play a role on the rehabilitative side. Said Amnesty International's Greenwood, "[Rescued] people need to be employed, trained, and often retrained in alternative skill sets. We'd like to see business come forward with some of these training programs."

THE WORLD'S OLDEST PROFESSION

Given the fact that so many trafficked women and children are forced to work in the sex industry, many activists argue that eliminat-

ing prostitution goes to the root of the problem that makes women and children vulnerable to human traders. Of course, many counter that we will never eradicate a business that has been around since the birth of mankind.

Societies have generally taken three general policies on prostitution: suppression or abolition; regulation or legalization; and tolerance or decriminalization. Abolition policies outlaw sex work; legalization involves a state-controlled industry; and decriminalization advocates the elimination of all laws regarding prostitutes, their customers, and pimps.

The United Nations' Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the 1949 Convention lumped human trafficking and prostitution together. As a result of that conference, an international legal document required state parties to punish any person who "[p]rocures, entices or leads away,

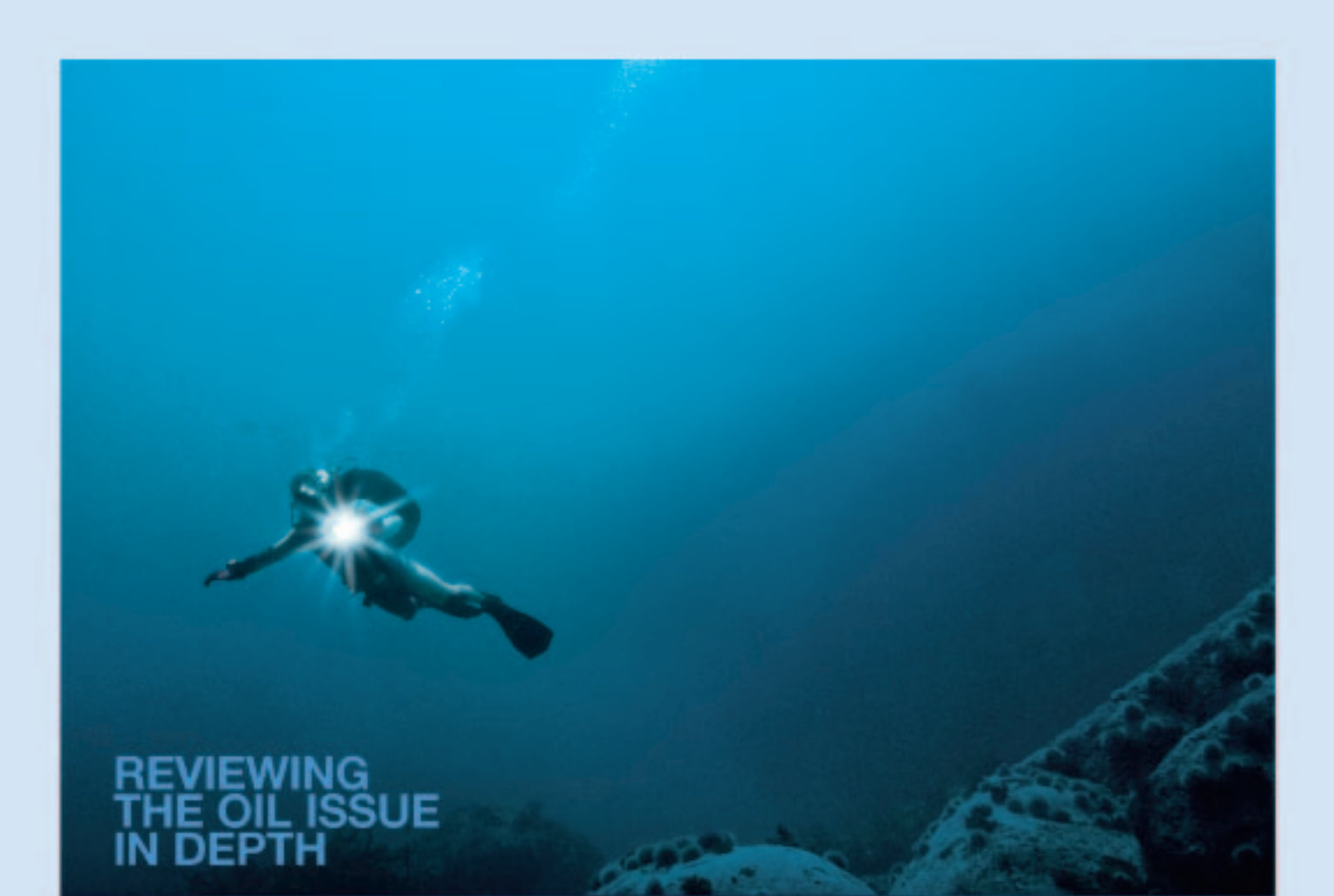
for the purposes of prostitution, another person, even with the consent of that person; [or] [e]xploits the prostitution of another person, even with the consent of that person."

Those favoring the 1949 Convention argued that any and all commercial sex work is inherently exploitative. Guiding this philosophy is the belief that even if a woman consents to prostitution, she would only do so because of poverty or past abuse, which would render her truly incapable of any "real" choice. "We are completely against legalization," says the Angel Coalition's Yurova. "We believe it's still exploitation even if it's legal." Ditto for Equality Now's Bien-Aimé: "We really believe that legalization of prostitution is a green light and carte blanche for traffickers. It makes the industry legal and makes it okay for people to thrive on the industry, including the demand."

But critics of the Convention insist a distinction must be made between consensual prostitution and forced sexual labor, noting that the former is a legitimate—if often illegal—career option that should not be stigmatized simply because an unfortunate number of women have been forced into it.

"No woman should be forced into any kind of work," says Norma Jean Almodovar, a former prostitute and president and founder of International Sex Worker Foundation for Art, Culture and Education (ISWFACE). "If we're truly interested in making sure that women aren't forced into prostitution, then that's where we should focus police resources," she says, cautioning against a blanket attack on all prostitutes.

Almodovar, who spent ten years as a traffic cop with the Los Angeles Police Department before becoming a call girl, contrasts how prostitutes are treated with workers in the apparel industry; that while human traffickers funnel people to work in sweatshops, she contends that "we don't set up sting operations to bust



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garment manufacturing places,” nor is the clothing business condemned as fueling the trafficking industry as is sex work. “If a police officer can’t tell the difference between someone who has been forced into prostitution versus someone who hasn’t been raped,” she asserts, “they don’t belong in the police force in the first place.”

Groups combating human trafficking often decline to take a position on legalization or decriminalization of prostitution. Amnesty International, for example, does not have an official position on the legality of prostitution. Neither does Oasis; though development director Lane acknowledges that refusing to engage in the debate might sound “like a bit of a cop out, it’s a very controversial area,” he says. “The problem is that if our organizations are publicly associat-

ed with one point of view or the other, there are a whole range of people who won’t work with us anymore.”

The 2000 United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children enables

returning migrants are victims of trafficking.

VICTIMS, VECTORS, AND RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Those who favor more lenient policies on prostitution argue that legitimizing the business would

Trafficking victims commonly fear the same law enforcement agents who are supposed to protect them.

individual states to choose how they will address prostitution and whether or not it constitutes trafficking by definition. This doesn’t make any easier what UNICEF has called a very daunting task—identifying who has been trafficked. Countries like Albania and Moldova, for example, lack specific procedures to identify which

actually inhibit trafficking for sexual purposes by giving a marginalized population the ability to voice complaints and work with authorities without a veil of fear.

“It’s currently impossible for women to come forward and turn in those people who are abusing them and violating their rights because they’re [considered] criminals,” says ISWFACE’s Almodovar, who contends that American police officers often use stringent and purposefully ambiguous laws to extort women and turn them into informants. “Remove the laws that make them criminals, and then they can come forward” to report improprieties, including child sexual exploitation and sexual trafficking. Adds Jenn Clamen, the Canadian representative for the International Union of Sex Workers, “I’ve seen sex workers who, after filing a rape report with the police, were fined with prostitution charges.”

Almodovar argues that equating prostitution and trafficking is both overly simplistic and highly dangerous to the women who choose sex work as their profession. She decries how, under the guise of busting trafficking operations, police can get away with intimidating women who are working in the sex trade by choice.

Trafficking victims commonly fear the same law enforcement agents who are supposed to protect

Down to the Wire Often viewed as disease vectors, New Delhi sex workers await customers.



3040705. PHOTO BY EMMANUEL DUNAND/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

them. "There is a major problem with police around the world further victimizing victims," says Oasis' Lane. According to Amnesty International's Greenwood, "Sometimes trafficked women are detained and prosecuted for prostitution. They could be raped by police while in custody or thrown in with common criminals. They could be sent back to their home country. They could be detained for months and months in order to get them to testify against their traffickers, which might put their relatives back home at risk." Finland, for example, is contemplating providing trafficked people with a temporary visa, which will mandate victims to testify against their traffickers. The visa's caveat has been criticized by Pro Tukipste, a Finnish counseling service for

"Prostitution should be subjected to the same kind of regulations as any other business," says ISWFACE's Almodovar, who argues that with proper administration, brothels could run like any other private sector industry. "The onus...to provide health insurance and safety conditions...should be on the business owner," she says, "not on the individuals who work there." Like other businesses that are implementing AIDS education programs and policies, the sex industry could even serve as a model for risk-free behavior. "If it's done right," Almodovar says of sex work, "this is safe. Health skills can be taught by sex workers, but giving that kind of information is considered encouraging prostitution."

Rather than viewing sex workers as victims or vec-

"Effective HIV/AIDS strategies involve working with—not against—people in the sex industry who can provide an accurate depiction of how the business really runs."

prostitutes. "The victims must not be turned into mere tools for solving crimes," said executive director Jaana Kauppinen.

In a world that allows trafficked women to be penalized under the very laws that are supposed to protect them, it is not surprising that sex workers are often marginalized as the most sordid members of society. Women who choose this profession are, indeed, frequently viewed as disease vectors, routinely condemned for transmitting HIV/AIDS. "Women sex workers are often perceived as a public health threat to be monitored," says Meena Saraswathi Seshu, the executive director of SANGRAM (Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha), an NGO that has worked with prostitutes in India since 1992. "This is a huge mistake because effective HIV/AIDS strategies involve working with—not against—people in the sex industry who can provide an accurate depiction of how the business really runs."

Ironically, legalization proponents argue, it's restrictive prostitution laws that make it very difficult for sex workers to protect themselves from contracting or spreading the disease.

"It's not the sex work itself that makes you susceptible to HIV, it's the criminalization" says Clamen of the International Union of Sex Workers. "In Canada, you can't keep condoms in the drawers at massage parlors." She adds that while her country does not specifically outlaw prostitution, countless restrictions make it almost impossible to practice the profession while using harm reduction strategies. "In the states," she said looking to Canada's southern neighbor, "people talk about having a whore college where you'd learn safe sex techniques, but teaching somebody to work that way implicates the teacher in the work, which is illegal as well."

tors, decriminalization advocates argue that this population is as worthy of respect as any other profession. As such, they should not be treated as in need of saving or morally incorrigible. Indeed, many sex workers and their advocates are adamantly opposed to groups identified as feminist, such as Equality Now and Russia's Angel Coalition, which argue all sex work is exploitive.

"You can't go into a community and organize that community for them," says Clamen. "It's very hurtful to a lot of sex workers when women outside the profession claim to know what's best. Most of these women argue that trafficking equals sex work, but they are not sex workers themselves; most of [the abolitionist feminist groups] are white, rich women. There is a huge sex workers' rights movement that's very vocal about what we want, but our voices are being contradicted by people who say we are in denial or oppressed or don't know what's best for us. It's just ridiculous."

ISWFACE's Almodovar expresses similar sentiments: "I can have sex with 10,000 men and I'm not being exploited," she says, "but the minute one of them leaves me a dollar on my dresser, we're both criminals, I'm exploited, and these radical feminists want to protect me from further exploitation by putting me in jail."

Lest she be dismissed as a "happy hooker," Clamen does not think that sex work is for everyone. She does, however, think that all workers should have rights regardless of whether we agree with their chosen career. "The sex workers rights movement isn't a pro sex-work movement. It's a pro-rights movement," she maintains. "We all work because we have to work...let's make all working conditions safe so we'll be able to identify cases of exploitation."