

The Global Sex Trade Grows Insidiously

by Antonio Barbangelo

As Europe prepares for the Euro 2012 football championship in Ukraine and Poland, officials are growing worried about a corresponding boom in the sex trade. The concern reflects a deeper preoccupation about a thriving industry that abusively controls the lives of tens of millions of people.

The scene is set for Euro 2012, the European Football Championship that will be held in Poland and Ukraine between June 8 and July 1. But local authorities in Warsaw and Kiev are bracing to deal with an issue unrelated to sports. Both countries are preparing for a massive influx of prostitutes expected in the major cities where the matches will be played.

According to France's Fondation Scelles, whose report on prostitution and sexual abuse was published in the French daily "Le Figaro," global sex workers have geared up in vast numbers before recent sporting events, including the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics and the World Cup tournament in Germany (2006) and South Africa (2010). Some 40,000 prostitutes operated in South Africa during the World Cup.

Major sporting events are a magnet for the sex industry. In Vancouver, many women's groups responded to the sex trade through a campaign titled "Buying Sex is not a sport." The campaign's green T-shirts and posters were visible throughout the duration of the Games. In

Ukraine, the feminist group "Femen," known for domestic protests including nudity, interrupted local sporting events with slogans and placards reading, "Ukraine is not a brothel." The Fondation Scelles survey suggests that there are between 40 and 42 million working prostitutes in the world, 80 percent are women and girls. Three quarters of them are between the ages of 13 and 25. Most prostitutes have a pimp. But the Foundation statistics are only approximate. The underground industry is difficult to quantify and numbers can vary wildly.

"It's a market dominated by violence, that preys on the vulnerable, and with profits beyond any known limits," said the statement by the Paris-based group. Most prostitutes come from eastern and central Africa (with Nigeria in the lead), Latin America and the Middle East. China and Eastern Europe are the newest suppliers, including Romania, Albania, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova and other former Soviet states.

Curbing Profits

Prostitution, though illegal, is undeniably lucrative. In Europe alone, the estimated 500,000 women plying the trade, and making themselves available at major events, can produce upwards of \$13 billion. If a prostitute earns an average of €30 per sexual service, the pimp earns an average of €6,000 to €8,000 monthly. The industry's growth rate is estimated about 40-to-50 percent per year. According to the United Nations, the sex industry, in some cases merged with weapons and drug smuggling, brought in some \$32 billion in 2011.

Many are the efforts to rein in the trade, including a number sponsored by the UN. These efforts have intensified over the last two decades, in an effort to keep pace with the boom. The global effort to contain prostitution and sexual trafficking was outlined in an international agreement signed in Palermo in 2000 and signed by 117 UN states. The objective was to facilitate the investigation and the criminal prosecution of suspects linked to facilitating the sex trade.

The next major step came in 2005, when the Council of Europe, which promotes European cooperation, signed the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, which was agreed to Warsaw and has since been ratified by most of its 47 member countries.



Epa / Corbis / S. Dolzhenko

Other organizations under UN umbrella had already taken up the fight, including the Asia-Europe Child Welfare Resource Centre Initiative (ASEM), a joint British-Filipino effort created in 1998 to promote international cooperation in defense of children. “The Palermo Protocol remains the starting point,” says Donata Lodi, who heads the national advocacy and international relations branch of Italian UNICEF. “The protocol was ratified by all countries in the former Soviet Union. But fewer countries signed the 2005 Council of Europe convention. Georgia and Moldova did.”

Moldova is among the countries Russia has directly targeted in an effort to reduce regional criminality, and also among the leading suppliers of prostitutes to the European market. “This problems evident even a decade ago,” says Lodi. “Over the past seven or eight years, authorities have made major inroads in trying to deal with

Ukrainian feminists part of the Femen group in front of Kiev Stadium.

the problem. Legislative measures have been enacted in an effort to better protect women and minors, even if it will take quite some time before we see the tangible effects of these new laws. On the other hand, not enough has been done to curb the trafficking. Help has to come from several fronts. Take the case of minors, for example: in those cases you need to work on the rehabilitation of victims once they’re rescued and to create protective systems to avoid traps and relapses. Children have to be assisted once they get back home so that they don’t find themselves in the same situation within a month.”

Interaction between officials and civil society is essential, as is fortifying an awareness of basic human rights so that citizens are aware of them. In Moldova, UNICEF is

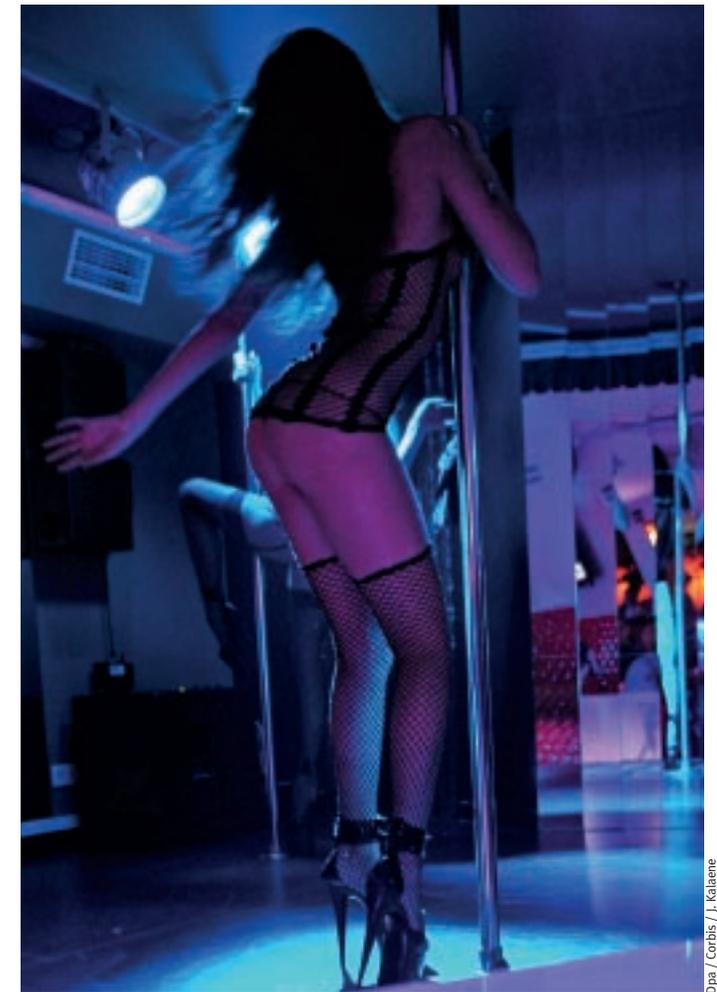
Dancer at the Tixi Omut nightclub in Kiev.

working with a group of women journalists dedicated to covering issues such as prostitution and sex trafficking, subjects that until recently were dangerous to write about, at the risk of criminal reprisal. A project funded by UNICEF Italy has trained teachers to address the issue in schools, speaking to students from different age groups and to those most at risk.

Seeking Synergy

It’s a complex issue. Efforts to protect the children and women victimized by trafficker can work only based on coordination between local authorities and other intergovernmental actors. The United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.Gift), a project launched by the UN in 2007 to combat trafficking, involves a daunting array of organizations and acronyms, including the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNICEF, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI) and the Turin-based UN Institute for Research on Crime and Justice have also been deployed to combat organized criminal activities and to create monitoring projects. Some UN workers complain that the amount of funding funneled to former Soviet bloc nations is insufficient. To offset this, many organizations seek synergies with major intergovernmental organizations and with the European Union in an effort to create a supranational network. Cooperation programs have been developed with a number of Eastern European countries in an effort to exchange relevant information and share “best practice” strategies.

It is Luxembourg’s Viviane Redin, vice president of the EU Commission and European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship in the European



Dpa / Corbis / J. Kalaene

Commission, who focuses on and oversees these kinds of efforts. In 2000, the EU created the so-called Daphne program, a patchwork of initiatives to prevent and combat all forms of violence against women and children. The latest version, Daphne III, covers the period between 2007-2013. According to Regina Bastos, a Portuguese member of the European Parliament, “Daphne enjoys widespread support and has helped fund a number of other related projects.” Bastos says greater emphasis has recently been placed on providing information about the web and social networking, to caution those new to the Internet about its potential dangers. Dealing with local

NGOs provides a daunting challenge. Rights officials say some will to collaborate with supranational organizations, but do so carefully, sometimes behind the scenes. Many fear reprisals from local criminal gangs. NGOs operating in Eastern Europe and former Soviet states are exposed to the direct wrath of traffickers working out of Georgia, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and other parts of Central Asia. The situation varies country to country. In some cases officials must tread gingerly. The network of subterranean involvement, legal and illegal, is both vast and tricky. In some cases the gap between trafficking and the shady network of international adoptions narrows to a blur. Not to mention that some domestic NGOs have been openly or implicitly tied using allegations of sex trafficking effort to undermine local political opponents.

The Fine Line

Among those working in the field, only thing seems sure. When legal immigration from former Soviet states to Western Europe is feasible, the trafficking phenomenon drops off. Illegality makes those seeking to emigrate open to any means of doing so, without worrying about risks or the absence of formal protection. “The line between ‘smuggling’ and ‘trafficking’ is getting thinner and thinner,” says Vincent Castelli, president of On the Road Onlus, an NGO that has worked both with governments and supranational bodies such as the EU and UN. “Smuggling,” on the face of it, represents all organized illegal activity to move people from one state or continent to another, while “trafficking” involved the exploitation of human beings, who are kidnapped or recruited through deception in the countries of origin and sent to work at the behest of their managers and pimps. Though smuggling and trafficking are entirely different phenomena, they often tend to coalesce. Smuggling can turn into trafficking, and vice versa, as people are toward their destination. Often, those behind smuggling rings are the same people, in part or as a whole, as those behind trafficking rings. “The big issue now has to do with those who want to move north, south and east,” adds Castelli. “The phenomenon of seeking asylum is getting bigger.”

But who organizes these human streams?

“The criminal groups that center on prostitution and

trafficking are mostly run by Romanians, Albanians and Russians, who are in charge of their victims for the duration of their journey,” says Castelli. “The countries of origin are mostly Moldova, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, and a number of others in Central Asia. These same groups are also responsible, at least in part, for controlling the sex trade in Italy. They use Italian criminal groups to help with logistics, which means renting houses and setting up places where prostitutes and clients can meet, and getting the victims involved with smaller, local criminal gangs. Local gangs are also active in the source countries, often as recruiters. “Local traffickers are like tiny pieces of an interconnected network,” says Lodi. “This local ingredient makes fighting trafficking even harder. Why? Because the person doing the recruiting or the ‘buying’ is rarely some outsider, but instead someone from the village or town, someone who’s recognized and trusted as a person who can ‘help out.’ In the first link of the chain, familiarity is essential. Early trust is what opens the door to all the rest.”

The Poverty Factor

While illegal departures and sex trafficking originating in countries such as Moldova or Ukraine has been the subject of new legislation, trying to apply the same logic and restraint to other former Soviet states has proved far more elusive.

Most citizens of the poorer Soviet republics set their sights on getting to Russia, and in some cases to Europe. Much of it comes from nations such as Kyrgyzstan, which has just under five million people, is nestled between China and Kazakhstan, is predominantly agricultural, and where the average national per capita wage is \$2,150. Further west is Uzbekistan and its 28 million inhabitants spread over 450,00 square kilometers.

Though the economic situation has improved in recent years, the average per capita wage still hovers around \$2,700. But the worst situation is in Tajikistan. Migrants working abroad generate half the country’s GDP and part of its territory is literally outside the control of national law (Tajikistan shares a southern border with Afghanistan, the world’s largest producer of opium). More than 80 percent of the country’s estimated seven million population lives below the poverty line, with a per capita in-

come at \$1,900. These levels are equivalent to those found in sub-Saharan countries (Ghana stands at \$1,500, with Nigeria at \$2,200).

Aid and NGO workers in these countries agree that protecting women and children is at the very least difficult. Part of the assistance comes in basic form, including education and literacy. In states and provinces where births are rarely registered in any systematic way, it’s far easier for people to go missing. Tajiks who do make it to Russia often find life nearly unbearable. They face abuse, racism, and are perfect candidates for recruitment into illegal activities.

Russian Prostitution

Some observers are convinced that the steady stream of migration from Russia’s more remote regions and from former Soviet states have helped fuel the growth of prostitution in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major Russian cities. In the 1990s, soon after the fall of communism, isolated voices issued a warning about the overall condition of women in Russia, insisting there were two emergencies in the making, prostitution and human trafficking. The two went hand in hand with the expulsion of many women from the labor market and the decline of the welfare system.

Two decades later the situation is virtually unchanged. Discrimination is more intense and systematic than ever. Recent statistics suggest that women are paid 65 percent of what a man earns doing the same job. Galina Sillaste, a professor at the Financial University of the Russian Federation, and the president of the International Association of Women and Development, says, “women have been increasingly squeezed out of the country’s economic life” over the last 10 years.

Some worry that the situation is cause for broader social alarm, pointing out that in addition to the lucrative illegal prostitution market, an increasing number of housewives and students are working as part-time escort to earn additional cash, or in some cases to avoid outright poverty. In 2010, the weekly “Ogoniok,” among Russia’s oldest illustrated magazines (founded 1899), presented a survey that suggested the trend toward part-time prostitution involved about 45 percent of Russian women between ages 18 and 44 years.

THE NUMBERS

The clandestine nature of the sex trade makes credible numbers on prostitution and trafficking hard to come by. “One of the problems we face is trying to get reliable data on the number of people involved,” says Donata Lodi, who heads the national advocacy and international relations wing of Italian UNICEF. “The estimates we have are often based on extrapolation. Using the number of cases that go to trial, for example.” The Paris-based Fondation Scelles suggests there are between 40 and 42 million working prostitutes in the world. The International Organization for Migration (IOM), a Geneva-based organization tied to the UN, suggests that about a million people are victims of trafficking annually, of which 80 percent are women and girls. The United Nations Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking (UN.Gift), launched by the UN in 2007, says the figure is between two and four million. In Italy, the UN estimates that some 20,000 persons are victims of trafficking. The Catholic charity Caritas puts the number at 30,000. UNICEF continues to insist that though the problem is hard to quantify, the most conservative estimates suggest that 1.2 million children are global victims of trafficking on a yearly basis.

Some of the data might be glorified gossip. But the presence of teen prostitutes on the streets of Moscow belies a deeper, more dramatic problem. Conflicts deep within the Russian heartland, including the long war in Chechnya and the brief Russia-Georgia war of 2008, have contributed to a massive increase in the number of orphans seeking refuge in the country’s major urban centers. Russian officials are working to limit what it recognizes as an insidious and growing social peril, cooperating with supranational organizations to find solutions.

Filipino Ofelia Calcetas-Santos, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, has issued a number of worrying reports about the extent of child prostitution in Russia. Other UN agencies as well as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees have also stated that urgent, coordinated action is required to bring illicit activities under control. It’s a broad, brushstroke landscape of problems that each requires care and attention.