

NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Research Paper No. 171

‘You will be sold like a doll’: the trafficking of Latvian women into the Danish sex industry

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May 2009



UNHCR

The UN Refugee Agency

Policy Development and Evaluation Service

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ISSN 1020-7473

Introduction

In January 2000, a 27 year old Latvian woman named Natalija Ivanova was brutally murdered in Randers in Denmark. Her murder case remains unsolved. However, over the course of the murder investigation, it became clear that she had been brought to Denmark for the purpose of working as a prostitute. The investigation soon discovered and dismantled an organised criminal network specialising in supplying Latvian prostitutes to the Danish prostitution market. Nine men from this organisation were charged with having brought a total of around 80 Baltic women to Denmark for the purpose of prostitution. Most of these women were from Latvia¹. Traffickers established contact with the women through connections in Latvia, and are believed to have earned between four and five million Danish Kroner from their prostitution (Brun 2003).

This previous example of Latvian women being trafficked into the Danish prostitution market is not an aberration. In fact, there have been numerous other cases in which an investigation into Danish brothels has led the police back to Latvia. Frequently, the women working in the brothels were Latvians, or because the traffickers involved came from Latvia, or both.

The high incidence rate of prostitution cases leading back to Latvia is not a coincidence. In fact, the Danish National Commissioner of Police estimates that Denmark is a major destination country for women from particularly the Baltic countries, and states that criminal networks in Latvia specialise in organising these flows (Østergaard 2003).

The past ten years have seen more than a tenfold increase in the number of foreign women from Eastern Europe entering Denmark to work as prostitutes. The exact figure of such women is unknown, but there appears to be approximately 3,000-4,000 foreign women working in prostitution in Denmark². Half of these women come from Eastern Europe, predominantly the Baltic States. Determining the exact number is difficult because foreign prostitutes are never registered or in contact with authorities. Out of these women, Latvians are a highly visible population, and there seems to be a very established flow of women from Latvia to Denmark.

How do these Latvian women come to Denmark? Are these women kidnapped or by any other means forced to come to Denmark, or have they consented to go abroad and work in the sex industry? The purpose of this article is to investigate these questions, by tracing an outline of the process by which Latvian women end up in the Danish sex industry

Trafficking of women for sexual purposes

Latvian women who end up in the Danish sex-industry are mostly part of an international phenomenon known as trafficking in women for the purpose of prostitution or human trafficking. Human trafficking is a huge international business netting traffickers enormous profits. Some experts estimate that it has even surpassed smuggling of weapons or narcotics as the most profitable form of organised crime³ (Runge Mortensen 2004).

The UN definition of human trafficking includes three essential and interlinked sets of elements in the understanding of trafficking:

¹ The men were initially convicted in the City Court, but were later acquitted in the High Court due to lack of evidence.

² This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

³ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

- The act: recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons;
- The means: by threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power, abuse of a position of vulnerability, or of giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over the victim;
- The purpose: exploitation of the victim, including, 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.

The definition of trafficking presented in the UN protocol reflects an understanding of trafficking as a process comprising a number of interrelated actions, rather than a single act at a given point in time.

In 2000, the UN ratified an additional protocol concerning trafficking of persons to the UN convention on organised crime: “The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children”⁴ or the ‘Palermo Protocol’. The Palermo Protocol criminalises trafficking in human beings as a separate area of international crime. In this protocol, the UN defines trafficking as follows:

- 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, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of 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 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 a 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. (UN 2000).

According to this definition, trafficking includes an element of exploitation, be that an exploitation of the prostitution of others, or of forced labour or removal of organs. Although the definition specifically mentions the use of force or deceit, there is also an opening for defining less obvious situations of coercion as trafficking, through the reference to abusing a position of vulnerability.

The definition does not require a complete lack of consent from the victim for a situation to be defined as trafficking. In fact, sub-paragraph b states that if force, deceit or the abuse of a position of vulnerability has been used, the consent of a victim of trafficking is irrelevant. This means that if a woman in a vulnerable position was recruited for trafficking, or if someone else profits from her prostitution, it is irrelevant whether she initially consented. Therefore such a situation can be defined as trafficking.

⁴ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

The process of trafficking for Latvian women

It is possible that certain groups may be more at risk of becoming victims of trafficking – that the victims may tend to share certain characteristics. These risk factors are outlined in the first part of this paper in order to gain an understanding of who the women are who end up in the Danish sex industry. These risk factors are the starting point for the women to enter the trafficking process in the first place. Second, as the UN definition of trafficking highlights, trafficking is not a single event but rather a process comprised of several stages and events.

Therefore, this paper will also include a look at the various stages that are involved in the trafficking process for Latvian women. Inspired by the Norwegian researchers Guri Tyldum and Anette Brunovskis, the trafficking process for Latvian women trafficked to Denmark, is divided into four stages. The stages are: recruitment; travelling and crossing borders; working and living conditions in the country of destination, and 4: the exit stage in which the trafficking process ends.

Risk groups in Latvia

As mentioned, the Latvian women who are at risk of becoming trafficking victims tend to share certain characteristics, which may therefore put them more at risk for entering the trafficking process..

First, they are generally very young. The average age is somewhere in the early twenties, and there is a significant proportion of teenagers and underage girls (National Commissioner of Police 2000; Moustgaard & Brun 2001). An estimated 70 to 85 % of these young trafficked Latvian women are unmarried. However, the proportion of women who are childless is much smaller; some estimates suggest that approximately half the women might be mothers (Zarina 2001).

Second, the women that are targeted by traffickers generally originate from poor, marginalised rural areas, or from social problem areas in the major cities (Ivinska & Haure 2003).

Third, the women targeted by traffickers are often already working in the sex industry in Latvia. According to estimates by the Latvian vice squad, 70% of local prostitutes are occasionally recruited for work abroad by criminal networks that control them in Latvia (Lehti 2003). Many prostitutes in Latvia are very concerned with hiding their employment from families and the local community. Women already working in prostitution are therefore often willing to accept offers by to work in Denmark as this will make it easier to hide the prostitution from their relatives and acquaintances (Zarina 2001b: 201).

Most of these women do not inform their relatives what they are actually going to do in Denmark. Often these women tell their families that they are going to work as a waitresses or hotel employees in a fancy Hotel (Zarina 2001b: 254). It thus appears that when a woman has entered prostitution in Latvia, her likelihood of ending up working abroad in the Western sex-industry increases.

Fourth women from the Russian minority in Latvia are particularly vulnerable towards trafficker's promises of lucrative jobs in the West (Zarina 2001b: 252-253). This should be seen in the context of the general status of this minority in the country. Many members of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia are non-citizens, and are therefore barred by law from holding certain jobs (Eglitis 2002: 222)⁵. Thereby many women from the Russian-speaking minority are left without many choices because they have difficulty getting a job and providing for their families. Some of

⁵ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

these women are therefore targeted by traffickers promising them a lucrative job in the west that can assure that they can earn enough money to take care of themselves or their families.

Lastly, women who already have a desire to emigrate and to work abroad are another risk group that are particularly vulnerable. Many young Latvian women have a belief that going abroad can solve all their problems and be the start of a successful career. The women wishing to emigrate therefore often go through illegal migration networks. The labour opportunities these networks offer are mainly for work in the sex-industry, because this sector has a demand for surplus labour, and as such the sector readily admits foreigners.

This tendency is confirmed in many studies which report that sex work or domestic work are the only possibilities for employment for migrant women entering affluent countries (Tureikyte & Sipaviciene 2001). In this way we can see that choosing migration may easily lead to choosing prostitution, since it is often the only work opportunity offered to migrant women.

In summation, the women who are generally most at risk of becoming trafficking victims are mostly young women originating from poor, marginalised rural or urban areas. Often they are already working in the sex industry in Latvia, originating from the Russian-speaking minority. Lastly, a risk factor is if the women already have a desire to go abroad for work.

The recruitment of women

The recruiters⁶ enlisting Latvian women to work abroad are often part of a larger network that has links to organised crime. The trafficking market in Latvia is highly organised through criminal networks. Some of these networks are huge syndicates with an international scope, while others are smaller, local networks made up of only a few people with personal contacts to local brothel owners abroad (Moustgaard & Brun 2001: 84).

The recruitment of Latvian women for the purpose of trafficking for sexual exploitation can take several forms. A common method of recruitment is through advertisements in newspapers, offering lucrative job opportunities in foreign countries for low-skilled jobs. The advertisements usually promise good salaries to young, attractive women who will work as dancers, hostesses, or private domestic help (Hughes 2000). These types of advertisements were previously the most common as a way of misleading the women and luring them into prostitution, however today most people in Latvia are aware that these newspaper advertisements in reality usually entail prostitution.

Today Internet advertising is replacing ads in papers. The Internet is gaining huge importance as a medium for recruitment, as marriage and dating agencies on the Internet are being employed by recruiters to initiate contact with girls and women interested in going abroad⁷ (Hughes 2000).

Lastly, a frequent form of recruitment is through personal contacts. According to Arturs Vaisla, head of the Latvian vice squad, recruitment with the help of personal contacts is becoming the most widely used in Latvia (Vaisla 2004). Here the recruitment is facilitated through personal relationships – this can be through family, friends or acquaintances offering the victim an interesting and lucrative job opportunity abroad. The friend or family member will then receive a financial bonus from the traffickers for providing them with a new victim (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004).

This pattern of personal recruitment in Latvia is closely linked to a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the second wave. The second wave means that trafficked women return home and become

⁶ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

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involved in recruiting other women (Hughes 2000: 6). Arturs Vaisla has also noticed that the phenomenon of the second wave is becoming an important part of the recruitment pattern in Latvia: "We're noticing a strange trend in how people are being approached now. They're using people who have been trafficked already to help them traffic their friends and family." (Vaisla 2004).

For Latvian women, the actual decision to go abroad and work as a prostitute is almost always made based on contact with a recruiter or a recruitment network, rather than independently: "Very few make the choice entirely without the influence of others, usually people already involved in prostitution or trafficking as recruiters or prostitutes themselves" (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004: 57). This is in all likelihood caused by the fact that Latvian women who travel abroad to work as prostitutes are largely dependent on the assistance of others.

Travelling to the West implies so many difficulties that organising the travel alone is usually not considered an option. Getting to a Western country may appear simple – especially after Latvia's accession to the EU – however, most of the women who travel abroad do not know how to contact potential employers or how to find a place to live in the destination country (Bolander 2004). Moreover, many travel abroad as a response to economic problems at home, and do not have the financial resources to pay the travel expenses themselves, since an average monthly income in Latvia is only 103 lats⁸ (Zarina 2001b: 253). Based on current exchange rates, this is equivalent to approximately 187 US Dollars, so even a standard price ticket to for example Denmark takes up a whole month's pay⁹.

Lastly, many need assistance to get travel documents such as passports and visas. This is especially the case for women from ethnic minorities in Latvia who do not have Latvian citizenship, and are therefore not EU-citizens¹⁰. These women still face difficulties entering the EU, and need assistance in obtaining the legal documents.

Even though some women who are recruited for trafficking are certainly forced and/or misled about the real purpose of their trip to a foreign country, sources agree that the number of women who depart from Latvia without knowing that they will be working as prostitutes is small. The Latvian Women Studies and Information Centre, as well as the International Organisation for Migration office in Latvia, both express this view, stating that the women who leave Latvia are usually aware that they will be working as prostitutes (Zarina 2001b). The local police in Latvia also agree with this opinion. Arturs Vaisla, head of the Latvian vice squad says, 99 % of the girls are aware that they will work in the sex-industry or as prostitutes when they go abroad.

Why are Latvian prostitutes typically so well informed? As Vaisla puts it, forcing women and girls into the industry involves much greater risk for traffickers, and as long as there are girls who are willing to go abroad and work in the sex-industry, it is not necessary to force them to leave (Vaisla 2004). However, even though the women usually know that they are headed for the sex-industry, they are not necessarily aware of the work conditions or the fact that the traffickers will often take all their earnings.

The women are often simply told by the traffickers that they can earn a lot of money for their families and that they can always leave if they wish to. These promised favourable working conditions, however, often prove to be very far removed from the reality that meets the women when they agree to go abroad (Jacobs 2002). So even when the women are aware that they will be working as prostitutes abroad, the conditions promised to them may not relate to the actual situation in which they end up.

⁸ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

⁹ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

¹⁰ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

In most cases, the recruiters make all travel arrangements for the women, such as travel documents and tickets. They also establish contacts with employers in the destination country. Thereby the women often become indebted to the recruiter before they leave Latvia. In some cases the debt is implicit, and the women are not sure about what their debts are before they leave their home country (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004: 61).

The women often travel alone, and know the address of the employer from a previous visit or through a pimp. In some cases the recruiter escorts the women on their trip, and delivers them directly to their destination. There is no clear evidence showing if there have been any changes in how much recruiters are involved in this stage of the trafficking process after Latvia's accession to the EU in May 2004.

Prior to the accession it was believed that the involvement of traffickers in this phase would decrease, as Latvian citizens would be allowed to travel more freely in the EU (National Commissioner of Police 2000). However, many women from the Russian minority do not have Latvian citizenship and are therefore not considered EU citizens either. For these women, it is therefore still necessary to obtain forged documents in order to gain access to EU countries¹¹ or for the organisers to smuggle them in.

If the women are smuggled into the European Union they are taken by car by the recruiter from Latvia to the neighbour country Lithuania, and then take the route by foot that is called the "forest path" in Lithuania, through which one can get to Poland on foot. From Poland the women are picked up by new smugglers and driven into Germany by car, and from Germany they are sent off to different European destinations (Zarina 2001b: 234).

Living and working conditions

Even though the Latvian women most often know that they are going to work as prostitutes, the vast majority do not expect the actual conditions they are supposed to work under: "They are shocked, [...], by the conditions under which they are forced to live and work once they get to where they are going" (Jacobs 2002). This is due to the fact that the conditions promised to them by the recruiters are usually far from the reality they encounter in the destination country. Very often the women are pressured to perform services they would normally refuse, such as unprotected sex, or they are pressured to take a very large number of clients during a day, and to not refuse any clients, even violent ones (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004)¹². Furthermore the women most often pay around two-thirds of their earnings to someone else (i.e. the brothel owner, the pimp, or the Latvian intermediary (Okolski 2001)). Many of the women experience a gradual shift in what they will agree to do because they feel unable to leave the situation, they also feel unable to define their own working conditions and set boundaries, and therefore they lose control over their own lives.

Even though, as mentioned above, the women often find themselves in conditions other than what they agreed to prior to leaving Latvia, the majority still stay and work as prostitutes. It is possible to identify at least four possible reasons why they do not leave these exploitative situations. First, there is the use of violence and physical boundaries to keep them from fleeing. Some women are indeed locked in and physically forced to work as prostitutes, and they are unable to leave. This category could also be said to include cases where the pimps take the women's passports away and thereby make sure that they are unable to leave the country on their own (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004).

Second, there is the category, which could be referred to as "captive behind open doors". This refers to the fact that methods of making the women stay may also take subtle forms of coercion, even

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when there are few or no physical hindrances preventing the women from leaving. In this case, the control is based on the women's general fear of sanctions from the traffickers or pimps. It is often fear of physical reprisals to the women themselves or their families, or sometimes the pimps may threaten to reveal the women as prostitutes to their families and local communities. This threat is very effective, since most of the women are very concerned with keeping the information of their actual employment a secret from the people back home (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004).

A third reason women may remain in an exploitative situation, takes the form of internalised or self-imposed constraint. This refers to women who come to accept the control others have over them, or accept that they are bound by having to pay off debts. Threats and fears of reprisals become unnecessary as the women do not question the authority that others hold over them. The pimps or traffickers claim that the woman has to repay the debt that she has accumulated, because they have paid for her travel expenses, housing or food, or they may even claim that they have bought the woman for a certain amount¹³ from the recruiter, and she has to work to pay off this expense (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004).

Fourth, in some cases the women stay in a situation of exploitation simply because they are able to make money from the situation. Despite the exploitative factors, some of these women hope that they will be able to make money from it after they have paid a certain amount of money to the recruiter and organiser. The amount of money the women can earn differs according to their situation and the arrangements made with the pimp or brothel owner. Sometimes the organisers take most of the money, while in other cases Latvian women working as prostitutes in Western countries can earn as much as 2,000-2,500 lats per month – even after they have paid other involved parties (Zarina 2001a).

What all these reasons for staying have in common is that the women feel unable to leave the situation. Based on one or a combination of variables such as physical constraints, psychological threats and fear of reprisals, internalised constraints, or the need to earn money, possibly to provide for family back home, it becomes difficult for them to leave. Thereby: “The ability of women to leave a trafficking situation is often more dependent on their perception of the situation rather than of any physical constraints” (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004).

The exit stage

What happens to the women when the trafficking situation comes to an end? Most of the women are eventually sent home by the traffickers because they become too risky – mostly if the police or immigration authorities become interested in the case. Or perhaps the traffickers do not earn sufficient money from the women. Other women leave the trafficking situation of their own volition, and thereby defy threats made by traffickers. And finally, a minority are deported if the police raid the club or brothel they are working in and arrest the prostitutes and traffickers (Vaisla 2004).

Unfortunately, very few women come directly into contact with police or rehabilitation services either in Denmark or in Latvia, and therefore the majority of victims of trafficking are never registered or offered assistance (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004). Even when they have been in a situation of exploitation, very few women want to report their traffickers to the police afterwards, perhaps because of fear of repercussions (either from the traffickers themselves or from the traffickers' friends and networks who are often present in the women's immediate environment upon return home). They may also fear that their families and the local community will find out that

¹³ This is an estimate from the Danish Police, mentioned at a conference on trafficking 23rd of November 2004.

they have been involved in prostitution, and they may not wish to make this fact public by pressing charges.

Others do not want to press charges because they wish to get on with their lives and forget about the experience. It is thus very difficult to find women who are willing to testify against traffickers (Bolander 2004). Some Latvian women do return with money to show for their work as prostitutes abroad, but many return almost empty handed. Often organisers take such a large part of the money that almost nothing is left, or sometimes the women have been caught working as prostitutes and the police have confiscated the earned money.

Women who have worked in prostitution abroad - even those whose work is unknown to relatives – often find it difficult to reintegrate into Latvian society when they try to return to their old lives due to the traumatic nature and the secrecy of their experience. As a consequence, some choose to later return to prostitution abroad (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004). In other cases, the women who return actually end up becoming recruiters for trafficking themselves. They thus in a sense come ‘full circle’ in the phenomenon of trafficking, and move from being victims to being active participants and exploiters in the process (Hughes 2000). This is what is referred to as the second wave, as described above.

In the worst cases, the women never return home. We can only speculate about what happens to the women in these cases, but some are continuously ‘resold’ between trafficking networks, and travel between sex industries in different countries. In the worst cases the women turn up as victims in the murder statistics in destination countries, as illustrated by the tragic case of Natalija Ivanova in the preface (Kvinnoforum 2002).

Conclusion

As this paper demonstrates, trafficking is not a static phenomenon, but a process, or a gradual slide, in which circumstances may change throughout the stay abroad. Several preventive campaign launched by international organizations only describes trafficking victims as women who are being sold or kidnapped, and generally uses an imagery of the ‘new slave trade’, with slogans like “you will be sold like a doll” (see NIKK 2002: 11). These campaigns thus present a picture of women who are not aware that they will be working in the sex-industry – women who are being forced to prostitute themselves. This makes it difficult for many of the women who actually end up in trafficking to recognise themselves as trafficking victims, since they mostly know beforehand that they are going to work in the sex-industry.

They may believe that what they are entering is not trafficking, because they have consented to going abroad, and cannot recognise the picture presented of women that are being sold as slaves or kidnapped. This problem can also be illustrated by the fact that there are several known stories of women who end up in trafficking, despite the fact that they have anti-trafficking brochures at home (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004).

As described, the majority of Latvian women are aware that they will be working as prostitutes when they make the decision to go abroad. However, they often end up in situations where they have no control over their own lives. This illustrates that exploitation and coercion can take place even though the women originally consented to entering the sex industry. As the outline above also shows, the women often find themselves in a grey zone, where it is not necessarily possible to distinguish between voluntary or forced cases, since the women’s situations may change throughout their stay abroad. Based on this, trafficking can be described as a continuum of situations; ranging from completely voluntary to completely forced situations, and everything in between.

Recognizing that trafficking as a phenomenon not only involves women being kidnapped and kept behind bars, but rather involves a continuum including many different cases and stories and a varying degree of consent could help NGO's, police and other actors working with trafficking in Latvia to deal with the issue in a more constructive way. Further, this broader understanding of the phenomenon could help the victims themselves to recognize when a situation is a trafficking situation when they come across it.

As trafficking situations are very complex and often difficult to include in the UN trafficking definition, it is of the utmost importance that practitioners from international organizations, NGO's police and others working directly with trafficking victims operate within a broader and more flexible understanding of trafficking. A more open and flexible understanding of the phenomenon is the only way to ensure that all victims in need of protection are identified and protected. The definitions and conceptualisations of trafficking thus need to move away from images of slavery and women held in total captivity, and focus instead on the differing forms of coercion and exploitation involved.

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