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Sex Slavery Thrives in Russia Out of Public View

By Alexey Eremenko

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Zhenya, a young Russian woman, was lucky: A client took pity on her and took her away from the brothel.

Before that, there was her life on the streets with Gypsy beggars since she was 12, and another kind man who took her to the movies, bought her clothes — and then sold her to a prostitution ring.

Zhenya is safe now, but thousands of other sex slaves in Russia are still waiting for a good samaritan to come along and save them — which is their best hope, since the government and society in general prefer to look the other way, anti-trafficking activists say.

While Russia may be more notorious for its homegrown cheap sex labor, these days inbound

sexual traffic in fact far exceeds the exports, thanks to Russia's previously stable economy, which ensures a steady demand for prostitutes, experts said.

The country is now at once a destination, origin and transit country for sex slaves — part of a 1-million-strong slave force that exists in Russia, according to a recent report released ahead of the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery on Dec. 2.

But the government and the legislature both ignore the problem for fear that it would damage Russia's reputation, even though sex trafficking exists everywhere, said activist Boris Panteleyev.

"Admitting the existence of slavery, in the eyes of officials, would harm our prestige," said Panteleyev, head of the Man & Law NGO and a former prosecutor who has been combatting human trafficking since the 1990s.

As a result, sex slaves in Russia struggle even if freed, and have to rely on NGOs, clerics or police generosity in the absence of state rehab and protection programs.

"Russian criminal legislation is insufficient, and existing laws say nothing about help for victims," said Yelena Timofeyeva of the SafeHouse charity.

A Million Slaves

Russia ranked as the country with the sixth-biggest slave population in the world — 1 million people — in a fresh annual report by the Australia-based Walk Free Foundation released last week.

The report put the total number of slaves among 167 countries of the world at 35 million. India was the runaway leader with 14 million slaves, while Mauritania had the highest percentage of slave population (4 percent).

The report did not differentiate between types of forced labor, but said the sex industry was among the main employers of Russian slaves.

The U.S. Department of State downgraded Russia to Tier 3, the lowest in the ranking, in its annual Trafficking in Persons Report in 2013.

Despite stereotypes, even well-educated, world-savvy people can become victims of sex trafficking, Timofeyeva said.

"Ninety-nine percent of people we work with say, 'I never expected it to happen to me,'" she said.

"Many school graduates have high salary expectations, and that makes them easy victims," Timofeyeva said.

But the poor are the main risk group, and a third of women who grew up in Russian female orphanages become involved in sexual labor within a year of starting adult life, experts say.

Outright abductions are rare: Victims are usually duped into traveling in the hope of a new job,

and instead find themselves in a brothel, where they are abused in order to break their will.

Supply and Demand

Only drug dealing is more profitable than sex trafficking as far as illegal activities go, Timofeyeva said.

Statistics are scarce, but data from Russia's Interior Ministry obtained by The Moscow Times contained about 900 cases of human trafficking, exploitation and involvement in prostitution over the first nine months of 2013.

Only one in nine such crimes ever comes to light, criminologists estimate, which indicates that at least 8,000 people are currently in sexual slavery in Russia. The figure is likely larger by an order of magnitude, given that most such cases involve more than one victim.

Experts named Ukraine, Moldova and the Baltic states — all post-Soviet regions — as the main suppliers of sex slaves to Russia.

A new rising trend is also seeing ethnic diasporas in Russia import women from their native countries, including Vietnam, China, the Central Asian republics and African nations, to work in their brothels.

One of the most popular websites for Moscow prostitutes, IntimCity.nl, which gives visitors the option of browsing women by nationality, was predictably dominated by Russians (2,300 women), but the "black women" category was the second most populous group with 236 entries. Three Asian categories ranked a combined third with 164 offers. It is impossible to tell from such websites how many, if any, of the women on offer are victims of the slave trade.

The head of the Interior Ministry's anti-trafficking department, Alexei Arkhipov, said in October that the number of Russian prostitutes sold into sexual slavery outside the country has decreased over the past six years because of visa problems and the economic downturn in receiving countries.

But the Walk Free report said that Russia is a hub for trafficking and exploitation in Eurasia.

Most victims are female, but Timofeyeva said certain spots in St. Petersburg were populated exclusively by involuntary young male hustlers.

The anti-trafficking department of the Interior Ministry, after initially providing a comment for The Moscow Times, later backtracked, withdrawing the comment for unspecified reasons.

But a law enforcement officer familiar with the situation told The Moscow Times on condition of anonymity that sex laborers make on average $150-$250 per client, which could put monthly revenues from a brothel with two dozen sex slaves at anywhere in the $600,000 to $2.5 million range.

There are, however, expenses to consider as well: It costs about $300,000 in bribes a month per prostitution ring to ensure that local authorities look the other way, and groups that do not work the streets spend up to 40 percent of their budget on advertisement, the officer said.

The Invisible Slaves

Despite the apparent size of the industry, there is not a single state-sponsored shelter for freed sex slaves in Russia.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has a shelter in St. Petersburg and co-runs another outside Moscow together with the Russian Orthodox Church.

Both shelters house all kinds of migrants in need of rehab, from illegal laborers to sex trafficking victims, said Pawel Szalus, IOM's coordinator in Moscow.

The two have a combined capacity of some two dozen people — which, Szalus admitted, was only enough for "the tip of the iceberg."

Government organizations are doing what they can, but no special programs or organizations exist to aid and provide rehabilitation to trafficking victims, he said.

Several Russian legislators used to help out in the crusade against sex trafficking, but none are presently active in the field. The most famous one was State Duma deputy Yelena Mizulina, who has gone on to become a conservative media star by spearheading legislative crusades against gays and U.S. adopters of Russian children.

Awareness of the issue also remains virtually nonexistent. The state does little in the field, though in 2012 the Interior Ministry published a brochure on the matter.

"Sexploitation runs strong in Russian society," Timofeyeva said. "We always tend to blame the victim."

Russia got the worst possible mark, "C," in taking measures against human trafficking in the Walk Free report, which said government activity in the field was "sporadic" and hampered by corruption.

The country scored acceptably on punishing traffickers, with 52 points out of 100, but support for victims was only rated at a dismal 33 points.

Charities are working to fill the void, such as Timofeyeva's SafeHouse, which hold seminars in schools, time and money permitting, and provides art therapy under the JewelGirls program.

But they only reach a fraction of potential victims, and are impeded by the general governmental crackdown on independent NGOs.

JewelGirls' plan to open a hotline and shelter for trafficking victims in Russia was foiled in 2012 because of the expulsion from Russia of USAID, which was going to foot the bill for the project.

NGO workers and police say the situation is still better than a decade ago, or in the 1990s, when Russian girls were trafficked across borders sealed between panels in the cargo area of trailer trucks.

And maybe the victims will yet prod the state into the right direction. At least, that is the plan for Angelina, another victim, who asked for her real name to be withheld to protect her identity.

Angelina, then a college student majoring in accountancy, was duped into working at a telephone sex company that she believed to be no more than a call center.

After a while, her handlers convinced her to work as an escort: "no sex involved." Soon she woke up in a locked apartment, having been drugged, where she was forced into starring in porn viewed by webcam, and drugged some more.

Angelina was freed in a police raid. She moved to a different city, and her abusers were jailed. She graduated from an engineering college and found a job in that field.

"But I dream of working in the police to help girls like me," Angelina said.

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