
Republic of Moldova:
Human Trafficking and Modern-day Slavery

November 20, 2012

by
Sarah Gowen
The Fishermen

Moldova is arguably the poorest country in Europe (along with Kosovo) with an average annual income of \$2,500, making it a hot-spot for human trafficking. Criminals operate freely, taking advantage of desperate men, women, and children who simply want a better life. Though the Moldovan government has taken steps to combat this horrible trade including the creation of the Department of Migration and a National Anti-Trafficking Committee, little has changed. Until serious steps are taken to address the problem on a level recognizable to the public (poverty and education), human trafficking will continue to plague the people. As it stands, sex slaves are Moldova's main export.

In this report I will point out critical data so you are aware of the size and scope of the issue of human trafficking in Moldova. Though there is a great wealth of existing information with new reports coming in every day, I will only focus on major problems and provide basic statistics. More data is available through The Fishermen if requested, including case reports, testimonies, overviews, and investigations by NGOs and government agencies.

The main categories I will address are as follows (definitions provided by the US Department of State and UNGIFT):

- **Sex Trafficking:** Sex trafficking comprises a significant portion of overall human trafficking. When a person is coerced, forced, or deceived into prostitution, or maintained in prostitution through coercion, that person is a victim of trafficking. All of those involved in recruiting, transporting, harboring, receiving, or obtaining the person for that purpose have committed a trafficking crime. Sex trafficking can also occur alongside debt bondage, as women and girls are forced to continue in prostitution through the use of unlawful "debt" purportedly incurred through their transportation or recruitment—or their crude "sale"—which exploiters insist they must pay off before they can be free.
- **Child Sex Trafficking:** According to UNICEF, as many as two million children are subjected to prostitution in the global commercial sex trade. International covenants and protocols obligate criminalization of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. The use of children in the commercial sex trade is prohibited under both U.S. law and the UN TIP Protocol. There can be no exceptions and no cultural or socioeconomic rationalizations that prevent the rescue of children from sexual servitude. Sex trafficking has devastating consequences for minors, including long-lasting physical and psychological trauma, disease (including HIV/ AIDS), drug addiction, unwanted pregnancy, malnutrition, social ostracism, and possible death.
- **Organ Trafficking:** Trafficking in organs is a crime that occurs in three broad categories. Firstly, there are cases where traffickers force or deceive the victims into giving up an organ. Secondly, there are cases where victims formally or informally agree to sell an organ and are cheated because they are not paid for the organ or are paid less than the promised price. Thirdly, vulnerable persons are treated for an ailment, which may or may not exist and thereupon organs are removed without the victim's knowledge. The

vulnerable categories of persons include migrants, especially migrant workers, homeless persons, illiterate persons, etc. It is known that trafficking for organ trade could occur with persons of any age. Organs which are commonly traded are kidneys, liver and the like; any organ which can be removed and used, could be the subject of such illegal trade.

- **Forced Labor:** The majority of human trafficking in the world takes the form of forced labor, according to the ILO's estimate on forced labor. Also known as involuntary servitude, forced labor may result when unscrupulous employers take advantage of gaps in law enforcement to exploit vulnerable workers. These workers are made more vulnerable to forced labor practices because of high rates of unemployment, poverty, crime, discrimination, corruption, political conflict, and cultural acceptance of the practice. Immigrants are particularly vulnerable, but individuals are also forced into labor in their own countries. Female victims of forced or bonded labor, especially women and girls in domestic servitude, are often sexually exploited as well.

The Problems:

First, let's examine the problems. The prevalence of human trafficking and the selling of organs and prostitutes in Moldova is due to widespread poverty and a general lack of education. Moldovans earn less than in any other country in Europe and are eager to seek a better life, even if it means taking a known chance on offers for jobs overseas. Additionally, it is not uncommon for friends, parents, and husbands to encourage loved ones to engage in risky or outright corrupt enterprises. Desperate people will commit desperate acts in order to get by. Others are simply undereducated about the dangers of the slave trade and answer ads for work in other countries as waitresses, dancers, models, etc, only to have their passports taken upon arrival and be forced into prostitution or physical labor.

Of particular concern for The Fishermen is the issue regarding orphanages. Children are required to leave institutions when they graduate from school, usually at the age of 16 or 17. They have no money for living expenses and are desperate for income of any sort – these children are easy prey. Some orphanage administrators actually sell information to traffickers so they know when girls are being evicted.

Sadly, once someone is ensnared it is incredibly difficult – if not impossible – to get out of the slave trade. Many victims wind up being killed by their captors either as examples to others or due to constant beatings. Even if escape is possible it is difficult to find people to help victims return home – quite often, the authorities and even trusted friends are directly involved. What I found shocking is that it is not uncommon for former victims to become trafficking recruiters themselves.

Finally, Moldova is geographically located in an area where it is relatively easy to relocate victims to Europe, Balkans, Middle East, or Russia – four of the major destinations for

Moldovan slaves. It does not help that the Transnistria region of eastern Moldova is under Russian occupation and outside the control of the Moldovan government, rendering it a hotspot for human trafficking operations.

The Statistics:

80% of victims of human trafficking – most of which are women and young girls – are forced into prostitution. The remaining 20% are usually men and boys whom are sold to forced labor operations. Approximately half (42%) of the prostitutes are under 18 when they are initially trafficked.

Though there is no hard number for female victims of sex trafficking, it is substantially higher than that of forced labor (apparently tens of thousands of Moldovan women have fallen victim). Out of all the female sex trade victims being sold out of Eastern Europe, 61% are from Moldova. These women – ages typically ranging from 15 to 30 – are usually from rural areas and are in search of employment. Most have answered ads offering jobs overseas – usually for dancers, models, nannies, or housekeepers – only to have their passports confiscated and then forced to work as prostitutes at bars, brothels, clubs, and saunas. In fact, nearly 85% of sexual slavery victims left their home countries in search of employment. Taking into consideration that there are an estimated 600,000 to 1 million Moldovans working abroad (70% of which are under 24), the number of females whom were likely trafficked could be staggering.

Child prostitution is wide-spread – occurring mostly at hotels or near bus and train stations – and typically involves relatives and authorities. Children as young as 12 are trafficked and are sold into slavery for low prices (sometimes as little as \$400) in order to ensure continued demand. Of all victims of human trafficking, 42% are minors at the time of “recruitment” (30% of which are girls) – only as few as 12% are still under 18 when they return home. Sadly, involvement of relatives is not always nefarious – there have been reports of parents selling their children in hope they will have a better future overseas. Again, the economic situation in Moldova is a key causative factor in human trafficking – with more than one-half of the population living in poverty with no hope in sight we must expect this problem to persist. Case in point: many of the children working as prostitutes on the weekend are students wanting to earn extra income and are not victims of sexual slavery.

The trafficking of organs is particularly heinous. Moldova is one of seven countries known for being providers of organs (the others being China, India, Pakistan, Egypt, Brazil, the Philippines, and Romania), most of which come from children. Organs commonly traded are the kidneys and liver, but can be any organ which can be removed and used. Since the harvesting of organs requires medical skills and facilities, hospitals and clinics must be considered as co-conspirators of this trade. Forced child prostitution, by the way, is a typically a byproduct of organ trafficking.

In 2008 it was estimated that there were over 25,000 Moldovans trafficked for forced labor alone. Men are trafficked to Russia and other countries to work in the construction and service sectors of Russia and other countries whereas the children are used for begging and other slave labor such as agriculture. A personal friend of The Fishermen is a survivor of forced child labor and his story is common. He watched as his mother and sister were shot dead trying to flee from the farm on which they were being held captive – only he survived.

The Solutions:

Finally, let's explore the solutions. Addressed below are Fishermen programs followed by suggestions for other NGOs.

As mentioned previously, low income and inadequate education are the two most significant causative factors leading to human trafficking in Moldova. Though we are incapable of affecting the economy, we are in a position to assist Moldovan youth by helping them explore employment opportunities and steering them away from suspect businesses. We have had a project in the making since the creation of our organization called the "Forum," which is an internet-based information resource where children in other countries can ask participating professionals for advice on jobs and education. Such guidance would help give students who would otherwise feel helpless about the course of their future take charge and hopefully find a suitable path and the means to get there.

Education is critical in the war to prevent human trafficking. Many are not aware of the dangers they are taking by responding to ads offering jobs overseas. They may be equally unaware of the involvement of friends and relatives who are often behind their "recruitment." By spending time at orphanages and schools teaching students how to identify and avoid slave traders we may be able to save many potential victims. We are developing a simple but effective brochure to help with this educational effort and will be more than happy to share them fellow NGOs and other volunteers dedicated to the elimination of human trafficking in Moldova.

Other options outside the scope of The Fishermen include:

- Employment training programs: By teaching Moldovans usable job skills, NGOs will - at the very - least reduce to possibility that they will seek "grey area" jobs such as modeling, dancing, etc.
- Job creation projects: Assisting in the expansion of local enterprises and/or providing funding for the creation of new businesses will generate jobs within Moldova and help stabilize the economy.
- Business verification databases: Providing a venue through which prospective employees can verify that the external or internal job for which they are applying is legitimate would not only help Moldovans evade human trafficking operations, but citizens of other high-risk countries as well. Availability of this information via internet, phone, and print will

assure that anyone willing to take the time to investigate a potential employer will remain safe.

Conclusion:

Though this was a simple overview of only a facet of the monumental problem which is the modern slave trade, I hope that it provided enough data for you to gain an understanding of the issue as well as our approach to a solution. As a small NGO with a narrow focus (orphanages) we are capable of only limited participation, but if we all contribute resources to fight this horrendous trade there may be a light at the end of the tunnel for the people of Moldova. Let us work together as one and eventually we will see the end of human trafficking world-wide.