

# HIV/AIDS Prevention and Kvinnoforum's Work in

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*Cet article présente « Kvinnoforum », un organisme non-gouvernemental basé en Suède, qui travaille sur le problème du trafic des femmes dans la région de la mer Baltique. L'auteure est intéressée tout particulièrement par le lien entre les maladies transmises sexuellement et le trafic et signale le rôle crucial des professionnels de la santé dans la prévention du VIH/SIDA et dans l'aide apportée aux victimes.*

Trafficking in the Baltic Sea Region occurs in a variety of ways. There is a "grey zone" which ranges from a local micro level to a complex criminal industry at a macro level. At the micro level, individual or small groups of Russian women cross the borders into northern Norway, Finland, and Sweden over the weekend to provide sexual services at a predefined hotel and then return home.

At the macro level, trafficking is an international criminal business with branches in countries of origin, transit, and destination and which receives political and economic support, often involving corruption of state officials (Global Survival Network). At both levels, trafficking in women and girls is commonly linked to other kinds of criminal enterprises such as trade in drugs, arms, or animals.

Trafficking is a complex phenomenon and its definition has been and is still contested. For lobbying purposes it is important to define the phenomenon. For networking purposes it is important to be open to various and differing views as the advocacy work that is needed around the issue of trafficking may otherwise end in endless debates. Only recently has the magnitude and complexity of

the issue of trafficking in persons been placed on the international agenda and the concern has expanded

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to encompass trafficking for purposes other than prostitution such as for bounded labour in sweatshops, as domestic workers, or for adoption and marriage.

In December 2000, the United Nations adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime which provides a useful definition of trafficking. It states:

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 form of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the

abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payment 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 in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in subparagraphs (a) of this article shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used;

c) The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation shall be considered "trafficking in persons," even if this does not involve any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) of this article;

d) Child shall mean any person under eighteen years of age. (Article 3)

At Kvinnoforum, we are particularly concerned about the traffic in women and girls, even though trafficking in boys and men also occurs. Kvinnoforum has been working against trafficking since the organization was founded in 1988. In 1997, alarmed by the increasing numbers of women in prostitution of Baltic or Russian origin in Stockholm, Kvinnoforum (1998) conducted a research project on anti-trafficking initiatives in the Baltic Sea Region,

# Access to Trafficked Women the Baltic Sea Region

Belarus and Russia. Having discovered how little is known about this issue, Kvinnoforum subsequently implemented a networking and capacity-building project with the Finnish MONICA Multicultural Women's Association and the Latvian Gender Problem Centre.<sup>1</sup> Our objectives were to raise awareness on trafficking in women and girls; to build a network nationally and regionally around the Baltic Sea across organizational, geographical, and ideological borders; and to develop strategies and as well as support victims. As a result, Kvinnoforum developed a partnership with several NGOs in the region: Monika, Multicultural Women's Association, Finland; PRO-centre, Denmark; AIDS Information and Support Centre Aidsi Tugikeskus, Estonia; Latvian Gender Problem Centre, Latvia; and a Lithuanian women's NGO Praeities Pedos, Lithuania. Together, these organizations have conducted training workshops for NGOs, authorities (e.g., police, social welfare units), politicians and other parties interested in trafficking issues.

Despite subsequent difficulties with funding for our joint efforts, these organizations remain in the network and continue to develop activities in their respective countries. Currently, Kvinnoforum is expanding the network by partnering with the Angel Coalition in Russia which is made up of more than 40 NGOs in Russia and neighbouring countries. Throughout the work Kvinnoforum has made use of Q Web, Women's Empowerment Base, a global internet-based network for exchange of information and contacts and one of the most complete re-



*Rochelle Rubinstein, "Entrapment," linocut print, 12" x 12," 1988.*

source bases on the internet with respect to trafficking issues.

## **Trafficking in the Baltic Countries**

In the Baltic countries trafficking occurs locally from the countryside to the major towns as well as regionally and internationally. Sometimes the same country may be a country of origin, of transit, and of destination, as for instance Lithuania. Estonia used to receive women from Russia, Belarus and Latvia but is currently mostly a country of origin or transit. In a broader international context,

women from Russia and the Baltic countries have been trafficked to countries as far away as the Philippines, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Israel, and the U.S. The fall of the Iron Wall dividing Europe, and the socio-economic crisis that has followed in the former Soviet states, has led to a dramatic increase in the number of women from these countries being trafficked into Western Europe.

It is difficult to obtain exact figures on the numbers of women that are trafficked worldwide. At a global level, the International Organization for Migration estimates that between

700,000 to two million women are trafficked across international borders annually. In Europe, trafficking has increased dramatically since the fall of the Iron Wall in 1989. Europol estimates the number of trafficking victims entering the European Union to be around 120,000. The main countries of destination are the countries in Western Europe: Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, the UK and the Scandinavian countries. A majority of the women trafficked come from Eastern and South Eastern European countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Albania, Kosovo, the Baltic States, the Czech Republic and Poland (see Kvinnoforum 2002).

The lack of reliable statistics can be attributed to the clandestine nature of the phenomenon, the complexity involved in the gathering of data, and a lack of political will to make this a priority. Nevertheless, Kvinnoforum's partner organization, Prides Pedos in Lithuania, estimates that an average of two girls per high school are trafficked abroad, for an approximate total of 1200 per year. This does not include any numbers regarding older women or girls outside the school system that are also trafficked.

Another organization that partners with Kvinnoforum in Latvia, the Latvian Gender Problem Centre, estimates that there are approximately 10,000 women and girls working as prostitutes in Latvia. It is not known how many work temporarily abroad but numbers are estimated to be significant.

In Estonia, Kvinnoforum's partner organization, the AIDS Prevention and Information Centre, conducted a survey over three years and collected information from about 400 women in prostitution in Tallinn. The survey indicated that of these, about 50 per cent intended to continue to work abroad. However, this number does not say anything about other women who may be deceived into trafficking. In Estonia, it is estimated to be the second most lucrative business after the drug enterprise.

The Swedish police force is reluc-

tant to provide any figures but estimates that of the 1,500 to 2,000 women in prostitution in Sweden, approximately 400 are foreign. These women come mainly from Estonia, but also from Poland and the other Baltic countries (Rikskriminalpolisen).

In Eastern Europe the fall of the Iron Wall has caused a very stressful situation for women due to high unemployment, unequal access to the formal labour market, low wages if

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any at all, lack of childcare and high incidences of sexual harassment in the work place and gender violence. The number of single-headed households has also risen and for these women the burden to feed their families has increased substantially. Further, trafficking in the Baltic Sea Region also has an ethnic dimension: ethnic Russians in Estonia and Latvia have more difficulty finding a job within the formal labour market and are frequently discriminated against. Thus, there is an disproportionately high number of Russian women who work as prostitutes in Riga, Latvia and Tallinn, Estonia.

#### **Trafficking and HIV Prevention**

Kvinnoforum was the first organization in Sweden to highlight the

need for a gender perspective on HIV/AIDS and to raise awareness of the link between trafficking and HIV/AIDS. In the late 1980s, the situation of infected women and mothers was not yet widely recognized. It was at that time, therefore, that Kvinnoforum began conducting training workshops, publishing reports, and developed strategies and activities for integrating a gender perspective in HIV/AIDS advocacy work. Since then, the impact of HIV/AIDS on the lives of women, and its link to trafficking, is an integrated part of Kvinnoforum's ongoing work.

In terms of the development of programs for the prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) in trafficked persons, it is important to consider that trafficking involves three to four different phases in which the situation and needs of the women vary: the contracting phase, during transportation, while being held and "working," and when returning home. Some issues crosscut all stages while others are specific to each phase. Thus, HIV and STDs prevention programs must be developed that address the specific needs of the women and that are designed around the probability of effectively accessing the women in each of the phases.

During the contracting phase, the women are generally unaware of what may be waiting for them. Even those who are already in the sex trade at home are often not prepared for what lies in store for them. Lack of awareness of sexual health and sexual practices and, obviously, of sexual rights is also common among young Baltic women. Many of them are from the countryside and have none or little awareness of these issues. Those who are aware may believe they are in control of the situation. This makes it difficult to do preventive work as the women may not believe they are at risk. At this stage, preventing HIV and STDs involves providing women with viable economic alternatives to the sex trade as well as empowering them to make informed choices.

During the transportation period, the women are completely dependent on the traffickers as they have full control of travel documents, money, food, the means of transportation, language, and so on. Many girls and women endure sexual assaults and rapes during this phase. It is important for this phase to develop programs aimed at educating and raising awareness of trafficking issues among border and migration authorities, police, personnel on ships, airplanes, buses and even travel agencies. Sensitizing these groups to the human rights aspects of trafficking will enable them to support the women and provide them with information on where to turn if they get in trouble, what their rights as foreigners in the destination country are, as well as distribute information on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Once the women start "working," apart from being deceived about the work they are expected to do, they have little or no control of the conditions of the services they have to offer. They are denied the right to choose clients and make their own conditions regarding the sale of sexual services, as well as methods to protect themselves from STDs and from contracting HIV/AIDS. Among women in prostitution, those who have been trafficked are the lowest ranking and therefore have less, if any power in negotiating the conditions of their sex work. They are also often the ones that must endure unsafe and violent sex practices which increases their risk of contracting STDs and HIV. Furthermore, the women are commonly denied the right to access to medical treatment and social assistance. In some cases, HIV testing may be forced on them, but the results may be withheld, or used only to create a false sense of security. This encourages the demand for unsafe sex from the clients.

In some countries, like in Germany, the women in prostitution are registered and there is mandatory medical control. But, only the women

who are registered can be reached. Trafficked women are often not registered and therefore not easy to reach. Moreover, the clients who infect the women are not tracked. Where unregistered prostitution is prohibited, foreign women with illegal immigrant status will refrain from seeking medical attention as they are afraid of being discovered and sent back home.

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only persons in contact with trafficked women and girls as sometimes even traffickers are interested in keeping "their girls clean." Health workers in HIV and STD clinics therefore have a responsibility to find out if the woman or girl they are seeing has been trafficked. HIV and STD prevention programs must be developed to sensitize health workers to the needs of trafficked women. Health workers must also be trained to counsel victims when they are in isolation from the accompanying man, if possible bringing in an independent interpreter (so the man who is with her cannot act as interpreter). They need to ask if she is afraid, offer to help her make telephone calls, and give her telephone numbers to NGOs that can provide assistance and support.

Trafficked women and girls may

also show up in hospital emergency wards as they are often subject to violence. The trafficker might have brought her in or she may have escaped. Training programs for staff in emergency wards is also crucial.

When the women return home, if they return, they may be unwilling to seek help or to tell anyone what they have gone through. Many of these women are sent home because they are sick and are therefore useless to the trafficker. Some continue to earn their living by providing sexual services at home. They may continue the unsafe practices they became used to when they were abroad. Therefore, health care workers and social assistance providers at home also need to be trained to "see" a trafficking victim. Moreover, a trafficked woman that is seeking help and health care is likely to hide the full picture of the circumstances of her situation. Health care workers and social assistance providers must be aware and sensitive to this. It is very important therefore to network with different kinds of organizations that provide services and rehabilitation programs for victims, together with local authorities, and coordinate efforts in the work against trafficking. With a general awareness of what these women might have experienced, health care workers can not only provide appropriate health care, but they can direct victims to other agencies that can provide support and assistance in other areas.

Throughout all phases, sometimes excepting the contracting phase, trafficked women are subject to physical and psychological violence, which affects their health and well-being in general, as well as their reproductive and sexual health in particular.

The anti-trafficking movement is divided in whether legalizing or abolishing prostitution is a solution for women that would have an impact on the prevention of HIV and STDs. One side argues that sex work is a woman's right. They recognize the violence and health risks are a problem and believe that legalizing pros-

titution enhances the possibilities of the sex workers to negotiate their conditions of work and have access to appropriate health care (Strandberg). On the other hand, others in the anti-trafficking movement view prostitution in and of itself a problem and consider it another form of violence against women. According to this view, prostitution must be abolished, and the Swedish law penalizing the act of buying sex is commonly given as an example (Strandberg).

Legalization, however, carries the risk of creating a dual market. There might, for example, be one legal market where Western Europeans can work under safe working conditions and with more control over the number of clients and to some extent the conditions of work. There may be another market, perhaps made up of Asian, African and/or East European women, who work illegally with little or no control over their conditions of work and who will have to take on the most violent and unsafe clients. This, however, could be prevented by ensuring that legalization is coupled with equal access to valid working permits for women in the sex trade. On the other hand, making prostitution illegal also makes it more difficult to reach trafficked women and girls in the sex trade. We do not have an answer.

Kvinnoforum has always worked to protect the human rights of women who are most marginalized in society and we acknowledge the need for pragmatism and local solutions when proposing policies and legal changes regarding prostitution. Any strategy or policy change must take into account trafficked women and girls' human rights and not further victimize them or render them more vulnerable to violence and harassment from clients or law enforcement.

## Conclusion

Trafficking is not only an issue of the sexual and reproductive ill health of trafficked women and girls. It is also a violation of these women's

human rights and a development problem for the countries involved.

Trafficking is seen as a violation of human rights in various international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, 1995. Furthermore, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons has been path-breaking in committing governments and international organizations to take on the fight against this modern day form of slavery. Nevertheless, there is still an urgent need to recognize the magnitude of the problem, particularly at a local level, to raise awareness of the issue, to work towards the prevention of trafficking, to address the demand for sexual services, and to provide support for trafficked women and girls.

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<sup>1</sup>A result of this work is a handbook on working against trafficking. It presents the issue and gives advice in terms of prevention and rehabilitation. It includes references on the issue and links to other organizations, on-line articles and networks. It includes a detailed list of 80 organizations in the Baltic Sea Region working against trafficking or on related social issues. The resource book is available at Kvinnoforum's web site: [www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/trafficking/](http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/trafficking/). This book was updated in 2002 and is also available on the same website.

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