

Migrant women trapped in Europe's sex industry

By Tom Pfeiffer

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THE money Rosa was earning in a Turkish shoe factory was not enough to support the three children she had left behind in Ukraine.

Then her new friend in Turkey, Katerina, told her she could earn \$700 a month as a casino waitress in Bosnia and convinced Rosa to come home with her to Moldova and then make their way to Bosnia.

"I began to think of all the things I could do to change my life to help my children, my family." As the time came to leave Moldova, Katerina said she had a problem with her passport and would join Rosa in Bosnia a week later. At the station, she introduced Rosa to a Romanian man who would accompany her.

Rosa felt something was wrong when she said goodbye and Katerina just turned away. "I pushed my feelings aside," said Rosa, who declined to give her real name. "I don't usually trust anyone, but I told myself that sometimes you have to have faith."

Rosa paid Katerina \$300 to get her a job but a criminal gang had already paid Katerina \$700 to make Rosa their slave.

She was smuggled across Europe in cars and once in a fold-away bed on a train, was sold and resold, beaten, raped and forced to work in brothels.

She was afraid to escape because her captors had kept her passport, home address and photos of her children.

Rosa was freed months later in Britain when police raided a sauna she was working in. But her captors are still at large.

Poverty, war, open borders and domestic violence are prompting increasing numbers of people from eastern Europe and beyond to seek work in the wealthy West.

With governments tightening limits on immigration, women desperate for work in bars, shops and hotels have come to rely on crooks to spirit them across borders using false identities.

"The profits are huge and the money the traffickers wave in potential victims' faces would certainly outweigh the salaries they can expect by staying at home," said Richard Danziger, head of the counter-trafficking unit of the International Organization for Migration in Geneva.

On the wrong side of the law in a foreign land, some of the women find themselves forced into prostitution. They are powerless to resist their captors. Many have sex with up to 30 men a day for months on end.

Out of sight: The trade in people for forced sex has mushroomed into a

\$12 billion industry to rival drug trafficking and gunrunning. Because the victims are locked in rooms or moved around in secret, it is almost impossible to trace them.

It also makes quantifying the problem virtually impossible. Five years ago, the British government estimated that as few as 140 or as many as 1,400 women had been smuggled into the country and forced to work as prostitutes.

Social workers say the problem has

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grown alongside lurid Internet sites and flyers plastered on the walls of phone booths fuelling a demand for unprotected and risky sex that few women would willingly supply.

"There is definitely too much work to deal with," said Anna Johansson of the London-based Poppy Project, which helps women trying to leave prostitution. "We're getting referrals from Birmingham, Sheffield, Liverpool, from all across the country."

Many women contract chlamydia, syphilis and sometimes HIV because they

are forced to have unprotected sex. They are often left with painful scars and some become sterile. Most suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

"Almost all those we work with have flashbacks and nightmares and cannot sleep," said Johansson. "They can be extremely frightened of strangers and find it hard to go out alone."

She said one woman had approached the Poppy Project after leaping to freedom from a second-storey window, breaking

foot at a northern England police station after eluding her "owner" in a nightclub.

But renewed efforts to stamp out the trade may be pushing it further underground, from red-light districts such as London's Soho to houses and apartments in the suburbs, many of which are unknown to the police.

"Women here are not advertised. Access is gained by word of mouth," said Johansson. "That's quite dangerous as the authorities are not that likely to come across them."

Campaigners say anti-immigration policies could be making things worse. Sending victims straight home means they cannot testify against their owners in court, and can expose them to more danger by landing them back where they were kidnapped.

"You can't break the problem of trafficking by sending people back to where they were trafficked from," said Mary Cunneen, director of Anti-Slavery International.

Last year a woman helped put her captors behind bars for nine years. Fearing reprisals if she returned to her small village in Moldova, she applied for asylum in Britain.

"She applied in February last year but there has still been no response," said Johansson. "The chance of her being re-trafficked is high, but this has not been recognised." **REUTERS**

bones in her foot.

Another's hopes were raised when a client promised to help her and bought her from her captor, then locked her away in an apartment and visited her at night twice a week on the way home to his wife.

From Soho to suburbia: Last month, three east European men were jailed for up to 18 years under new British trafficking laws after they lured a 15-year-old Lithuanian girl to Britain on the promise of a summer job, then sold her for 4,000 pounds.

Three months later she turned up bare-