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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Bought and Sold

Global Survival Network (1997: 42 minutes) Transcribed by Darrell Moen

Unidentified woman: So the visa, the apartment, and the trip there and back are paid for? And I only have to pay for food?

Unidentified man: That's right.

Unidentified woman: Everything sounds good. It's just that I've heard that a lot of girls go abroad and they never make it back.

Narrator: The United Nations estimates that criminal groups rake in more than \$7 billion dollars annually from trafficking human beings -- rivaling the lucrative trade in guns and drugs. One of the fastest growing trafficking trades is the sex trade. But this is not a film about prostitution. This is a film about trafficking and modern--day slavery, and how and why it persists even into the 21st century.

An international coalition of non--governmental groups (NGOs) defines trafficking as: Recruitment or transportation... for work... by means of violence or threat(s)... debt bondage, deception or... coercion" (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women).

The Global Survival Network is a non--profit organization that exposes and addresses human rights and environmental violations. In 1995, while we were investigating the illegal trade in endangered species, we came across a mafia group in the Russian Far East that was selling tiger pelts. They were also trafficking Russian women to Japan.

Our discovery led us on a two--year undercover investigation into the trafficking of Russian women. In Russia, our investigators posed as foreign buyers scheming to import Russian women into the United States to work as high--class call girls. We formed a dummy company and distributed phony business cards and brochures in meetings with pimps and mafia members. Our investigators wore hidden cameras and filmed their meetings in order to give you an insider's perspective on how the trade in women actually works. From Moscow to Vladivostok, we discovered a

network of recruiters and pimps trafficking women overseas to work as prostitutes. The casual disregard for law was obvious.

Unidentified man (trafficker): My favorite book is the criminal code -- I know it very well.

Narrator: We learned that thousands of women are trafficked every year from Russia and the newly independent states to locations throughout the world. Why haven't you heard more about the problem? Because organized criminal groups control the business, which means the women are scared, governments are involved, and the community groups that are working to tackle the issue lack the resources to make their voices heard.

The Russian mafia is so notoriously brutal that we are changing the names and concealing the identities of many people in this film. This security measure is taken to protect the lives of the women brave enough to speak out as well as our investigators. Lena and Tatiana are two young women who were trafficked overseas and made it home to tell the tale. Lena was trafficked to China when she was 19 years old. She thought she would be working as a waitress and studying Chinese cooking.

Lena: They began to lock us up. There were guards everywhere. There was a balcony. You could jump it you wanted to die.

Narrator: Tatiana is a dancer and musician. When she was 20 years old, she accepted an offer for a job in a cabaret in Spain.

Tatiana: They treated us like animals. We didn't have any rights. It was as if we had a one--way passport.

Narrator: Meet Katia, Lola, and Vika -- these are some of the thousands of women who are still caught in the underground of the global sex trade. Katia is 22 years old. She used to live in Ukraine where she worked as a hairdresser. Now she lives in Germany, working as a prostitute. She is trying to support her family.

Katia: Now my daughter calls her grandmother "mama" -- she is beginning to forget me. If I am gone for another year, she won't recognize me at all. It hurts.

Narrator: Lola is a 24 year old from the Russian Far East. She was unemployed and eager to see Europe. Some friends, who turned out to be members of the Russian mafia, bought her a ticket. By the time we met her, she had been purchased by Yugoslavian pimps in Germany.

Lola: I asked, if I return the money, will they leave me in peace? They said, if I pay back the money, they won't touch me anymore, and they'll "protect me." It could be worse. They can sell me wherever they want!

Narrator: Vika is a 22 year old from Latvia. She wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, but there were no jobs. Two weeks before this meeting, she answered an ad for work in a bar in Germany.

Vika: I'm Latvian and they're Belarussian. There were five of us who came. They put us in different apartments. One here, another one there. I live with Belarussian girls. They're also young, and we all have problems...

Narrator: Marina is ready to go. She is 22 years old and is willing to work as an escort abroad. She hopes it is her ticket to a life of adventure and glamour. This film is made for people like her.

Unidentified man: And you would like to travel to another country?

Marina: Yes, I like to travel.

Unidentified man: And which country would you like to go to?

Marina: Florida, Paris, or Los Angeles.

Narrator: The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 was a time for celebration and promised new freedoms and opportunities throughout the former Eastern Bloc. However, the transition from communism to capitalism throughout Russia and Eastern Europe has led to a sharp decline in the economic status of women in the region.

Spokesperson for Trafficking Prevention Program La Strada (Ukraine): 80,000 of our unemployed are women. Industrial enterprises are closed. The problem of trafficking is the problem of the small towns in our country.

Ukrainian ice cream vendor (Moscow): During Soviet times, my children saw cafes, ice cream, theaters, and movies. And now, nothing. Now, I'm yelling at them, "Children, eat less bread!" My salary is enough only for bread and a bottle of oil. As soon as they open their eyes in the morning, they say, "Mama, food!"

Narrator: Poverty like this leads women throughout the world to migrate for work, but they face limited opportunities and substantial risks. They may be forced to work illegally as tailors in sweatshops, as maids in private homes, or as prostitutes in sex clubs.

Katia: If we didn't help our parents, they would live very badly. The money is not for buying things. There's not enough money simply to eat.

Interviewer: There is no other work?

Katia: No. Lena's father worked for half a year and they didn't pay him. Why work if they don't pay you? The bank has no money -- that's it. Everybody is being sent on "unpaid vacation." There's nothing to pay with.

How are they recruited?

Narrator: We found that the number of ways women come to be trapped in the global sex trade is practically endless -- through dance and modeling companies, marriage agencies, and ads for jobs as waitresses, au pairs, and maids. What is common to all the women is that they are lured with promises of a better life in a faraway land.

Joanna Piore, Health Counselor for Migrant Prostitutes (Geneva): There is this image of a beautiful life and a beautiful country. They think okay, I'll try it because someone comes and tells them that they can work in a bar in Switzerland and make a lot of money in just a few months.

Narrator: Surprisingly, women are often recruited by people they consider their friends, like Tatiana, who thought she was going to work as a dancer.

Tatiana: A friend of mine told me that there is a company that sends dancers overseas to work. This interested me because I needed the money. I met the man who headed the company. He described heaven to me -- that I'd make crazy big money and that everything would be really great.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: This is really one strategy of these young pimps -- to tell the girls, "Come with me. I'm already rich in Germany and I live there so if you come with me, you'll live like a princess, my princess." Yeah, it is very hard for the girl to realize that she was exploited.

Narrator: Throughout our two--year undercover investigation, we met with Sergei, a former surgeon and current pimp. We discussed developing a business together -- trafficking Russian women to the United States. He proposed using a marriage agency as a cover.

Sergei: The best thing to do as an official cover is to set up a marriage agency. A nice, respectable marriage agency. Some girls come, some girls go. Who will notice if she went to America as a bride and ended up as something else?

Narrator: Because of the desperation to get out, women are recruited for marriage agencies easily and inexpensively. We attended this marriage agency function in Moscow and spoke with one of the recruiters about the business.

Unidentified woman marriage agency recruiter: We work like this: he brings me the pictures and telephone numbers of the girls. Then we make an agreement that if

she is in demand, I pay him \$10 or \$20 for a short message. He can then come to the meetings and he can take any of my girls and can sell them to other agencies with me.

Narrator: These gatherings and their lists of invitees also serve as "hunting grounds" for traffickers. White women from the former Eastern Bloc are regarded as the hottest new commodities in the sex trade and are being marketed as alternatives to Asian and Latin American women. One marriage agency brochure claims that Russian women are "... from a modern, yet meager society." And that "... ladies from Asian and Latin regions will not marry men who have already been divorced."

We found that modeling agencies are another plentiful source of women anxious to find work abroad. Our investigator dropped in unannounced at this modeling agency and proposed trafficking women overseas. The agency director was willing to do business on the spot, and he said that he had a database of over 20,000 girls.

Modeling agency Director: I can send my girls anywhere, not as models. For example, I can send my girls to Japan as hostesses. The girls come here to be models, but they will never get jobs as models.

Narrator: Galia, another (woman) recruiter ready to do business is using a variety of media to recruit women to work as escorts in Australia.

Galia: The television advertisement says: "Agency invites girls for work abroad for escort service." Sometimes newspapers won't take ads that have "escort service" in them so we state, "Agency invites girls for highly paid work abroad."

Counselor for Trafficked Women: Some of the women know that they will work in prostitution in Holland or Germany or wherever they go. And that's fine with them, but what they don't know is that once they sign up with these guys, that it'll be very difficult to get away from them, to get out of their control again. So in the end, she's in the same situation as the young girl who answered a job advertisement to work as a waitress or a model or a housekeeper.

Narrator: Even women who migrate independently and are not deceived by traffickers may be forced to work illegally and against their will. Forced labor is prohibited by the International Labor Organization which defines it as: "All work ... extracted ... under menace of penalty and for which said person has not offered himself voluntarily" (ILO Convention 29).

Because prostitution is generally not recognized as legitimate work, women in the sex industry are often denied the legal protection guaranteed to others.

Director: Trafficking Prevention Program La Strada (Prague): It's a question of developing democracy and that means protecting the human rights of each individual. Individuals are also women and individuals are also prostitutes.

Why don't they earn any money?

Narrator: The sums of money promised to women by trafficking networks can be enormous. However, we found that they rarely earn what they are promised.

Sigrun Katrins, Counselor for Trafficked Women (Germany): After they arrive in Berlin, only then are they told that because of the help they got they have to pay maybe 10,000 Deutch Marks. And so the pimp or the trafficker will make a list of the customers and count how many days or months she has to work until she pays back the 10,000 DM and only then can she keep some money for herself.

Unidentified woman: The pimps don't give a damn at all. Nothing concerns them. They have one goal -- to get the money. If I don't pay them back, they'll sell me. Then I won't get to see Russia for another 10 years.

Marjan Wijers, Foundation Against Traffic in Women (Netherlands): So the only way to pay back your debt is to continue working. That's the choice that a lot of women make -- just leave me alone and let me try to go on working to make the money so that I can buy back my safety and my freedom.

Narrator: But repaying debts is difficult if not impossible.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: [Many of] my clients, [who come to our office for help,] they didn't earn any money. 50% of their earnings is for their pimp or the recruiter, who's sometimes the same person, and the other 50% goes to the bar owner. So they, the women, don't get any money. You didn't know this before? This kind of prostitute doesn't get any money.

Unidentified woman: Then they stopped giving us money altogether, or allotted money in portions which were nothing for ten people. So in fact, we went hungry. We were so desperate, we could have been stealing from the stores.

Narrator: This is Natasha. She is trafficking other women to Japan by collaborating with the Japanese mafia [yakuza]. She advised us to confiscate all the money earned by the women, a form of debt bondage prohibited by national and international law.

Natasha (trafficker): I think there is not any way to avoid these problems but to make a very severe contract with very severe punishment. If they escape, for example, from or agency or something, they should pay. First of all, you should keep all of their salary in your bank account. You cannot give them even one cent. They will live in the States on credit. Without any cash, without any money, [they can do nothing]. This is the normal way to do it.

Narrator: Our investigator asked Natasha for a copy of the contract that she uses. It states that the woman's salary will be kept in the Japanese club owners' bank

account. It also states that 30% of a woman's salary and fees for numerous expenses will be deducted as payment to the club owners. And finally, the contract indicates that the club owners are entitled to keep all monies earned if the woman fails to follow directions. Everyone, except the women working as prostitutes, is making a killing off the business.

Galia told us how much she earns sending Russian women to Australia to work as escorts.

Undercover investigator: How much does the company in Australia pay you for each girl?

Galia: I get \$2,000 a week for every girl I send. So for three months, I receive \$24,000 for each girl.

Narrator: And Sergei is looking for a similar return.

Undercover investigator: What are you thinking in terms of your salary [if I do business with you]?

Sergei: \$5,000 a month until the moment when the first girl leaves. After that, we'll all get money from the girls. I'll get money, the mafia will get money... We'll solve any financial problems with the girls.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: For many women it's something they really can't stand, you know, that they've earned so much money and there's nothing left for them.

Who is behind it all?

Counselor for Trafficked Women: There are organizations, some people call them mafia, that have well--organized networks that recruit women in their own countries, bring them to Germany, and force them to work in the prostitution industry here.

Narrator: We approached this man who is the director of a Moscow security firm and asked him to provide a "roof" or protection for our phony business trafficking women to the United States. He was eager to cooperate.

Undercover investigator: We want no problems from the police or any government authorities. And secondly, we want to problems from any other criminal groups.

Unidentified trafficker: I can guarantee you that. We collaborate very closely with the Federal Security Service -- very closely. And they won't bother us. We don't have any problems with criminal groups because they know that we work very closely with the police and the Federal Security Service.

Narrator: Anatoly Diechenko is a Russian expert on the sex trade.

Anatoly Diechenko: Naturally, no business that exports girls for services mentions this in its charter. It can be registered as any kind of business, who knows what, but one thing is clear -- they are not licensed for this kind of activity.

Narrator: Natasha is using a tourist agency as a front for her operations.

Natasha (trafficker): We created this company only for legal purposes. But actually, I have several companies with my former husband, with my partner from Bulgaria -- several different companies. One of my partners runs this tourist agency. And that's why we can send women as tourists anywhere without any problem.

Narrator: We asked Vika how she got to Germany.

Vika: Where I'm from, in Latvia, they recruit us for work and they bring us on buses like tourists for two months.

Narrator: Masha is a former model and prostitute, and current trafficker. She agreed to an interview on condition of anonymity, and she told us just how easy it is to obtain tourist visas.

Masha: It's all handled as routine tourist travel. A girl is chosen and her passport is taken away. In a few days, she gets a passport with visas, a signed contract, and tickets. It's so simple!

Narrator: She also told us about the governmental "roof" for her trafficking business.

Masha: The best "roofs" are the government criminals who are legal and who receive a certain percentage from the earnings of firms, including ours. And if there are problems from other "roofs" they take care of it. So if this "roof" is high enough, if it is well connected in government and elsewhere, then there is nothing to be afraid of.

Anatoly Diechenko: These businesses are, in essence, links in organized criminal groups. It is clear that there are people responsible for traveling around, searching for, selecting, and recruiting girls. It involves arranging phony contracts, promises of paid services, booking tickets, getting passports ready, etc... Finally, there are people already in place abroad waiting for them. So we have recruiting, transportation, and sales. These three links prove that the sex business is undoubtedly a professional and organized one.

Narrator: Connections in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs may be used to transport underage girls out of the country. Natasha told us how it works.

Undercover investigator: What about if we have interest from a client who wants younger girls -- say a 16--year--old girl?

Natasha: Yes, a 16--year--old girl can, according to our laws, obtain a passport. But to go abroad, if she's only 16, she should have approval from her parents. If we want to avoid contact with the parents, we can make her a passport that indicates that she is 18--years--old. In that case, she doesn't need any approval. There are several people we know in the Foreign Affairs Ministry who can do this.

How do criminal groups control women?

Narrator: Sergei advised us to control recruits by confiscating passports.

Sergei: I think it is important that you should take their passports. I'm talking about taking their passports because I have no idea what's going on in their heads. Without doing that, I can give no guarantees. They can take the money and goodbye.

Tatiana: They took our passports even though the contract said that everybody would keep their passports. They took them saying they needed to register us because we'd be living there for a long time. They demanded \$15,000 for our passport if we wanted to get it back.

Narrator: Vika told us that her pimp will keep her passport until she has worked long enough to repay her debt to the criminal group that brought her into the country.

Undercover investigator: If you ask the pimp for your passport, can you have it back?

Vika: He won't give me my passport. He'll say that I have to give him the money first. I have to work off the contract first.

Narrator: Why don't the women just go to the police? We asked Lola the same question.

Undercover investigator: You don't want to say anything to the police -- to ask them for help?

Lola: No! You must understand that if I tell the police they'll put me in jail. They'll arrest everyone. It's okay as far as the ones who live here in Berlin, but I'm going back to live in Russia. Imagine what will happen [to me or my family] in Russia.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: If she's working in prostitution, for a foreign woman it is illegal and if there is a raid by the police, then in most cases they would treat her as an illegal alien and put her into prison, and then she would be deported from Germany.

Narrator: We learned from our meetings with Natasha that traffickers are very effective at using state immigration regulations to control their workers.

Natasha: But it's better not to give them business visas, to tell the truth, because with business visas they are absolutely free to do anything they want. With a guest visa, they will have to work illegally. For you, it's better because if they work illegally they will be afraid of being captured by the police.

Narrator: When trafficked women are captured by police, they can sometimes prolong deportation by agreeing to testify against criminal groups. But they face risks whether they agree to testify or refuse and get deported.

Marjan Wijers, Foundation Against Traffic in Women (Netherlands): Of course, there are the obvious risks that the people she testified against will take revenge or will just be waiting for her to bring her back into the business. Then, there is the risk of [revenge being taken by injuring or killing] family members. Many of the women are really most concerned about the dangers their families and their children will face. There are a lot of women who have debts and as long as they haven't paid off their debts, they are in danger.

Narrator: Criminal groups use fear and shame to control women.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: They tell her that if you really appear in court, we know your home address and we'll go there to see your family and tell the family that you were a prostitute.

Katia: For me, it a humiliation -- I've become "bad". I'm dirty. You understand? Dirty.

Marjan Wijers, Foundation Against Traffic in Women (Netherlands): Or they say we will kill your family. Let's say they get the information on the pimp -- the pimp will tell the girl, "If you accuse me, and even if I'm arrested by the police, there's still my brother back home, and he'll find your family and he'll find you when you return to your hometown." And of course, the women know that if the pimp is from the same town or village as them, there is still the family network and his friends to consider, and she realizes that she will always be in danger.

Narrator: In 1994, this quiet Frankfort street was the site of the murders of four Ukrainian women working as prostitutes in this brothel. The brothel owners were also strangled because they tried to avoid using Russian mafia recruiters.

Marjan Wijers, Foundation Against Traffic in Women (Netherlands): One of the women we worked with had worked for them for seven months. And in those seven months, she had witnessed three murders within the group and between two competing groups. And of course, if a woman witnessed these killings, for them it

means that they will not say anything. There's no way out for them, and even now, after three years, she still waits up in the middle of the night with nightmares of having these guys coming after her.

Tatiana: We were afraid in a purely physical sense that they'd beat us. I was always afraid. When they told us that we were going to strip, no one said a word otherwise. I didn't have anyone to turn to for help.

Narrator: By using threats, severe contracts, and by confiscating salaries and passports, traffickers are guaranteed a compliant workforce.

What can be done?

Narrator: Trafficking and forced labor must be recognized as violations of human rights.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: In the sending and in the receiving countries there is still a lot of public work to be done because a lot of information has to be made available to the public. People don't know and many people don't want to know what's really going on.

Narrator: Governments, community groups, and media should promote awareness of the problems of trafficking and forced labor.

Tatiana: We went to the embassy and the consulate. They made empty promises. In reality, no one did anything to help. They said, "Work, earn money for the tickets." But how? Who are you? You don't have a visa, you don't have a right to be in the country without a visa.

Narrator: Governments should train law enforcement, immigration, and embassy officials about the problems of trafficking and forced labor so that they can handle cases appropriately when they arise.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: They think that if they make very strict laws that there will be less people coming to Germany, but this is not true. If the laws just become stricter, the pressure on the people who want to come here becomes higher. They will have to pay more to come to Germany. There will be more and more people who will make even more money out of this business.

Narrator: Governments must stop treating trafficked women as illegal immigrants. Stricter immigration regulations can increase a migrant woman's reliance on apparently legitimate organizations that offer to handle her visa and passport. Governments should provide stays of deportation to witnesses and increase penalties for convicted traffickers. Confiscated funds should be used to provide counseling, health care, housing, legal advice, and compensation for trafficking victims.

Marjan Wijers, Foundation Against Traffic in Women (Netherlands): And for some women, but not so many, they really have to feel that they want these guys in jail and go for that which I feel is really courageous. But a lot of other women weigh the dangers and the risks against the possible benefits, and in the end, it doesn't offer her anything [to speak out as a witness].

Narrators: Witnesses are endangered if they testify against trafficking networks. Governments should provide witness protection and relocation programs.

Counselor for Trafficked Women: I think that if more pimps here have the experience that this crime is seriously prosecuted, then [they will realize that] there will be a risk [of imprisonment] in their business. Right now, it's too easy for them - the law is too easy on them.

Narrator: There are no simple solutions to these complex problems, but the stakes are too high to stop fighting for change.

Lena: When I came home, I was a completely different person. Even my mother didn't recognize me. I locked myself up inside. For the first half year, I didn't socialize with anyone. My mother was even scared for me -- before, such a social person and now around me such a desert -- she would try to knock on the door to get through to me, but there was this wall -- a barrier. It became very difficult for me to continue living.

Marjan Wijers, Foundation Against Traffic in Women (Netherlands): We can never give them back what they have already lost. You can call it dignity or freedom, but I'm sure it's no longer a part of them because when you look in their eyes it's something dark I've never seen before.