

SEXUAL MARKETING OF WOMEN: SEX TRAFFICKING FROM FORMER SOVIET UNION TO TURKEY

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Abstract

The sex trade has grown into a very lucrative business around the globe. Sex trafficking, or human sex trafficking, is one of the most common types of modern slavery, and can be defined as: “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of the commercial sex act” (Weitzer, 2013, 1337). In 2012, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported nearly 21 million people were involved in human trafficking worldwide and 4.5 million were victims of sex trafficking globally (ILO, 2012).

Many women from the nations formerly part of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) are victims of the illegal sex labor both in their homeland as well as being traded across national boundaries. Because Turkey is a ‘gate way’ between the east and the west, it is a transit point for many men and women involved in prostitution from the many nations formerly part of the USSR as well as the Middle East. In Turkey, a nation adjacent to the Black Sea, prostitution is regulated under article 227 of the Turkish penal code (BBC News, 2007). This is readily evidenced by those in the tourism industry offering tours of the districts replete with the legal brothels and sex clubs (for example Dia Tours (2016) and the Wiki Sex Guide for Istanbul (Istanbul, 2016)). However, despite legislation against human trafficking (“Turkey on trafficking in humans”, 2011) Turkey has been reportedly one of the largest markets in the sex trafficking of women from former Soviet Union states (Bulut, 2016), despite Turkey being a state with 99.8 percent of the population reporting as Muslim (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016). The Quran permits a ‘temporary marriage’ (Nikh Mut’ah) (“What does Islam teach about. . .”, 2016), thus endorsing prostitution in Turkey regardless of the individual’s religion, ethnicity, or any other factor.

Not all individuals involved in this activity are initially unwilling, but the poverty, lack of employment opportunities, and other causes for a potentially dismal future puts men and women into situations where they become “virtual slaves” within the sex trade because their country offers worse conditions (Smith, 2005). Others are sold into prostitution by their families, sometimes with the promise of a better life for their child (Bulut, 2016). Others are victims of war, living in foreign countries where they are afforded little dignity, and where their desperation to feed themselves and their families leads them into the sex trades (Bulut, 2016).

But the world has truly become global, and while those in the sex trade may call less developed nations home, the internet broadens the array of target nations. The internet has facilitated communication around the world, between communities and nations around the world. The technology of the internet has also advanced such that this communication can be encrypted, hidden on the dark net, and made untraceable. Further, the technology can reach anyone with access to the internet, allowing contact between people of similar proclivities and tastes, regardless of the legality of the content of the communication. Prostitution therefore can and does access the internet both for commercial transactions facilitated by internet banking, and shipping arrangements, facilitated by immediate communication (Crimes Against Children Research Center, n.d.). Technology has entered every field, legal and illegal, including the sex trade (“More bang for your buck”, 2014).

The Internet has grown into a powerful source of advertising and marketing goods and services in many countries. In Turkey, the internet is popular with ADSL easily available in tourism areas and in large cities with ready WiFi access (“Internet”, 2016). With a population of almost 79.5 million (Central Intelligence Agency, 2016), there are an estimated 46,196,720 internet users in Turkey in 2016, representing 58 percent penetration level that has consistently

grown (“Turkey internet users”, 2016). Because the internet is a source of information, marketing has accessed the millions of pages, facilitated by providers, search engines, and website owners.

Marketing in prostitution in the 77 countries where prostitution is legal, in countries such as Germany (“More bank for your buck”, 2014) and Turkey (“Prostitution in Istanbul”, 2015) (“The legal status of prostitution by country, 2016) accesses the internet. Prostitution is illegal in 109 countries, restricted in 11, and has no laws attached to the activity in 5 (“The legal status of prostitution by country, 2016). While this means the marketing is not as open, the internet provides opportunities for marketing. Despite the legal status of prostitution, with the acceptability of the practice dependent upon individual moral and ethical grounds (“Prostitution: Is prostitution morally acceptable?”, n.d.), prostitution marketing exists on the internet (Cunningham & Kendall, 2011; Lee-Gonyea, Castle, & Gonyea, 2009).

There is no doubt the internet has spurred growth of human trafficking. The International Labor Organization estimates 4.5 million people are trapped into forced sexual exploitation globally (2012). With the number of individuals engaged in the sex trade is growing, the economics continue to grow, primarily for the traffickers and pimps (Rucke, 2014). As the global sex industry is developing, women are seen as mere commodities and their bodies are marketed as sexual objects through internet sources.

Turkey is a nation with power distance, meaning those in authority are not challenged in their role as a caregiver or father figure, within a collectivist framework wherein harmony within the society is more important than the rights of the individual (“What about Turkey?”, n.d.). This need for harmony facilitates the high uncertainty avoidance with laws and practices designed to appease those in power. Altogether, the culture of the Turks endorses the practices of those in power, including the acceptance of prostitution, in particular of those women who are not part of the Turkish society because of immigration.

In this paper, we explore how women from former USSR nations are marketed and sold as commodities to the sex industry in Turkey, facilitated through role of the internet. We look at this through the cultural lens of Turkey and the dynamics of the sex trade in this nation.

Keywords: sex trafficking, women, sex work, marketing, Internet, prostitution, brothels, business, former Soviet Union, Turkey

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