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home

- ☐ Afghanistan
- ☐ Balkans
- ☐ Belarus
- ☐ Caucasus
- ☐ Central Asia
- ☐ Iraq
- ☐ Tribunal
- ☐ Special Reports
- ☐ Training
- ☐ Letters
- ☐ Archive
- ☐ Links

## Balkan Investigative Report

[home](#)

### Thousands of Women Lured into Bosnian Brothels

Over the past couple years, the trafficking of Eastern European women into Bosnia has dramatically increased.

By Nidzara Ahmetasevic with Julie Poucher Harbin in Sarajevo (18 April 2002)

One day last November, 25-year-old Elena from Romania set out to visit her relatives in Italy the cheapest, quickest way she knew how. Trying to avoid complicated visa procedures, she paid 250 euros to a smuggler to get her there. After a long, hard walk through the woods, and an illegal crossing of Yugoslav border in a horse cart, a man in a police uniform escorted her to Belgrade.

A few days later her trip continued. But instead of Italy, she ended up in Acapulco, a nightclub in northeast Bosnia's multi-ethnic free-trade-zone-turned-black-market, called "Arizona". Forced into prostitution for no pay, her documents seized, she was caught trying to escape by local police soon after and brought right back to the nightclub.

Over the past couple years, the trafficking of Eastern European women into and out of Bosnia has dramatically increased. The Arizona market, near the Bosnia-Serbia border, is one of the many places in the country where women and girls are forced into prostitution with profits going exclusively to the owners.

Nightclubs at the Arizona market also host "sex slave" auctions, where girls appear naked on stage with numbers in their hands. They are given a thorough once over - including a teeth check - by potential buyers (usually women), who purchase them for 500-3000 euros, and then "employ" them in their brothels.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, IOM, which runs shelter and repatriation programmes for victims in Bosnia, between 6,000 and 10,000 foreign women are currently being coerced into prostitution in the republic. Many places registered throughout Bosnia as "night-bars", "café-bars", nightclubs, massage shops, and fitness clubs commonly function as brothels. While some of the women work as prostitutes by choice, many are forced.

Given that the legal penalties are lower, trafficking in women is fast becoming as lucrative as the drugs trade. In economically depressed places like Bosnia and Kosovo, the business has attracted everyone from petty criminals to high-ranking government officials. The main customers fueling demand tend to be internationals and wealthy local politicians.

Members of the International Police Task Force, IPTF, in Bosnia (where prostitution is illegal) were also implicated last year in trafficking women (see [UN Prostitution Scandal](#), IWPR BCR 264, July 20, 2001). In large part as a result

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**Past Issues**

| 2003                | Issue No. |
|---------------------|-----------|
| <a href="#">Mar</a> | 411-418   |
| <a href="#">Feb</a> | 403-410   |
| <a href="#">Jan</a> | 394-402   |
| 2002                |           |
| <a href="#">Dec</a> | 387-393   |
| <a href="#">Nov</a> | 379-386   |
| <a href="#">Oct</a> | 371-378   |

[BCR archive](#)

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of investigations led by local media and human rights groups and the subsequent international outcry, 15 IPTF officers tasked with helping local police to stop trafficking, were repatriated after they were discovered to have visited brothels or conducted raids without local police. UN spokesman Stefo Lehman said many were caught when rescued women recognised them in a book of UN Bosnia staff pictures. As of the end of March 2002, investigations were ongoing against three further IPTF officers.

It was against this backdrop that a Special Trafficking Operations Programme, STOP, was launched last July by the UN Mission in Bosnia. The programme's head, Celhia de Lavarene, told IWPR that STOP's own mission is to rescue the women from sexual slavery while ensuring UN personnel are not involved in solicitation.

Early this year, the homes of de Lavarene's and two of her team were broken into. Ms de Lavarene labeled the break-ins an act of "intimidation against STOP" designed to prevent the STOP team of 140 local police and 50 unarmed IPTF, from doing their job.

A typical STOP raid on a premises involved in sex trafficking or prostitution sees a team of at least 40-50 police going in with an investigating judge, government health and tax inspectors, and municipal officials. After the initial inspection and security sweep, they look for business permit, tax and sanitation violations that could penalize or close it down.

STOP conducted 279 raids and inspections between July 2000 and the end of February on 181 establishments. Despite this only 43 were shut down, two changed their type of business, and 21 convictions resulted; a poor record which de Lavarene blames on local corruption and a weak judicial system. The best results came in the Brcko district where 13 of 15 nightclubs identified last July as being involved in prostitution and/or trafficking have since been shut down.

Until recently, Bosnian authorities were mostly arresting local and foreign women that they assumed to be voluntary paid prostitutes, fining and then releasing them instead of going after their customers, traffickers or brothel owners.

Desperate to get out of a poor economic situation back home, the majority of victims (mainly from Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine) continue to arrive in the Balkans after answering adverts which claim to be seeking models, babysitters, dancers or barmaids for legitimate work in the West.

But the jobs do not exist and the adverts invariably trap victims in the clutches of cross-border smuggling gangs. However, there are increasing cases of females who have not responded to offers of overseas work, but are simply kidnapped. On a nightclub raid last December in Kiseljak, local STOP police found a 15-year-old girl who reported being kidnapped in Romania while walking home from school.

In extreme cases, victims are forced to marry the traffickers. There's a current case in Doboj, says de Lavarene, of an 18-year-old Romanian woman who was repeatedly drugged and forced into marriage to the brother of one nightclub owner. When not locked inside an apartment, she would be driven to "work" in different nightclubs. The use of a string of different nightclubs, is a common trafficking strategy according to de Lavarene, making it very difficult for groups like STOP to find the victims.

Most East European victims of forced prostitution pass through a certain house in Belgrade, from where, de Lavarene says, they are put up for sale "like animals".

She told IWPR, "If they are beautiful enough, they go to Bosnia where they stay for one or two years, then they are sent to Italy, Greece or somewhere else in Europe. If they are not beautiful enough, they are sent right away to Kosovo or Albania."

"Elena" from Eastern Europe escaped her new life of forced prostitution when her brothel owner took her and 12 other women to a local police station to get them illegally registered as foreign citizens working in Bosnia as dancers. She told some sympathetic police at the station that she wanted out, so they let her go free. Most women are not so lucky.



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"Interviews conducted throughout Bosnia indicate that some local police officers cooperate with traffickers in exchange for bribes or free sexual services," said Martina Vandenberg, an investigator for Human Rights Watch working in Bosnia. "These police officers rarely face prosecution by the Bosnian government."

According to UN sources, the police chief, the prosecutor, and the investigating judge, are all involved in trafficking in a named central Bosnian town. According to testimony from many prostitutes who work at a particular nightclub there, the town's police chief warns the nightclub owner when there's going to be a raid. The nightclub prepares accordingly, and after the raid the police chief is "paid back" with free sex.

Such evidence is rarely sufficient to secure a conviction. Even when it is, sentences are too light to be a deterrent.

While the lack of specific anti-trafficking legislation on the state level in Bosnia-Herzegovina is a big obstacle to conviction, according to Madeleine Reese, Head of the UN Office for Human Rights in Bosnia, there are numerous provisions in the criminal code, which could be applied. These include: slavery and transportation of enslaved persons, unlawful detention, rape, forced intercourse, sexual intercourse with a minor, and recruitment into prostitution. Sentences in the Republika Srpska, the Brcko district and the Federation range from 3 months to 3 years, and if the victim is a minor, up to 10 years.

Yet despite this, says de Lavarene, traffickers make immediate appeals against any sentence and rarely end up in jail. When they do it is perhaps only for a month. And the nightclubs cum brothels will stay open and the trafficking continues as most places are owned and operated by families.

One such example is the Marlboro, a 150- room nightclub in the Arizona area, where a STOP raid uncovered 50 victims. While the Marlboro's owner was recently sentenced to a month in jail for his trafficking role, the nightclub remains open while his wife runs the place.

A further complicating factor hampering conviction is the unwillingness of victims to testify against their captors.

"They are scared to death," said de Lavarene. "We tell them that if they don't want the same thing to happen to somebody else, we need them to stand up in court."

And if some do initially agree, by the time the case comes to court and is actually heard - after a host of delaying tactics have been employed by the defendants - the witness has invariably backed out.

Local police who work on the regional STOP teams remain frustrated. Though their professionalism is well regarded by the UN and the personal risks they take acknowledged, they complain they are laughed at by traffickers who usually walk free.

De Lavarene told IWPR that nightclub owners tell the women that STOP cannot be trusted to help them. Victims also fear they will be chased down by the nightclub owners if they try to leave. Mara Radovanovic, who oversees the LARA shelter, says some girls won't talk because they are generally afraid of local police and internationals since some are "customers".

If the women don't admit to falling victim to traffickers, they are sent back to the nightclubs. (It is not in the UN's mandate, nor is it in the local government's interests to rescue willing prostitutes).

Elena was one victim willing to tell her story to LARA shelter workers, who said she arrived shaken up and badly beaten. The night she tried to escape from Acapulco, the angry bar owner had sold her to another bar in northern Bosnia for 1500 euros, where for a couple months she was fed, but locked up during the day, forbidden to use condoms or see a doctor, and never paid.

Radovanovic said such women often come to the shelter with terrible injuries, including cigarette burns and broken bones, and ill with syphilis and other venereal diseases. They have even had one AIDS case. Radovanovic added that many victims say they have been given abortions, provided illegally by doctors who have made private deals with the nightclub owners.

The UN works in cooperation with Bosnia's six temporary safe-houses run by

IOM and local NGOs. Since August 1999, the IOM has assisted 429 girls and women, repatriated 404, and resettled one to a third country. The others are still waiting. Twelve were minors with the youngest victim 12 and the oldest 36.

Everyone involved says still more shelters are needed.

There is no end in sight to the problem while the demand for cheap sex slaves in the Balkans and Western Europe intensifies and the trafficking of women continues to be so profitable.

There are even growing indications from local NGOs that Bosnian women are starting to be ensnared in the dangerous trafficking web, both in Bosnia and abroad. "The number of Bosnian girls becoming victims of forced prostitution has been increasing in the last couple of months," says Fadila Hadzic, who oversees the La Strada shelter in Mostar.

Hadzic calls this new phenomenon "internal trafficking", saying she's heard from victims that girls from the depressed Republika Srpska entity "where life is much harder than the Federation" are being lured by newspaper ads to work as bartenders and babysitters to save money and support their families, but they end up as sex slaves instead.

She said that most are minors forced to work "in secret places" (not obvious night-bars) or by telephone appointment. The girls report that customers pay the pimps 15 euro for sexual services, half as much as they pay for foreign women.

De Lavarene has seen only one forced Bosnian prostitute during a raid - a woman who said she had been abducted from a street in Goradze.

And while Deputy Director of Bosnia's Interpol office Asim Fazlic points out that Bosnians are working as prostitutes, "on the streets, in café-bars or by telephone appointment", he does not know of any internal trafficking in women. He added that while there are reports of some Bosnian women turning up in Italy, numbers are not enough to be judged significant.

However, experts from the University of North London Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit confirmed that they have turned up all over Western Europe.

A chilling public awareness campaign, titled "Open Your Eyes", was launched just last month by ASTRA, a women's NGO in Belgrade and points to the fact that an increasing number of Serbian women are falling victim to the same traps as their East European sisters. Bosnia too may soon be headed down the same road.

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