

**TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN**  
**Questions and answers**



**“Animus Association” Foundation** is a women’s non-government organization working in support of survivors of violence. Its team consists of psychologists, psychotherapists and social workers. The Rehabilitation Center of the organization offers services to women, adolescents and children survivors of violence.



Since 1998 “Animus Association” has been the Bulgarian partner in the international programme **La Strada for prevention of trafficking in women in Central and Eastern Europe**. It has been running for over 6 years and is financed by the European Commission and the Dutch government. It is implemented simultaneously in Poland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, Bulgaria and the Netherlands.

## **Introduction**

There are things, which, once you find out, you cannot keep quiet about. Trafficking in women is a subject we want to tell about to as many people as possible. The Animus/La Strada team has been working in support of the victims of this brutal crime for 5 years already. We have published dozens of articles and taken part in dozens of radio and television programmes. And we have still not been able to exhaust the theme about the suffering of the women victims of trafficking. We, the people who meet these women, need to talk. In this brochure we will try once again to share our experiences from the contact with pain and despair and these women's struggle for survival.

The brochure begins with a true story. We heard it from one of our clients. It seems very short and laconic. But how can one put on paper everything they want to forget? How does one find the right words for describing the horror they have been through? This is the reason for the lack of epithets in the woman's story. It contains facts only – deceit, departure, escape, return.

We have collected articles by people with different professions – psychologists, psychotherapists, Help-line volunteers, journalists, lawyers. For different reasons, they have all talked to women survivors of trafficking and have not been able to remain indifferent. They have put in words all that the victims could not tell another person. It is from these articles that we can understand the experiences of the women in trafficking. Everything they have written on trafficking, the authors learnt from the women themselves in a situation of trust and safety. Only then could these women summon the courage to talk about the violence and humiliation they had suffered.

We are grateful to all the authors of these articles who decided to share their experiences in the work with women survivors of trafficking. Their feelings – excitement, worry, and often helplessness and despair, can tell us a lot about the extent of the human tragedy of the survivors. No matter how sad the brochure might be in some places, the professional attitude and competence of the authors give us reassurance and hope. They are proof that there are people who are involved with the theme of trafficking in women and are ready to work in support of the victims.

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**THIS ACCOUNT IS WRITTEN BY A CLIENT OF ANIMUS WHO IS A SURVIVOR OF TRAFFICKING. SHE WISHES TO REMAIN ANONYMOUS.**

*I had had a boyfriend for two years. His name was Sunay or Mustafa according to his passport. In the middle of August he told me that I was going to work in Burgas as a shop assistant. He introduced to me two of his friends - Rashid and Zdravko - we left for Burgas. When we reached Burgas I was told I was going to work as a prostitute; as I did not agree, they drove me to Varna and sold me to Vasve and took me by bus to Romania; from there to Hungary and after that we continued via Slovakia to the Czech Republic and then Poland; on the road to Chestahova the drivers raped me. The next day I surrendered to the police and they arrested me and they sealed my passport and let me go; I stayed in the house where I lived for three days and moved to the town Opole and stayed there for one week; then I escaped and went to Krakow and for 5 months lived in a house of a 70-year-old man and after that I went to Romania by train but they stopped me at the border with Slovakia because my passport was not valid and then took me to the Bulgarian Embassy in Warsaw. There I was given a pass-avant and I went by bus to Sofia where people from Animus were waiting for me.*

## **Trafficking in Women – Personal, Psychological and Social Problems in (Non)- United Europe<sup>1</sup>**

Maria Tchomarova

Slavery was officially abolished in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Countries that had previously profited from the slave trade began preventing others from doing the same. It was thought that the era of slavery would be well and truly over and mankind would move to a new level of civilization. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it seems, there has been a movement in the opposite direction, back to slavery. In the post-Cold War era, globalisation and free trade have opened avenues for all sorts of illicit trade: arms, drugs, and people.

Trafficking in women has become a “lucrative” business opportunity. Trafficking in women once used to refer to white women who were smuggled to Arab lands as concubines. Today, victims of trafficking are mainly people from the deprived areas of the world who fall prey to this resurfaced form of slavery, where money, sex and violence come together in an insidious dance.

In broad terms, it works like a system of bondage. People are forced or sold to traffickers or they may have been lured into a country as voluntary migrants under a cloud of deception, for instance they are offered a job opportunity as an au pair or an air-hostess. Where pure trafficking is at stake, the migrant owes a debt to the trafficker, which she will have to pay back one way or another. There are four areas in which migrants work in these conditions of near or pure slavery: agriculture, industry, as domestic workers or in forced prostitution. In these last two categories, the victims are almost always women. They have their travel documents taken away from them, they are physically confined to the workplace, they depend on their employer and there is always a threat of violence.

The talk today is about trafficking of young white female slaves from the former socialist countries for the purpose of forced prostitution. This is a large-scale phenomenon in post-totalitarian societies. For example, we estimate that there are approximately ten thousand women who have been trafficked abroad from Bulgaria, which is a relatively small state – 7 million people.

This phenomenon is the result of a complicated and varied set of reasons: personal and family history, psychological characteristics, as well as historical, social and cultural characteristics.

In my lecture I would like to answer the following questions: Why does trafficking in women exist? Who is at the highest risk of being in the situation of trafficking? What do the victims experience? What happens to them? How do we help them? The answers to these questions are the result of my 6 years' experience as a psychotherapist along with a team of therapists working with women, survivors of trafficking at the Rehabilitation Center for Women, Adolescents and Children,

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<sup>1</sup> This is a part of a public lecture held at Union College New York, USA, in May 2001. Some of the issues raised in this paper are discussed in more detail in the other papers in the brochure and this is why the original text of the paper is not published here, but references to the other materials are made.

Survivors of Violence within the Animus Association Foundation, Sofia, Bulgaria as well as my consulting work in the Netherlands, England, and Eastern Europe.

I would like to illustrate my points using some case material and also part of the results of two studies which have been conducted in Animus Association Foundation: Feminist Participatory Action Research based on 50 case studies on trafficking in women as well as articles on trafficking in women published by selected Bulgarian and Foreign newspapers and magazines.

First I will consider the question “Why did trafficking in women develop so fast in the post-communist societies?

As you know, World War II divided Europe in two parts, isolated from each other – Eastern and Western blocks. The lack of communication, the inability of people to travel freely helped the communist propaganda in creating the myth of the West as Hell on Earth. At the same time, as a reaction to the official propaganda, the opposite myth was born and spread among the people – that Western Europe is Paradise on Earth.

The isolation of the post-communist countries for many years still influences ordinary people’s life. The lack of information and a realistic idea about Western societies feeds the myth of the idealized forbidden fruit of happiness, prosperity and freedom. Many young women raised in a repressive communist culture fall prey to the pimps of organized crime. Ten years after the fall of the iron curtain, the victims of trafficking painfully experience the consequences of the division of Europe – they leave their countries dreaming and hoping of getting to Paradise, but in fact they get into real Hell. Trafficking in women is part of the price, which the post-communist countries have to pay for the black-and-white image of the world they created.

This behaviour of dividing the world into black and white is a result of the psychological mechanisms of splitting and projection. Everything negative is split off and projected onto the other. Thus the former socialist societies of Eastern Europe denied and silenced the existence of violence in them.

Institutions (parties, governments, parliaments) and societies made use of these mechanisms. All difficult, painful and disconcerting questions, going beyond the idealized communist social image were split and projected, repressed, and rationalized. These were the questions, connected with violence, social and gender inequality, poverty and even sex. All these existed in the West, but our socialist societies ignored them as non-existent.

Individuals behaved similarly. After 1989 many Bulgarians said they did not know there was political violence in Bulgaria. This had secured the effectiveness of the rationalization of all officers who were in charge of concentration camps and responsible for many deaths. This rationalization, which blames the victim is a defence mechanism.

Excessive use of defence mechanisms such as splitting, projection, rationalization is destructive. It badly affects the victims and wears away the moral foundation of society.

In these conditions, when society has learned to turn a blind eye to violence, victims have hardly any other choice but to remain silent. Silence prevents learning from experience, which is the only way of development and change.

Post-communist culture is a perfect environment for creating and developing social phenomena, which are founded on the mechanisms of brain washing. The communist regimes are based on these principles. Trafficking in women uses mechanisms of influencing the human psyche in the same way as communism did. It is determined by the mechanisms of socialization.

The same mechanisms of repression and rationalization are still applied to this painful for society problem - trafficking in women. For a long time the institutions denied the existence of such a problem at all. Pressed by the new Western partners in the process of integration of Europe and by some NGOs within the country, the politicians have started to recognize the problem. Unfortunately, post-communist societies have difficulties in overcoming the deformations of communism and patriarchal culture. There are no public discussions on this problem and this certainly helps criminal organizations to continue without much trouble.

Psychological conditions alone do not aid the boom of trafficking. Post-communist realities, lack of law and chaotic state structures, created a fertile ground for very profitable criminal activities.

Trafficking in people, taking women and children into slavery and prostitution is producing profit second only from those to the drug trade within organized crime. Pino Arlacchi, the executive director of the UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, said at a conference in December: "Trafficking in people is the fastest-growing transnational criminal activity" The estimated 15 billion dollars international turnover from sex trafficking is on a par with the drug trade, yet Europol has only 3 full time staff in the Hague coordinating statistics on it. Hundreds deal with the trade in illegal drugs. The power and ruthlessness of the mafia people in the Balkan underworld cannot be overestimated. The Russian mafia is now setting the pace in Kosovo, where a similar trade in human beings has developed in a post-war economy. Where there is a market, there will always be supply. International peacekeeping forces have dramatically failed to prevent the resurgence of the slavery of human beings and, in Former Yugoslavia. Penalties for traffickers and bar owners in East as well as in many West European countries are minimal when compared to those for either drug running or arms smuggling, the other equally profitable cross-border trades.

Another important economic characteristics of the post-communist realities and a factor in the trafficking in women is poverty. The countries in transition are trying to re-structure their economies and change to market economy.

As a result the level of unemployment increased drastically in the last few years. Today about 75% of the Bulgarians live below the level of poverty. 65% of the long-term unemployed women are between 18 and 30 years. Lured by ads for seasonal work abroad many young women feel that this is their chance for a better life. When transported abroad, however, they become easy victims.

Thus we come to the question: Who are the people most at risk to get into trafficking? Our research shows that in most cases these are adolescents. Another risk group are women with past traumatic experiences – domestic violence, sexual violence or



incest, as well as children from orphanages and children with a large number of siblings and only one parent.

I think that researching and understanding the age and past traumas factors are important as they make possible the development of timely and effective prevention programmes with the active participation of non-government organizations, whereas economic growth and the struggle with the mafia on a world-wide scale need much more time. And of course the knowledge of these characteristics also plays a key role in the process of rehabilitation of adolescents, survivors of trafficking.

Adolescence is one of the most radical of all the developmental periods. In the few years between the onset of puberty and adulthood, one's sense to oneself must adapt to the physical changes of size, shape, and strength; changes of built, and changes in appearance. The social and psychic corollaries of this are to develop the capacity to become intimate with others, to form sexual relationships, to become less dependent on parents, and to move towards separation from the family, to move towards becoming an independent person, both internally and externally.

Now what happens if the family and society are in crisis themselves and are unable to contain the adolescent's ambivalence and to provide structure, space, help and cooperation for young people? The answer is: the adolescents get overwhelmed and act out.

Traumatized young people suffer adolescent's crises much more severe than the other ones. Their confusion between good and bad is much greater. They must deal with the terror of pain and aggression, both externally and internally with no internal or external resources. This is due to lack of good external family experience and objects they can internalize. These adolescents overuse defence mechanisms like manic feelings of omniscience and omnipotence, splitting and projecting of what is unbearable, rationalization, and repression. The result is: they feel empty, confused, and anxious; they do not have much mental space for thinking and behave impulsively.

Single parent families are inevitably more vulnerable to emotional intensity because more is expected from one. When they are also required to accommodate the emotional and behavioural experimentation of adolescence, single parent families may come under considerable pressure.

According to the UN Human development Report, the countries from the old Soviet orbit have by far the highest divorce rate in the world, ranging from 50 to more than 80 per cent, which means that children are most likely to grow up in single parent families. The women with uncured past trauma – domestic violence, incest, rape, are also much more vulnerable to entering new situation of violence. The Psychodynamic theory gives clear explanation for this. Often, people with traumatic identity as an aftermath of violence suffered, unconsciously are trying to rearrange and repeat the events of their lives in a different, a better way with a better outcome for them. In the academic literature this is referred to as “repetition compulsion”. In the everyday language I would say that this is the aspiration of every normal human being for a change for better. Many of the women, victims of domestic or sexual violence see the idea of working abroad as an opportunity to repair their past and to put a new

beginning to their lives. All this is to say that traumatized young people as well as women with past traumatic experiences are the most vulnerable groups targeted by the organized crime of trafficking.

After we have seen why trafficking exist and who becomes its victims I would like to present the mechanisms for control over the victims of trafficking in more details, and to show what happens to women who have been trafficked.

The set of psychological defenses which people have is not large and is studied in the same way as human anatomy. There is a carefully developed system for manipulating people, which has been popular for a long time and has been practiced in totalitarian communities as in concentration camps, and sects. The trafficking in women uses the same mechanisms:

First - Severe violence - rapes, cruel torturing, beatings, hunger.

The aim is to put the victim in extreme surviving conditions. The psychic mechanism for defence, which consists of the belief that the world around us can be controlled, is being attacked. We all know that man is earth-born, but we all are afraid of death. That's why nature has given us defences, which nurture the illusion that we can control our lives. These defences are important, because they help us to plan, to show initiative, and to communicate. When the problem of death from being an existential question becomes painfully private, the defences that we usually use can't serve us any more. Just like at high tension a fuse blows out in order to prevent burning the whole installation, in a situation of life danger a person "switches off" and stops thinking for one purpose only- physical surviving. The price of this is high and causes psychological traumas. The perpetrators use this to force women to obey them absolutely, and to become prostitutes.

I will illustrate my points with some findings conducted by journalist Kate Holt and published in Sunday Times Magazine on 18 February this year. These facts are confirmed by 5 of our patients who managed to escape from Bosnia. Holt writes: "Girls, who refuse to have sex with customers are often subjected to beatings and rape by their owners. They are warned that if they go to the police they will be arrested for prostitution and illegal migration. Death threats are common. And they are told their families are in danger from the east European mafia. Those who cause trouble are easily disposed of. Last year the naked bodies of two women were found in a river near one of the biggest captive market, called Arizona Market in Bosnia. Both bore the marks of mafia-style killing – hands tied behind their backs, feet bound to concrete. Tape over their mouths was marked "Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe" The symbols of protection had been used to stifle their screams. Their identity is impossible to trace.

The irony is that Brco, near where Arizona Market is located, boasts one of the highest concentrations of the international police force, created to establish law and order in Bosnia. One of the Largest American army bases and one of the biggest UN-administrated aid packages of the post-war years. Once, a foreign soldier visiting a rape house would have been indicated as a war criminal; now they just get sent home."

Second - Physical exhaustion. The system of manipulations includes not giving any opportunity for rest to the victim - no possibility to remain alone with herself and to be able to think, to consider, to recover even partly and to start actions to defend herself. A 20-hour working day brings big profits, but it is also important for “bending” the psyche of the woman.

Third, -Total control and isolation. The victim is isolated from the outside world, she is forbidden to communicate with other people except for the perpetrator and she is strictly observed. The women, victims of traffic, usually live and work at the same place. One cannot suppress the need of communication, but having communication only with the perpetrator the woman starts to perceive twisted information about the world and about herself. The message is only one - the life of the woman is of no value, because she “owes money”, she has been bought and she has to “pay herself back”. Of course she can never do that and is sold again to another pimp.

“Prices for trafficked women range between 500 and 2000 US \$. Girls say they are often forced to stand on wooden crates in their underwear and bidders poke and pinch. When a price is agreed they are led away to the seedy underground world of Bosnia’s coffee bars.

Arizona Market, near Brco, looks more like a scene from the Wild West than central Europe. Amid piles of rubbish, row upon row of wooden huts sell denim by the kilo, illicit whisky, cheap perfumes, guns and in many bars - girls. Established by peacekeeping forces after the war to foster trade between Serbs, Croats, Muslims, it has grown into five square miles of sinister black market and the epicentre of a growing sex-slave trade. Behind the everyday façade, women from the former Soviet Union and elsewhere from eastern Europe are sold to the highest bidder.”

The system of the sale is important. First, the idea that the woman is a commodity, slave, and she is not a person like others, is introduced and then the idea of the total world, world of violence and control as the only one possible is confirmed. All pimps “learnt” to work at the same standard. Sometimes the torment is substituted by small gestures of attention - presents, showing mercy /for example taking the woman to a doctor/. This aims at forming an attachment to the perpetrator and often it succeeds, because one needs to become close to somebody, to experience something good.

My work with women, survivors of trafficking, shows that at the most 6 months are needed for “breaking” these women – for permanent cognitive and emotional changes of their personalities. In other words for turning them into prostitutes and making them from considerably free people into slaves<sup>1</sup>. (...)

To sum up I would say that the causes of the rise in trafficking of women are complex but the division of Europe and consequences of communism rank among the most important ones. The EU’s restrictive immigration policies have proved a boon for the traffickers in people. High risks are involved but the profit margins are also considerable. Other factors that contribute to the rise of trafficking in women include

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<sup>1</sup> How the survivors escaped and what they feel after coming back home; what are the chances of resuming their normal life? Answers of all these questions you can find in “Bulgarian Trafficking in Women” by Nadia Kozhouharova

the feminisation of poverty, armed conflicts, ill-designed development policies, sex tourism and certain cultural and religious practices. The research conducted in Animus also shows that traumatised women, adolescents especially those from dysfunctional and single parent families are at a greater risk of falling into the hands of traffickers.

I believe there is no other way of stopping this cruel crime except by understanding its nature and the reasons that make its existence possible. It is my hope that this lecture will rise to questions and give food for thought.

# TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN IN BULGARIA: THE STARTING POINT OF LA STRADA-BULGARIA

BY NADIA KOZHOUHAROVA  
Psychotherapist

Bulgaria is one of the small countries in East Europe. In spite of this, it ranks as a top country with regard to trafficking in women for the purpose of forced prostitution. Our experience so far makes us believe this is not accidental. The escalation of trafficking in women is the implication of the uncertain and rather traumatising course of the changes taking place in our society. Bulgarians' unrealistic visions of about the West and about having an easier life in Western Europe should also be taken into account in relation to trafficking. Of no less important are the way young Bulgarian women feel in times of changes, the options they have, and the chances they stand to have an autonomous life. Some of the specifics of trafficking in women have much in common with prostitution itself in Bulgaria, a significant part of it being related to organised crime. Last but not least, we need to focus our understanding on the way women victims feel after coming back home and the chances of resuming their normal life.

It is important to emphasize that we have mostly learned about the phenomenon from women survivors who have managed to return home. The source of our considerations is not that much statistics and media analyses but rather the experience of women who have lived through the horror of trafficking and forced prostitution.

## **How is Bulgaria perceived by the Europeans and Europe by the Bulgarians?**

It often happens when speaking of Europe that Bulgaria's name is left out. Most West Europeans do not even know where Bulgaria is located. It has been only recently that the European citizens started having a clearer idea of what lies between Romania and Greece, Turkey and former Yugoslavia. Curiosity is even further enhanced due to all the excitement of the transition processes, the changes, the cultural specificity of Balkan country. Whether it be due to our country being a potential market for the European goods, or due to its "inexpensive wine and women", that Bulgaria's image is usually associated with strong passions in Europeans' mind. Europeans seem to be afraid of Bulgarians. The visa policies are tightening up. Compared to other East Europeans, Bulgarians are regarded as a tedious threat to perfect peace and comfort. As regards Bulgarians in the West, are usually expected to be suitcase traders, drug dealers, car stealers, pickpockets, illegal workers, illegally residing individuals, prostitutes and their pimps, the poor, the shrewd, cunning, unfriendly squirts hanging around central squares in European cities. All of them people who are strange and unacceptable to the European life style and mentality.

Bulgarians, however, have a rather different perception of their place in Europe. It is true ours is not a rich country, it is true most of the streets are pot-holed, and it is also true there are frequent misunderstandings in our state governance. Bulgarians residing in Europe, however, are most successful - the best amongst students, artists, singers and researchers. They seem to have been denied the chance of proper performance in their own country. The orderly western world is just enough for their gift to flourish.

It is just an illusion which helps Bulgarians overcome their inferiority complex by trying to compare to the standards of the European society.

After the fall of the Berlin wall, there was a positive and enthusiastic response to the changes in Bulgaria. Yet, there lingers a bitter taste of incompleteness, of failure. Bulgaria did not have its real Renaissance at the appropriate time; it did not have its real bourgeois-democratic revolution\* and is now close to not having its real democracy, either. The Bulgarian society has its own logic of development which is different from the European one. How can we then fit into the European home, without being outsiders? Would it be possible for us to cope “in the European way” with the normal implications of the process of economic and political reforms, such as corruption, unemployment, poverty? The prevailing feeling is that neither the society, nor the government can successfully address them. Bulgarians are still feeling insecure and unprotected. There is still a common lack of confidence vis-à-vis the institutions of law and order - the Government, the Police, and the Court.

It is still very hard to properly make any planning in Bulgaria. It is not at all easy to achieve anything in this country. It takes too many efforts which do not directly target the aim but are invested in overcoming meaningless obstacles. In the beginning people believed in the new uplift, in free initiatives and opportunities for a better life style. Nowadays there are no doubts whatsoever regarding the naïve enthusiasm of this approach. Hopes have been replaced by disappointment and scepticism about the future. Nowadays the challenges Bulgarians are confronted with are their physical survival, coping with everyday necessities rather than their creative and professional performance. This is known not to be the case in European countries. Life follows its well established path there.

Mistrust in social processes and the insecurity of life has a deep impact on Bulgarians' personal orientation. Material values rank much higher than personal expectations. The striving of 48 % of Bulgarians is simply to survive “here and now”, 50 % make no plans whatsoever regarding the future (UNDP, 1997).

There is a common belief that going to some European country is one of the ways to have a decent life. Hundreds of thousands of young Bulgarians have quit the country since 1989. They are believed to be the successful ones who have managed to escape. Although strange it seems easier to overcome the old patriarchal traditions and leave behind your family and relatives, and become a foreigner in another country rather than strive for a better life in your homeland.

The illusions Bulgarians have about Europe, on one hand, and the mistrust of Europeans towards Bulgarians, on the other hand, are the two sad dimensions of our image abroad. It is these dimensions we have to bear in mind when addressing the issue of the upsurge in trafficking Bulgarian women abroad over the recent years.

### **Bulgarian women in Bulgaria and in Europe**

In order to have a clearer idea of the phenomenon of trafficking it is essential to understand the way young women live and feel in their own country. It is not less

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\* During the European Renaissance and the bourgeois revolution Bulgaria was under the Turkish yoke (1396-1876). The economic and cultural flourish in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries during the subsequent liberation movement is considered to be the Bulgarian equivalent of these events.

important to know how they feel while being abroad. The reasons for which Bulgarian women go abroad are different from those which make Bulgarian men undertake this step. The great number of women seeking their chance abroad is a new phenomenon for our country. The direct linkage with trafficking is obvious.

The traditional image of the Bulgarian woman is that she is a strong person- hard working, pretty and capable of managing the situation. Her inventiveness combined with deprivation, makes it possible for her to support the household, to see to everything by means of a limited budget. Bulgarian folk songs praise either the most beautiful, industrious maiden who is about to marry and is the object of somebody's love or, at a more advanced age, the wise and caring mother. It is not clear what other roles she may have apart from being a worthy fiancée, and, late on, a loving mother. Bulgarian women of today's generation aging between 35 and 60 still follow this type of patriarchal model. They set up the image of selfless and dedicated individuals who, having very few choices in life, have accepted to suffer numerous deprivations. The lifestyle of these women best reflects the overall despair and lack of opportunities.

Bulgarian girls do not want to follow their mothers' life model. They seek to fill in the gap in Bulgarians' idea about women, to try out something different and have some other roles. It was some twenty years ago that this very same enthusiasm about overcoming the stereotypes about women prevailed in the European world. Feminist tendencies emerged and people started talking about feminism.

However, rather than standing up for their women's rights and opportunities, nowadays Bulgarian young women are being concerned about overcoming the limitations they are subject to in their poor country. Many of these young women are ready to live through anything, to undergo their small personal revolutions in the quest for a decent position in life.

Only some of the parameters of these processes are known. As a whole, young people constitute one third or the largest group of the unemployed and the long-term unemployed. 29,7 percent find themselves jobless right after graduation. Over recent years the unemployment rate amongst the young has been stable. It is obvious that the state is unable to manage the process of transition towards market economy and thus ensure job opportunities for a large part of the young (UNDP, 1997). Young women stand few chances on the labour market as they are young and are believed to be professionally inexperienced.

Apart from bearing the burden of unemployment among the young, young women are subject to the regularities which are typical of women's labour market in Bulgaria. It is assumed that the new decentralised social model should result in more job opportunities. Regrettably, the simple facts show a different situation - most job offers are not accessible for women. The findings show that 65 percent of the long-term unemployed in 1996 were women (UNDP, 1997).

Being jobless for a long time, young women miss opportunities for self-expression. Having no real prospects and having dropped off the active labour market their female energy is easily directed at other alternatives. Some girls get married and devote themselves to their children. Others get involved in family business or set up one of their own. There are also women who decide to take a chance abroad. There is

nothing surprising about the latter being one of the most popular options. Young Bulgarian women are also attracted by the option of getting a job abroad. The emotions accompanying this option are always perceived as positive. It is really disturbing that rarely do young girls think of the insecurity and the risks of such an undertaking. On one hand, it is their youth and enthusiasm that account for it. On the other hand, Bulgarians proved to know little about the European world. Any opportunity to get in touch with the luxurious life they have been longing for is rather tempting.

Young girls can choose between a scholarship, to which, however, the access is limited, and the more easily accessible job offers. So here are the young women bound to Europe overwhelmed with energy, dreams and ambitions - students, dancers, waitresses or baby-sitters. Some of them succeed in having their dreams come true. For others, however, the dreams turn into a nightmare and the attractive life proves to be a trap. These are the ones we shall refer to hereafter. What is certain is that these Bulgarian girls take the low self-esteem of their nation with themselves on their way abroad. This, however, makes them vulnerable.

One of the “convenient” ways for European society to regard Bulgarian women is to look down on them. By directly sending them into its lowest circles - the red light districts and the underpaid jobs. It makes them “invisible” and seems to “get rid” of them. This is an attitude that fits the way Bulgarian women feel about themselves in Europe - poor and with low self-esteem. As if they did not deserve a better place. It is even hard for them to imagine it. In fact, their great hopes for a better life abroad seem quite modest against the background of Western reality.

There has lately been a strange myth across Western and Central European countries - “Bulgarian women are amongst the most sexual ones”. There should be a reason for this. Sexuality that is accessible and cheap is being openly discussed. It is a feature attributed to marginalised groups, which do not usually enjoy any respect by society. In case Bulgarian women comprise one of the large group of prostitutes in Europe, they have to be “advertised”. This results in a strong association in people’s minds abroad: “A Bulgarian woman - cheap sex”. This, on its turn, gives rise to a series of other associations, fantasies and expectations. It is just enough to say where you come from in order to be regarded and treated in a different way.

One of the ways for girls to feel safer is being among their “piers”- small communities of Bulgarians who legally or illegally reside abroad and whose source of subsistence are often criminal activities. The mother tongue is spoken in these communities and the life style is familiar. These are mainly severe male communities. The criminal type of these groups presupposes various forms of violence being generally accepted. Young Bulgarian women are isolated not only because of the language barrier, lack of money and the cold attitude of the European society. It is also because of being controlled and dependent upon their “piers” who threaten and force them into committing things against their will- fraud, theft or prostitution. The mechanisms of power and control seem to be clear and transparent in these groups - threats, financial dependence, isolation, physical violence. Bulgarian Mafia guys are notorious for ranking first in terms of their unscrupulous behaviour. Hence, Bulgarian women who are their victims are under the best control and are prone to the most severe maltreatment.



Many young Bulgarian women do not feel comfortable in the European world. From the very beginning they start feeling how hostile it is to them and how little they know about it. One way of adapting themselves to its rules is by accepting the position they have been given in it - the position of victims.

### **Prostitution in Bulgaria**

Prostitution in Bulgaria has not been sufficiently studied. The little we know about it would contribute to the better understanding of trafficking in women abroad.

The changes in the Bulgarian society seem to have initially become visible through the change in the attitude towards sex trade. Some of the first visible signs of “liberty” was the abundance of sex magazines at the news-stands. This gradually subdued in order to give way to the next wave - prostitution.

It is over recent years that prostitution has become visible in our country. First, girls appeared in front of hotels and, later, in streets, highways and parking lots. A great number of clubs was springing like mushrooms. Special places where one could buy sex appeared in big cities, usually near market places and cheap hotels. Various classes of prostitution emerged.

Prostitution in Bulgaria bears the signs of the prejudices common to our society and follows the patriarchal pattern in Bulgarians’ mentality. Unlike Central and west European countries, prostitutes in Bulgaria are only women. Male prostitution is either unacceptable or exists within limited boundaries. It is only women who offer the service and it is only men who are the consumers of this service. Moreover, it is men that own the business, organise and control it. It is not typical for a woman to work on her own. According the widely spread model, a pimp owns more than one woman to “take care of”. Prostitutes are in close bonds with their pimps. The women are constantly and closely watched and “guarded”. It is not only them that they depend on but also on the whole well-organised hierarchy (which often involves representatives of official authorities, too). Over recent years the underground world dealing with prostitution has been setting up its own hierarchy. Part of the organisation is the distribution of areas of influence. Maintaining internal order in the criminal world is a way to stabilise it.

In Bulgaria prostitution is closely connected with organised crime. The sexual exploitation of women proved to be quite a profitable business in a state where there are no definite norms and rules but curiosity to savour sexual freedom prohibited in the past. It is rather easy to turn women into an expensive and profitable commodity. Therefore, it is rather easy to overstep the admissibility threshold of aggression and violence accompanying the process of victimising women.

Women are in the lowest position. They are placed under the heavy hierarchy of pimps exerting direct and indirect control over them. Trading in women is typical of Bulgarian prostitution. Mobility is yet another specificity of prostitution. Women are rarely kept at one place. They are being sold and resold across the country within an organised criminal network. The methods used in sex trade in the country are used as a basis for trafficking in women abroad. This can lead us to the conclusion that trafficking in women is not a new phenomenon but rather a regular evolution of the underground world as a result of the new social situation.

Violence has become a distinctive trait of prostitution in Bulgaria. This may be the reason why hardly any distinction is made between forced prostitution and force used in prostitution. The link between domestic violence and violence in prostitution is rather impressive. It is common for a prostitute to be in a partnership (emotionally involved or married) relation with her pimp. In these cases she is transformed into double victim- both as a wife and a prostitute. The frequency of these examples suggests that the prostitute-pimp relationship easily follows the mechanisms of abuse of power and control which are so typical of patriarchal societies based on the totalitarian principle. Bulgarian prostitutes are simply the captives of their pimps regardless of whether they have willingly accepted prostitution as a source of income or not. They are subjected to total control like victims who have completely lost their autonomy. Prostitution in Bulgaria is tightly bonded with brutality, physical and mental torture, sexual violence and subjection. "Don't beat her too much"- this was said by a pimp passing over his captive to a client. It goes with no comment.

Most girls involved into prostitution in Bulgaria are quite young - between 14 and 16 years of age. This makes life easier for pimps as the girls are expected to be much less resistant and more obedient. "Making" a prostitute out of a girl is not a difficult task especially when she is scared. Violence arouses fear. It is combined with signs of benevolence which resulting in emotionally binding the victim and the violator being perceived as a saviour. This strong bond is almost impossible to break given the lack of alternative roles and models of behaviour.

Bulgarian society and institutions have a victimising attitude towards prostitutes. Prostitutes are believed to be the only one responsible for what they are being through. The public opinion raises "ethic" issues, which naturally are never in favour of prostitutes. Prostitutes often have the mentality and behaviour typical of victims. This is to be taken into account when seeking to explain the mechanisms of trafficking in women and ways to solve the problem.

In Bulgaria the phenomenon of prostitution is still haunted by immature fantasies, curiosity and prejudice. This is the reason that makes the victims keep silent. Myths are being accepted, which create an image of prostitution convenient to society. The rate at which prostitution evolves in our country is much higher than the rate at which the attitudes towards it are changing. This is clearly to be traced in the media. Materials reflecting prostitution are usually short reports. It is usually news about raids in illegal sex clubs, arrested pimps and prostitutes. The coverage in the yellow papers sounds quite different. It usually focuses on the sensational aspect of prostitution - price lists, clients, and types of services. The prostitutes themselves are referred to as "priestesses of love" or those who exercise the "most ancient profession". Photos of unambiguous sexual connotation usually accompany the articles. No press material has adequately reflected the real situation in the period March 1997 - March 1998\*. The coverage has always been one-sided. The criminal nature of prostitution is always being emphasised. Not a single report to provide support to women prostitutes has been detected in the 4 newspapers in which

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\* Observations have been made within the context of Bulgarian Project against Trafficking in Women implemented by Animus Association in the period March 1997-March 1998

prostitution-related materials have been monitored. Not to speak of deceit, violence, cruelty and suffering.

Prostitution is illegal in Bulgaria. It is considered a criminal deed. It is those who instigate and organise prostitution that bear criminal liability. The prostitutes themselves do not bear criminal liability. In reality, however, pimps remain unpunished. If they get arrested they are released in 24 hours. This is due to various reasons such as corruption in the judicial power or skilful interpretation of the law. There is a new joke telling that a defendant had better find a prosecutor, not a lawyer. Very often the papers report of raided sex clubs. Meanwhile, sex clubs are being freely advertised in the press. The discrepancy is more than obvious. So is the inadequacy of Bulgarian legislation.

Following the principle of the closed circle, a one-sided attitude towards prostitution is being reproduced and disseminated. The prostitutes, however, are left outside this circle. Their professional and human rights remain unprotected.

### **Bulgarian Prostitution in Europe. Trafficking in Bulgarian Women.**

Being at the crossways between Europe and the Orient, Bulgaria has always taken pride in its strategic geographical location. However, this is also an advantage with regard to trafficking in women. Channels start from Bulgaria in various directions - Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands in the West via former Yugoslavia, Romania, the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary; and Italy, Greece and Turkey via Macedonia in the South.

Girls are most easily trafficked to ex-socialist countries there being no visa requirements. A three-month stay is allowed without registration. This is the reason why Bulgarian girls are always on the move from one border to another. This brings about confusion since they usually do not speak foreign languages. Sometimes the girls do not even know exactly in what country they are.

Bulgarians are not allowed to travel to western countries except with a visa. Getting one is a long and tough procedure. A set of documents is required - letters of invitation, records certifying certificates, ownership and professional status. Parents' permission is required for those who are under age. It is a real wonder how traffickers organising the trafficking of Bulgarian women into western countries manage to get hold of all these to meet the requirements. As a rule, these women hold fake passports. They usually have a tourist visa that entitles them only to a temporary stay. The relevant term is made best use of. After the legal term has expired the girls are resold and moved to another country or they just remain in the country illegally.

The areas close to the Bulgarian borders are at highest risk. Two of them seem to be most popular: Northeast (Dobritch, Varna, Rousse) and Southwest (Blagoevgrad, Kyustendil, Kurdjali, Petritch). The number of cases of trafficked women is impressively high. For instance, we are aware of 3 girls from the village of B. (which has about 2000 residents) close to Varna being sold abroad. They are supposed not to be the only ones. Many of the girls meet relatives of theirs or fellow villagers when they go abroad.

Typical groups of girls who are exposed to the risk of becoming victims of trafficking can be determined based on the channels being used. The victims are most often very young girls from the villages in the above areas. After finishing their basic education at the age of 14 and 15, they have very little opportunities - either working on the farm or getting a job in a factory. Neither of these is attractive to them. It is mostly due to financial reasons that very few of the girls carry on with their education. Getting them entangled in trafficking is very easy by luring them with promises about getting rich, having beautiful clothes, expensive cars, even by offering them sweets or chocolates. The girls have no doubts whatsoever as to the promises they are made. These are usually offered by a rich local man who easily wins their confidence by giving them small gifts and illusions for a better life. Trafficking in women is well known in villages as it has recently been a common practice. However, girls are still unable to protect themselves and easily get trapped. The people who organise the trafficking are the unofficial authority in these areas. Sometimes they even openly ask the locals whether there are pretty girls available in the village to become prostitutes. By means of brutality they make the girls and their families feel absolutely helpless. The police do not always have the power and tools to combat them. Sometimes almost legal campaigns are organised as a result of which several girls are recruited. In some cases girls are simply kidnapped in the streets or disco bars.

Victims of trafficking in villages find themselves absolutely helpless and dependent. This is mainly due to their low education and lack of social experience. The culture in small rural communities differs very much from the urban one. Being abroad the girls are like prisoners and slaves. They do not speak a foreign language and are not even aware which country they are in. "Developing the prostitute model" starts before they leave Bulgaria. First, they are taken to a bigger city in Bulgaria. There they are left entirely isolated for several months. The only people they have any contacts with are their kidnappers. It is like being in a real prison - overall control over the victims' body and life. It is the same people that rape and beat them, and then take care of them supplying food and clothes. The aim is absolute confusion by means of threatening and dependence for their physical survival. It is these girls that work as prostitutes on highways and the streets of the big European cities.

Another popular way of deceiving into prostitution is by offering attractive jobs abroad. According to a survey of job ads in papers for the period May-June 1997, 94 percent of the ones offering jobs abroad target women. They usually set specific requirements regarding appearance attractive, nice, beautiful girls), social status (not married), age (below) 25, etc. These are usually job offers for positions such as au pair girls, dancers (81 ads), models (62 ads), sometimes airhostesses. Some of the advertisements have a strict requirement for a photograph. It is easy to notice that it is mostly offers for jobs abroad that set limitations relating to gender and age. Compared to men, it is much more often women who receive unclear job offers with humiliating requirements (physical descriptions or photos). As a rule, unrealistically high payment is promised. The offers are usually made by agencies which only indicate a contact a phone number, usually somewhere in Bulgaria (Gender Project, 1998).

Young women with ambitions and capacities mostly respond to such offers. They are usually well educated and speak foreign languages. They wish to have a job abroad in order to be able to provide financial support for their families under the circumstances of an economic crisis and impoverishment. There have been cases of married women

with children responding to an offer for seasonal work and later finding themselves in the position of victims.

The mechanisms of making women victims are just the same as with the rest of the cases- establishing relations of trust and subsequent abuse. Usually, upon crossing the border the polite and caring agency employee turns into a pimp and violator. The woman finds herself a captive. She is left with no identity documents (her documents and money have been taken away, her name has been changed, sometimes even the colour of her hair). Women are sent into bars and clubs. They are made to believe that they are heavily indebted to the pimp. In order to buy off their freedom they have to pay back the money for the visa, travel expenses, food and accommodation. However, this is always an illusion. Women get but a small part of the money they make and the calculations the pimps make are always at their expense.

The victims of trafficking also include the ones involved in prostitution in Bulgaria. Regardless of their will, sooner or later they find themselves outside the country. Although they were previously aware of the purpose of the trip, they are similarly deprived of their autonomy. Abuse is a much easier task abroad - money and ID cards have been taken away, control and violence have been tightened. Previous promises and arrangements for good payment are not fulfilled. It is not the women but their traffickers and pimps who profit from their work.

There are cases of girls, especially of Roma origin, who are sold by their parents or relatives. In Roma communities trading in women is acceptable for the purpose of marriage or labour force (pick-pocketing mostly). Most frequently purchasing a woman is aimed at benefiting from her in a way. Prostitution abroad is one of them. Kidnapping and selling a woman to the pimps' network can also be a form of family vengeance.

It is clear that risk groups in Bulgaria are of various kinds. Girls from orphanages, specialised institutions, boarding houses with schools and universities can be added.

Pimps exert a most severe control upon these women. They have been isolated from their natural environment by means of various forms of emotional and physical manipulation. The language barrier and the illegal status make it really easy. What can indeed a terrified girl do who does not speak the language do in a foreign country! She would hardly approach the police and stand up for her rights as she holds a false passport. In such a case there is nothing she can do but obey. There are numerous ways of torturing a human being. However horrifying it may seem, women forced into prostitution are familiar with them. Each act of disobedience is severely punished. It can be hunger or battering on the hidden parts of the body, such as heels or kidneys, where scars are left. There have been girls coming back to Bulgaria with branded numbers on their skin. Just like being in a concentration camp. In a situation of inhuman torture, the fear of death becomes stronger than anything, even pride and dignity, and the search for freedom. You are ready to do anything in order to stay alive.

The way back home and to the family no longer exists. From the very start the women are told that any attempt to get in touch with their families without the pimp being aware of it will have very bad implications for the family. Someone may get hurt. For

the sake of their relatives the girls maintain the illusion about doing very well, having a wonderful life there abroad and being taken good care of. They have assumed the serious responsibility of protecting their families. This is a most effective manipulation on the part of the pimps. Recently organised crime in Bulgaria has gained fabulous power and impact.

Bulgarian women victims of trafficking stand few chances of breaking away. There are enormous barriers between them and the European world. The only human beings the women communicate with are their clients and the pimps. Sometimes it is the clients that help the girls escape. Another way of getting away is the incapacity to do the job any more - for example if they get pregnant or go mad.

It is still exceptional for a woman to manage to escape from the trap of forced prostitution. The price is very high - either her mental or reproductive health. The people and institutions which are willing to co-operate are either few in number or unknown and inaccessible to Bulgarian girls. Yet due to the joint efforts of women organisations in Bulgaria and the ones in the countries into which women have been trafficked the chances to escape are increasing.

### **The girls who come back home**

The trafficking problem does not end with the women's return to their home country. Where do they find themselves? What are their chances to survive?

Some girls are just getting off the bus. They are poorly dressed, pale and trembling. The girls are now in Sofia. Their parents live somewhere in a remote region of the country. The girls have run out of money and they have no documents. They are hungry and have not taken even a shower for a week. They are shaking with fear as their pimps must already have noticed they are missing on the highway in Poland (the Czech Republic or wherever). They must already have informed their accomplices in Bulgaria and someone is probably waiting for them to take them back.

What the girls most need is someone to take care of them at least in the first few days - to take them to a warm place and give them some food, talk to them a little, take them to a doctor, help them contact their parents. In plain language, this means warmth, understanding and compassion. There are quite a few things to be done with relation to each of these girls. The Bulgarian aid services and other institutions do not operate on the basis of people in trouble being in need of multiple choices. These services are usually strictly specialised & they provide support to under-aged, juvenile perpetrators, orphans or sick people. Victims of trafficking fit to neither of these categories. They are not entitled to the help which others in trouble get. It appears they do not enjoy equal rights with the rest of the citizens.

X. Is a 20-year-old girl of Roma origin. Her parents sold her at the age of 17. She has been sold several times afterwards. When she came back to Bulgaria she was pregnant in the 6<sup>th</sup> month. It soon turned out that X. is not eligible for pension. She is not an orphan, she is of age and is not entitled to pension benefits. Even if she were under age, could she have gone back to those who had sold her? She has never had a job in Bulgaria as she has never had this opportunity, hence she is not eligible for unemployment benefits. She is not eligible for motherhood benefits either as they paid

after the child was born. She cannot get a job, either as no one would hire a woman in advanced pregnancy. She cannot have even the poorest accommodation because no one would run the risk of renting lodging to an unknown pregnant woman. She cannot even go to see a doctor as she needs reference by her family doctor. She needs an ID for all of the above. However, due to unknown reasons, X has no ID. On the other hand, in order to have a new ID issued, she needs to go back to the place where she was sold. It is vicious circle.

It is very difficult to disentangle the whole knot of inappropriate procedures, norms and rules through which the women has to go in order to restore her fundamental human and administrative presence as a citizen in her homeland. Women victims of trafficking find themselves unfit for their own country which proves unable to take them back and take care of them.

It is easy for people who are able but reluctant to give help to hide behind bureaucracy. They are unwilling to hear about and understand the tragedy the victims of trafficking have been through. It is beyond normal human mentality, so it is hard to imagine. Bureaucratic rules and restrictions are like an impenetrable shield behind which the officials can stay undisturbed, unaffected by the other person's tragedy with no feeling of guilt whatsoever.

The issue of physical survival is still outstanding after the girl gets back home. On one hand, there are purely technical reasons for this - the slow, rigid, outdated, strongly centralised institutions. Any Bulgarian who needs a service has to fight with the apathy and inadequacy of the institutions. Unwritten alternatives are the only way out they find. The most powerful of them is "pulling strings". The common belief is that there is a key to any door if you know the right person. Administrative and bureaucratic regulations in Bulgaria are very often but a simple imitation of the ones in democratic countries as they are applied in a different way to various people. Offering a service is rather a matter of attitude towards the relevant person than of public arrangements. What kind of attitude can victims of trafficking rely on? They are not perceived as fellow citizens, daughters or wives but rather as "sex workers", "love priestesses", "love sellers", "dollies of special pleasures" or "tourist"\*.

Similar to the rest of society, the victims of trafficking remain outside the written and unwritten rules of public order. The victims environment (families and relatives) is not ready to accept them back. On their behalf, the girls need a kind of compensation for the suffering they have lived through. They also hope for a better attitude, safety and equity in life. However, they get nothing of the kind. People seem reluctant to accept the victims of ultimate failure and aggression, as is the case with trafficked women. They would rather declare them second hand people. Women survivors are often subjected to humiliation because of having been forced into prostitution. However, they are worthy of being paid tribute to for surviving in a situation of inhuman suffering.

There is much ground for the survivors to fear how they will be accepted after returning home. Y. is now afraid of going back to her village because she will be known to be "the prostitute of the village". She would rather go to an orphanage than

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\* The expressions are taken from Bulgarian press materials on trafficking in women

expose her family and herself to shame. She fails to find any reasonable arguments to defend herself before her fellow villagers.

Mental illness saved Z. while being abroad. She behaved inadequately, which made her useless to her pimps. It was mental illness once again that helped the survivors avoid being by their family for their deeds. A girl is usually expected to feel safe when back home. This is but the initial effect. Experts declare her completely in good shape and in no need of any treatment. However, after Z. has returned home the symptoms emerge again. This is her defence against the response of hostility, blame, curiosity and fantasies. It is the very same mechanism that had saved her from her violators. Being in the position of a helpless and sick person, she would rather evoke pity than blame with her fellow-villagers.

It is a sad fact that physical sickness is not the only implication women survivors come back home with. The psychic trauma considerably impacts their emotional life and mental health. They need special care and time for recuperation. Overcoming the trauma is impossible unless the environment has offered them support and security. In reality it is usually the reverse case. Even if their families have accepted them, the community refuses to do so. In order to survive, the women have to adapt themselves to a new/old role imposed on them by their country fellows. The only choice they have is a place in the most remote and dark niches of society - sick, disabled people who are unfit to be anything but prostitutes. Being left without any support and understanding they are doomed to be the victims of their past. They begin perceiving themselves as the others do.

A civilised attitude by society will hardly erase the memories of the past and the suffering, but it can alleviate the feeling of being a victim to an act of utmost injustice. It will help them rehabilitate their image for their own sake. All these are very significant if you are 17 and most of your life is ahead of you. Otherwise, girls survivors are exposed to the risk of being forever stagnated in the position of victims of violence.

### **Conclusions**

Who will assume the task of providing support to women who have suffered trafficking? Maybe sooner or later our country shall overcome the uncertainties of its current development and trafficking shall gradually subdue. However, women survivors shall keep the memories of the tragedy, the horror, the wounds and the damage done to them.

Combating trafficking in women and supporting victims contributes to restoring a destroyed idea of truth and justice in our society. We are not concerned about criminals being punished but rather about raising the awareness about victims being entitled to defence. A civilised society requires not only punishment for criminals but also care for their victims.

Having clear tasks does not make our work less hard. There is a lot of work ahead in order to make people aware that trafficking in women means severe violence and abuse with human beings.



It is necessary for all the political powers in Parliament to be convinced about the need of having a properly functioning legislation that provides support to the victims of trafficking, which will make them regard their homeland as a secure place.

The police have to be convinced of being equally powerful when defending victims as they are when persecuting criminals.

Doctors in hospitals have to be convinced that women suffer because they have been maltreated, not because they have been selling their bodies.

Inspectors in social services have to be convinced that victims of trafficking are a special group with a specific life experience who need the same social assistance as other disadvantaged groups.

Teachers in schools need to be convinced about these girls' need for special educational programmes as they were not able to graduate and it was not their fault.

People who work in shelters need to be convinced that the victims of trafficking equally need shelter as the ones who have suffered domestic violence.

Journalists need to be convinced that the attitude of the general public towards the phenomenon of trafficking greatly depends on the language they use in their reports.

The women's families and relatives need to be convinced that their daughters, sisters or wives have been through great suffering and are not to be blamed for it. On the contrary, they need even more family support, care, love and understanding.

Young women need to learn how to avoid potential traps leading to trafficking and forced prostitution.

Care programmes need to be developed for ensure support and help to the women survivors so that they can restore the balance in their life. They will thus be able to overcome their strong emotions, fear, pain, anger and aggression and restore their social relations. They have to find a place of their own amongst the others.

What have we achieved so far?

We have precious experience as a result of the five-year work in the field of trafficking, which has helped us learn a lot.

We know about the attitudes in our society and the myths about trafficking in women and forced prostitution. We know how few people actually know about the reality of things.

We have met more than 90 women victims of trafficking who have managed to return home. We have learned about their needs, the way they feel and what they are going through. We have been involved in helping them.

We have established contacts with many other institutions and people who, we hope, will be collaborating with us to support victims.

We have good relationship and co-operation with foreign organisations similar to ours. We can rely on smooth co-operation with regard to victim support and lobbying on a high level.

We are part of the International La Strada programme, which is one of the competent networks against trafficking in women. It is known for its good collaboration with organisations from several countries as well as for having a multilateral impact on trafficking-related issues, through lobbying, prevention and victim support. We are aware of how complicated a task working against trafficking is. We face many difficulties. We learn from our mistakes. Being part of La Strada is a chance for us to share experience with other countries and not to feel alone. It is also a chance to join efforts in the international trend against trafficking in women.

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## **What do Women Victims of Trafficking Suffer and Why?**

Maria Tchomarova  
Psychotherapist

In this short article I will try to briefly summarize the psychological and emotional problems with which women who manage to escape the situation of traffic have to cope with. I would like to explain in a popular language why women are faced with these problems. Psychotherapists' opinion is that the reactions of people in a situation of violence are more or less alike.

The range of psychological defense mechanisms that are available is not very wide and they are studied the same way as human anatomy. There is a precisely developed system for manipulating people that has long been known and which has been practiced in communities such as concentration camps, religious sects, etc. The same mechanisms are applied in trafficking in women:

- Severe violence – rape, cruel tortures, battering, hunger. The aim is to place the victim in an extreme survival situation. The attack targets the mechanism of psychological defense - the belief that we can control the surrounding world. We are all aware of being mortal, but we are afraid of death. That is why nature has armed us with mechanisms of defense which keep up the illusion of being in control of our lives. These defense mechanisms are important, as they help us plan, undertake initiatives, communicate etc. When the death issue has been transformed from an existential one into a painfully personal one, the defense mechanisms we usually use are no longer helpful. Similar to a situation of hypertension when the safety-fuse blows out in order to break the electricity chain and to prevent setting the whole system on fire, in a life-threatening situation one “switches off”, stops thinking and physical survival becomes the only aim. The price for this, however, is high and causes a mental trauma. The perpetrators make use of this ability of human nature to make women obey, to force them into prostitution, etc.
- Physical exhaustion. The manipulation system includes the rule of giving the victim no opportunity to rest – no chance to be alone with herself and think it over, to partially recover and start planning actions to defend herself. The 20-hour working day is very profitable, but it is also important in terms of “breaking down” the woman’s psyche.
- Absolute control and isolation. The victim is isolated from the surrounding world, she is not allowed to communicate with other people except for the perpetrator and is subject to strict control. Usually, women victims of trafficking work and live at one and the same place. It is not possible to suppress one’s need for communication, but communicating only with the perpetrator the woman starts receiving distorted information about herself and the world. The message is but one single –a woman’s life is of no value, she is worth nothing. She is to blame for what has happened, as she “owes money” because of being bought and has to “pay it back”. Of course, it is not possible for her to ever pay the money back, so she is sold to another pimp. The selling system is important. Firstly, the idea of a woman being a commodity, a slave, not a person like others is introduced; secondly the notion of the total world she lives in - world of violence and control - as being the only possible one is conveyed. All the pimps have “learned” to work by one and the same “standard”. Sometimes violence is substituted by small gestures of attention – small gifts or acts of mercy (for

example, taking the women to see a doctor). These are aimed at getting the victim attached to the perpetrator and they are often successful as the nature of human beings is such that they need to get emotionally involved with someone, to feel the reward of this emotional dependence.

I mentioned some of the key mechanisms for “brain washing” in order to better explain what kind of emotional problems women survivors of trafficking have to face. Throughout the first days during and following their escape women are usually mobilized and are precise and adequate in their actions. After relaxing and feeling the slightest sign of security, being aware somebody is taking care of them, they start realizing the monstrous dimensions of what has happen to them. Hence the trauma symptoms known as post-traumatic stress disorder become visible.

In a situation of trafficking some women “split” reality. Thus they manage to save part of their personality of a free person. Any day of violence and control attacks the woman’s former views of herself and the world, thus making her to gradually forget them. Unless she can forget them, she “goes mad” as her picture of the world clashes with the absurd reality. Traumatic symptoms are similar to the symptoms of a mental disease, but these are two completely different diagnoses and hence the different treatment. The more frequent symptoms are nightmares, flash backs of pictures and images from the violence relating to past violence, etc. The major problem, however, is that the woman is “blocked”, having lost her previous idea of the world as a place of order and predictability. She has lost the ability to keep control over her own live. The woman victim of trafficking feels empty and numb, as she is unable to bear her own intense emotions. Her access to emotional life is also blocked, her emotions being extreme: feelings of guilt, anger, fear, and self-disgust.

Regrettably, we human beings, are very fragile creatures, easy to hurt and it is difficult for us to recover. A perpetrator with a bat can break one’s bones and damage one’s internal organs just in a few minutes. In order for the victim to recover, a hospital with sophisticated equipment, special cares and much time are required. The traumatic event swoops the person all of a sudden and causes serious problems for the future. The feeling of being hurt by other people is much more painful than suffering natural disasters or catastrophes. The manipulation mechanisms I described hereto can break a woman just for a few months. I recall a writer describing the traumatized soul as a vase broken into small pieces. Searching for these pieces and rebuilding the vase is a long and complex process. But as the ways of destroying one’s psyche are known so are the ways of rebuilding it. Psychotherapy provides ways to do it.

The path towards overcoming trauma is not so simple. It cannot be described in a few words, as I did with the process of destruction. The purpose of therapy is to empower the woman, to help regain her autonomy, to safely “lead” her through the sea of extreme emotions, so that she would once again be able to accept her personal integrity and resume the life of a free person.

## **HOW WE HELP WOMEN, SURVIVORS OF TRAFFICKING**

### **The experience of Animus/La Strada - Bulgaria**

Nadia Kozhouharova  
Psychotherapist

There are several questions that people tend to ask when they are interested in how we help women survivors of trafficking. I will try to answer these questions. In this article I would like to dispel commonly held illusions about women survivors of trafficking and to present what is realistic in terms of helping them in Central and Eastern Europe.

I will begin with the question “who do we help?” Very often, people ask ‘who are these women? What do they look like? What do they feel? What do they think about?’ Most people expect to hear that these women are poor and uneducated, mainly from ethnic minorities. It is true that it would be easier to classify trafficking as being the problem of just one social group. We would then be able to have a clear consciousness about our passivity, because in general this is a socially disadvantaged group in many respects and the problem would be too huge. But the truth is different. Victims of trafficking come from all social groups. We have met so many women – some of them are educated but unemployed, who have decided to help their families, others are children from as young as 14 who have been deceived by the traffickers in a very basic way or simply just kidnapped. There are women from towns and villages, young women who have parents and some who don’t ..... But there are some things that unite these women. They all come from this part of Europe that was isolated for many years. Most of them have experienced the poverty and economic instability of countries in transition. They all want to change their lives for the better and they believe they can do it by themselves. Thus they try their chance abroad.

For me, it is more important to share with you, how these women are when they first reach us – this is when they have been able to escape from the trap of trafficking. Women survivors of trafficking change when they feel safe and they feel they have the support of someone else. Until now, they have lived in fear that every moment their lives are threatened. For someone to survive in these circumstances, she needs to be able to mobilise all of her physical and emotional power. Women who manage to escape from the traffickers by themselves usually demonstrate more of this power. The inner strength of these women is a good example of the many resources a person has to save their life. This is why when women come to us they are still very much in this ‘mobilised’ frame of mind. They look stable, they have plans and wish to change their lives. Most of them in this state of mind are full of energy and want to do something proactive against trafficking – e.g. to make a report to the police or to help other women. But this enthusiasm is only temporary. The safer the women feel, the more the reality overwhelms them and their enthusiasm quickly turns into hopelessness. Survivors of trafficking are alone because they have survived things they cannot share with others, they don’t have any money or documents, they have a broken past and an unclear future. They feel very confused. They fall into a deep emotional crisis. They are swamped by strong emotions of fear, anger, horror, self-blaming. They are even afraid to go out alone on the streets in case they meet someone who will sell them once more into trafficking. Paradoxically, they are not able to assess situations very well and tend to behave in a risky way. They have

flashbacks and nightmares. Sometimes they have perceptual difficulties with time and space. They have mood swings and every day they change their plans. Thus, when they are in this state, there is the danger that other people misunderstand them and think they are 'mad' or 'crazy'. The truth is, that the violence they have experienced while being trafficked causes psychological trauma. In this state, survivors of trafficking are very vulnerable. To recover from this stage, the woman needs a lot of care, safety and a great deal of understanding. It only takes a few days to break a woman, it takes many years to help her to rebuild her life. What we have learned is that life after trafficking is no less dangerous than life in trafficking.

The next question, which we are often asked is 'How do we help survivors of trafficking? What can and what can't we do for them?' Imagine a woman of 18 or 19 years of age, getting off the international bus, returning to her own country. This could be the same woman to be found in the police station after being arrested in the red light district. In both cases, she doesn't have anything other than the clothes on her back. She feels very tired, and she has not ate or slept for days. Our care starts here. For her to manage this difficult situation in which she finds herself she needs a safe environment and care. The first and most urgent issue for us is to provide the basic necessities – accommodation, food, clothes and personal items. The woman is in crisis and she needs someone to help her to put things in order and to contain her feelings. Together with her, we make a plan for what she needs. Some young women are in a hurry to go back to their families. These are the lucky ones. There is someone who cares and who can accept them back. With these women, we discuss with the family how they can help their daughter and how to prevent her being a victim of trafficking again. We provide them with money to travel back to their community in the countryside. If the woman is a foreigner we contact other organisations to guarantee her safe return home – embassies, police, the International Organisation of Migration, etc. Of course, it is easier if this transfer is taking place between countries in which La Strada has offices. After we have provided accommodation, food and safety for the woman, we then work with her on the next most important thing – documents, medical checks, medicines, legal help. Our aim is to help the woman to regain her autonomy. We understand that she is in the best position to know her own needs. That is why we believe it is the personal, human contact with our clients that is most important. Because of this situation of trust, we can discuss everything with her.

But things only look like this on paper. The reality is that every single case is much more difficult. Very often we feel at a dead-end. Helpless. For example, one young woman returned seven months pregnant, another found out that her mother had died whilst she was trafficked abroad, and a third discovered she was HIV positive. There was one woman who needed to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital because of the severity of the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, another disappeared from the shelter.... And what can we do for the women who are not able to return home because it is dangerous? What can we do with underage women whose parents refuse to accept them back into the family? How can we manage with the emotional breakdown these women experience when they come to the realisation that no-one wants them and everyone blames them? We still don't have answers to these questions. Our societies are not prepared to support survivors of trafficking. It is very frustrating to realise that these women don't fit the criteria of the social programmes run by the government in Bulgaria. This is an enormous injustice

which we cannot accept. We think that it is our duty and an important part of our work in support of survivors, to develop networks of GO's and NGO's who will share this responsibility with us, to help the women. We in La Strada understand their problems. They trust us and share things with us. We know how difficult it is for them to re-build their lives. We want to help them. If we don't work in this direction, if we stay passive, we would allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by the desperation and the loneliness of the women.

The next important question is to what extent are we able to help survivors of trafficking? What happens to them when they leave us? Do we have any 'success stories'? I think that all these questions are connected to the significance of our work. I don't think that it is possible to measure success in the work with survivors of violence because it is hard to measure human happiness and unhappiness. From now, the life of most of the women who have survived trafficking will be a train of traumatic events. The violence that they have experienced is so serious that most of them will probably never fully recover. Some of our clients fall into trafficking again, or find themselves in another situation of violence. The most difficult is when there are suicides or attempted suicides. We have to accept this reality, however sad it makes us. Despite the enthusiasm with which we work there are limits to what we can do. The most difficult moments in our work are when we have to say 'we can't help this woman anymore'. One of the ways to work out our feelings of helplessness is by setting clear and realistic boundaries of the support we can offer. Otherwise, we risk being driven by our feelings to promise things beyond what we can provide. Our intervention probably looks extremely small when compared to the suffering of the women. The concrete things we can do for them solve only some of their problems. But the help provided by us has another dimension that is much more important than everything else. For us what counts is that the women learn to trust someone again; that there are people who believe them and understand what they have suffered; that life is not only about violence and abuse and there is a reason to live; that they can take control of how they solve their problems. Sometimes, it's even enough that someone has communicated with them as human beings, respecting their opinion and choice. Our attitude towards survivors of trafficking is why they call us again and again when they find themselves in situations of violence. We think it is a success for us that they trust us and know how to find us when they are in need.

I have written in detail about the personal experiences of survivors of trafficking because very few people realise what happens to these women. The truth is that the problem of trafficking in women does not finish with the 'rescue' of the women from the traffickers. For the last five years, the Animus/La Strada has begun to address the lack of services in Bulgaria. I also think that if we want to help survivors, we have to know and better understand their feelings and their needs. We are not the only ones who meet victims of trafficking. Others include the police, immigration services, some medical and social services. But how we differ from these other organisations is that we are particularly interested in the *human* problems of the women. For us they are not just illegal workers or migrants, but women who are victims of cruel violence, who have the right to receive help, who have the right to regain control over their lives and to continue to live like other people in our societies.

I realise that what I have written here can sound quite sad. But as I said at the beginning, my aim is to present the reality which faces the women survivors of

trafficking and the reality which faces us, the women of La Strada, who do our utmost to help them. Every day in our work, with every single woman we have contradictory feelings. On the one hand is the feeling that there is no-one to support us and we can only rely on ourselves, that no-one can understand the pain that survivors of trafficking experience, that the problems are too complicated for us to solve. But on the other hand we still have the feelings that give us the power to continue – the satisfaction that we are able to help the women, the belief that we can defend their interests, the knowledge that in time we are becoming professionals and experts.



# Developing an Animus Association Care Program for Women Victims of Trafficking

Nadejda Stoytcheva  
Psychotherapist

As a professional who was brave enough to face the first cases of women victims of trafficking I will try to offer a general outline of the care which our service provides. The program includes two kinds of work- social and clinical. On one hand, my expose presents the needs and problems of victims of trafficking. On the other hand, it focuses on issues the consultant might be confronted with.

The case manager gets ready in advance for the first meeting with a woman survivor of trafficking. The consultant knows how the woman accessed the service. He/She has discussed the case with his colleagues in the professional team and has worked out a hypothesis. At the first meeting that we, the professionals, call an interview, the therapist faces two kinds of problems - social and medical.

## Counselling during the crisis

The case manager is responsible for revealing and ranking by importance the **physical and social needs** of the woman victim of trafficking, which means creating a social work plan for the relevant case. The needs could be: ensuring the safety of her arrival, placing her in a shelter or in a hospital; making urgent arrangements for food and accessories, medical examinations; contacting her parents, issuing documents, and other unforeseen needs. As for the social tasks, the case manager should solicit additional assistance that is usually provided social workers, volunteers, students.

There are also some common **emotional needs**, which should be discussed with the woman. These are usually fears, which are common to all women survivors of trafficking:

- Fear of being exposed to considerable danger, i.e. of being tracked by the traffickers when you are back home
- Fear of losing your relatives
- Fear of being ostracized by society
- Fear of being vulnerable without male support
- Fear of being a disgrace to your family
- Fear of being alone as you have no information and you do not know whom to approach for help (social services or people)
- Fear of not being able to have a normal life
- Fear of the future

Women who have been abused need individual sessions, meetings with therapist in order to share their problems in a secure and protected environment. In most cases, these sessions last from 45 and to 60 minutes. In hard crises, (e.g. if the woman has suicidal thoughts) more time is needed for her to calm down.

The consultant's role is to listen to the woman and lead the session. He/She helps her find answers to her initial questions relating to the state of insecurity and to further steps to undertake. The woman is supported to help her re-identify her own capacities

and recognize the strength it took her to survive. Both her experience and her past and future plans are discussed.

Here are some common reactions, which can be traced in the behaviour of women victims of trafficking:

#### FEAR.....

- .... of staying alone
- ... of being found and punished by the perpetrator of the abuse
- ... of others not understanding what has happened to her, believing she was a prostitute
- ... of being punished or prosecuted for illegally residing abroad
- ... of her own anger
- ... of sexually transmitted diseases or AIDS
- ... of nightmares

#### GUILT.....

- ... that she has made a mistake or has been “stupid”
- ... that she had broken cultural and religious beliefs
- ... that she had failed to provide funds to her family

#### ANGER.....

- ... with herself for “allowing this to happen to her”
- ... with the others for not protecting her
- ... at society
- ... at her life being confused and broken

#### SHAME.....

- ... due to the feeling of being “dirty”, “spoiled”
- ... due to the fear of others telling what has happened to her only by looking at her

#### BETRAYAL.....

- ...by these who contacted her with the traffickers
- ... by God
- ... by the State
- ... by her family

#### LACK OF TRUST...

- ... in her own capacity to assess people and events
- ... in other people even these who have not “betrayed” her

#### HELPLESSNESS.....

- ... you have no control over your life
- ... “it will never become better”
- ... being woman means being always abused

#### SHOCK.....

- ... feeling of numbness and impossibility to cry

DOUBT.....

...."Did it really happen?"

... "Why did it happen to me?"

DISORIENTATION.....

... impossibility to stay still (restless all the time)

... impossibility to tell the days

... memory difficulties

**What difficulties the consultant working with women victims of trafficking faces**

When the feelings of helplessness and shame prevail some women make up their minds to commit suicide. If the woman talks about suicide and has some ideas about ways of doing it, the consultant, being concerned about her life, makes interventions until the risk declines and, if necessary, refers her to a specialized service. Help from outside is also to be sought in case the woman says she wants to hurt herself or other people.

It is also normal for a woman to show hostility towards the whole world, as well as towards the consultant himself/herself. She manifests a great variety of emotions - anger, guilt, helplessness, joy and grief. She may have built up unconscious barriers subduing the feelings in order to survive the extremely painful events. It is easier not to have any feelings when there has been a painful abuse. Sometimes the consultant can find out these emotions are directly addressed to him. The consultant is the only one to provide a safe place for her to reveal her anger, which she was not able to express in the situation of violence. Releasing this anger is curative for her. It could be very difficult for the consultant to cope with the woman's negative emotions, especially if they are directed at him. That is why women professionals who consult victims of trafficking should know this work is physically and emotionally exhausting. It is necessary to allow for enough time to discuss the case in a professional team-based environment.

However difficult it is to work with women victims of trafficking, it is important for the program to carry on. This program builds both on the specific needs of women victims of trafficking and on the analysis of professional experience.

Nadejda Stoytcheva

Psychotherapist, Animus/La Strada

# **About the (lack of) Choices for Women Survivors of Violence and the Role of Professionals Working with Them**

Elena Bojinova  
Clinical Psychologist

The purpose of this paper is to present the story of a girl who managed to escape from a situation of trafficking and the efforts of professionals from different areas of the social assistance system to help this girl. I wish this text would be full of hope and joy about “things turning out well” and “a happy end”, which would, however, mean escaping from reality into the world of hopes and wishes. To my mind, the point of such texts lies in recognising and accepting the limits of our professions, this being the precondition for being able to really work in a team and try to meet the needs of our clients more adequately.

Due to the experience with women victims of trafficking in Animus Association we are constantly witnessing the inadequacy of our social system to provide care for women and girls survivors of trafficking. One of the reasons for this may be that women survivors are not identified as a separate group of customers. Identifying them as a target group implies conducting in-depth research and developing specialized care programs for them. Care programs aimed at meet their potential needs for psychotherapeutic and psychiatric help as well as their social needs. Quite often, these girls cannot return home, cannot rely on social benefits or motherhood allowances, the state and society are extremely unwelcome in their attitude towards them and under the “best case scenario” they are left with the choice of either going back to the state of being victims to trafficking or achieving a life style close to the normal one. It is exactly this border-space the role of the professionals supporting the women survivors of trafficking fits into.

Any girl coming back from abroad, any girl survivor of trafficking raises new questions and enhances our knowledge about how limited our capacity to help these women is. I think that the point of constantly admitting limits to what we are able to do is not giving up our work, but constantly searching for collaboration with other professionals.

I will tell the story about a girl escaping from trafficking abroad and the work of specialists in the humanitarian professional space helping her recover from the severe trauma and organize at least a minor aspect of her life.

N is a 16-year-old girl. She has been in a situation of trafficking and forced prostitution abroad for two years. In the aftermath of the severe psychological trauma she develops an “adjustment disorder” for which she is treated in a psychiatric hospital. Her past history is one of harsh traumatic experience – domestic violence and rape in early adolescence. A women’s NGO in the country where N is gets in touch with the Center for Rehabilitation of women survivors of violence with Animus Association. The plan is for us to meet her and get in touch with her parents.

At the time of her arrival in Bulgaria N is the 6th month of pregnancy. Following the consultation with a psychotherapist from the Center who declares her current condition as stable, N and her family decide that N is to return to their family home.

About half a year later, the parents got in touch with us again because of the N disappearing on several occasions for various periods of time. They believe her to be forced to prostitute in Bulgaria. Strangers go to their place asking for N, intimidating them, sometimes directly threatening them that if they are hiding N they place themselves in danger. The parents feel they cannot rely on the local police as they have refused to help them on several occasions.

They have yet another concern – N's behavior is getting increasingly "strange": she is threatening to commit suicide, she is having those unexplainable outbursts of anger – insulting others, throwing objects at her close ones, hurting herself. After such incidents she usually feels very sorry and asks them to forgive her. They are very worried for her; they are also concerned about N hurting her baby (who is 6 months old by that time). They also tell us about N recently attempting a suicide.

N's parents are seeking help for their daughter, feeling unable to take care of her any longer, as her condition has become worse. They are very much concerned about the life and health of their daughter, as well as about their own safety. The solution they found was placing N in a hospital to be treated by psychiatrists.

During the consultations in the Center N is showing symptoms of severe trauma, possibly post-traumatic stress disorder - she is too agitated, her reactions towards her family are often enraged. Her moods are constantly shifting, she speaks fast, her thoughts are chaotic. It is hard for her to stay still and keep track of the conversation. She tells that she has considerably lost body weight for the last one year, a year and a half, she has been having nightmares with visions of what happened to her, she is getting "jumpy" at the slightest noise. She talks chaotically about being forced to prostitute by means of threats against her baby. One of the phrases N is repeating all the time is that she would do everything for her baby. She points at the wounds where she hurt herself, about some of her wounds inflicted by the pimps. She says the last pimps put her "some shot" after which she felt very easy and careless and then very sleepy. She was worried this was a "drug". She was willing to get treatment because of her baby.

We discussed the possibility of N being treated in the psychiatric hospital in a neighbouring town with N and her parents. Her parents feared the hospital was not a safe place because of the pimps searching for N. However, in order for N to go to another hospital she needed a referral. As N had worked with a local psychiatrist after returning home we decided that she and her parents were to see him again. A social worker Animus Association had worked on other cases with was to facilitate the meeting with the psychiatrist. A few days later the family got in touch with us again. They already had a note of referral. N was assessed as having "drug addiction" and was referred to First psychiatric ward in Alexander Hospital. The diagnosis in the referral was surprising, but the Animus Association team decided we would try to implement the decision made by N and her family. Moreover, all of us were convinced that there should be no delay whatsoever and that the N's condition

required emergency psychiatric treatment as during the second consultation N talked even more openly about her attempts to hurt herself and commit suicide.

Hence searching for a place for N to be taken care of started. She did not seem eligible for any of the health or social institution target groups, regardless of the assessment and the conclusions made by the people involved in the case (including the psychiatrists) which clearly indicated that because of the severity of her trauma she needed specialized treatment.

As she was 16 years old she was not eligible to be a patient in the children psychiatric ward, but not being 18 made it impossible for her to get treatment in the Women psychiatry department, either. She was not in an acute psychotic condition but her behavior required a structured and safe environment. Some of the professionals assessed the risk to her life as high, while others assessed her behavior as demonstrative and setting no threat in terms of self-destructive acts.

The situation I was working in was as follows: N's parents were unable to take care of her; as a consultant involved in this case, my assessment was that she needed psychiatric care; this assessment was shared by all the Animus Association team. Meanwhile not a single psychiatrist or institution had committed themselves to taking care of N so far. Beside her mental health, her physical survival was a problem the risk to her life being too high.

We were in a situation that we had to cross our professional boundaries and we had to deal with problems from the competence of other professionals. We had to find a place for N to sleep during the night, so on the next day we could proceed with the search for specialized institution to take care for her. The team decided that N would sleep in the Crisis Center at Animus Association.

After discussing the issue with the team we also decided that N had to be consulted by a psychiatrist in the Youth Mental Health Centre. Dr. Maya Mladenova who consulted N. confirmed our worries about N's condition and issued an epicrisis with referral to an emergency ward for assessment of the suicidal risk and her condition. We got in touch with a psychiatric clinic in Sofia, but the conclusions of the psychiatrist consulting N pointed her numerous suicidal attempts and self-aggressive behavior being due to her lack of maturity and her dramatic behavior. According to the psychiatrist on duty there was no need to N to be urgently admitted into the hospital.

As I relied on my professional experience and the understanding of N's behavior as an aftermath of the severe psychological trauma following the violence she had experienced, I was still very anxious about N's condition.

Once again I got in touch with Dr. Maya Mladenova, as she had been the only psychiatrist truly involved with N's case so far and both my team and myself were still convinced about N needing hospital treatment. Dr. Mladenova recommended emergency commitment and referred us to the State Psychiatric Hospital "St. Ivan Rilski", where based on her assessment and referral N was admitted in the Women's ward. N seemed to be in a safe situation and to get adequate treatment in the end.

When I went to visit her, I was told that she could no longer stay in the ward because she is under 18 and her condition did not meet the diagnostic criteria for acute psychotic condition. Besides the problems relating to the procedures, N seemed to have got into serious clashes with the ward staff. She refused to stay in the hospital for even yet another day.

Once again there was no place for N. The Animus team decided that the Association would cover the expenses for N's treatment in a psychiatric hospital in Sofia. N stayed in the hospital for 10 days. The psychiatrists' opinion was that she suffered from a personality disorder – immature personality. While N was in the hospital she had several crises – she was saying that she would escape from the hospital, commit suicide or hurt herself. In spite of all these difficult aspects, the people involved in the case were “having a sigh of relief”. As for her parents, this was a solution to their problems; as for the hospital staff, there was no violation of procedural rules; and as for myself and the whole Animus Association team N being in a psychiatric clinic gave us grounds to believe the risk was under control, that adequate care was being taken of her and the treatment of her psychological traumas had started.

However, the hospital personnel set the requirement about someone from Animus Association paying a visit to N. every day. It was either the responsible social worker or myself who visited her; these visitations were aimed at withholding her rush to run away from the clinic or to harm herself. As for myself, I wonder whether the visitations to N and the interventions in the hospital corridors are an expression of real teamwork with the psychiatrists from the ward or rather stepping beyond professional boundaries as a result of the lack of an alternative either for N or the team of Animus Association and myself, in particular.

Our concerns were also focused on what would become of N after getting out of the hospital. It was obvious that if she went back to her hometown, she would again be involved in trafficking in women. Her parents' request was that, to the possible extent, N should stay in the hospital or another place where somebody could take care of her. During the team discussions the idea to use specialised schools emerged. We started looking for information about such schools and whether it was possible for N. to access them. We paid numerous visits to both the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Ministry of Education in order to find out that the schools we needed were the ones with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. We had a meeting with a very supportive and collaborative woman who offered several options for N's case and the only condition she set was for N to be in a stable condition and under psychiatric control. At that time N had already quit the hospital. According to the involved psychiatrists, in order for N to be cured she needed to be with her family and take care of her child. Regretfully, that was not possible for the time being – meanwhile her parents had got separated and they lived with some relatives of theirs. They believed going back to their house was very dangerous. It was her elder sister who was looking after N.

N had to spend yet another night in the Crisis Centre. In the morning she disappeared. All the efforts N and the people taking care of her had made seemed to have been in vain. The first time she was on her own, she did not succeed in controlling her self-destructive impulses. The team people experienced a feeling of hesitation between anger and the blame for the efforts invested in vain and the deep sorrow and the

professional knowledge about these being manifestations of the trauma she had suffered; and about the need for more time and permanent care in order to change her functional model. Based on our experience, we knew that what was going on with N was no exception to the general rule and that very often there was no another way out for the survivors of trafficking but death. They are left to rely only on themselves and under the best scenario it was their families taking the care of them. However, very often the trauma is so deep and severe and their souls so deeply impaired that there is nothing to keep them alive.

As a professional, I do not accept the strong self-destructive actions of these people as being a result of a personal choice. I do not regard their suicidal attempts or the extremely risky situations they get into as an expression of the right of each of us to make the choice between life and death. In my opinion, this choice is refused to them due to the degree of their psychological trauma. Currently there is no alternative, there is no choice for them.



# **The phone-calls concerning trafficking in women on the Hot Telephone Line - collision with feelings, thoughts and questions**

Dobriana Petkova  
Iva Georgieva  
Hot-line volunteers

Working on the Hot Telephone Line of Foundation “Association Animus” is a challenge, especially when speaking of confronting with the problem of trafficking in women.

When we are at work, our adrenaline rises when we think of that we might have a conversation connected to the problem of trafficking- regardless of the fact that it may be counseling concerning the prevention of trafficking, forced prostitution or slavery like practices.

With a feeling of uneasiness each of us picks up the ringing telephone, fearing that on the other end she'll hear the voice of a frightened, confused, helpless girl, who has been enticed with false promises of a better living, kidnapped or just lied to. There is no time. The girl is speaking fast, very quiet, the words come out of her mouth without any connection. Just for some seconds the chaos in her feelings sweeps us over. We are very close of giving way to her panic and despair. The tension grows, realizing that maybe we are her only chance of getting away from this nightmare. And we carry the responsibility of helping her. We have to concentrate so we can handle our own emotions and be able to answer her needs most adequate- whether it be talking with her, supporting her, just listening or to respond to her call for help, to organize a plan for escape...

Sometimes we may outdistance the decision of the calling women. It's important that we follow her “rhythm”, to explain her the risks and the consequences. We feel really frustrated- enraged, “tripped”, impeded, confused, because our human striving of helping has confronted with the women on the other end, who is not ready yet, to take responsibility of the risk of changing her way of life.

When we understand that the girl has more time to talk and when we see that we have been able to get “connected” to her and she can adequately get the information which we've been giving her, the confusion and the tension suddenly drop off.

The conversation has finished, we close the phone, relax on the chair, close our eyes and suddenly a wave of feelings, thoughts and questions sweeps us: “Did I calm the girl?, Did she feel I understood her?, That she's not alone?, Did I do everything that's possible? Will she call again?, When?, Will she be able to escape?, What will happen to her?”.

Again we're alone with our confusion, fear, flowing in the unknown...the same feelings with which we had started the conversation.

Difficult and not less emotional are the conversations with the parents and the relatives of the missing girls or women. We are faced to the anxiety, fear, rage, confusion, helplessness, the desire for something to be done and at the same time not knowing exactly what it should be.

The information that the caller has about the girl is usually scarce, unclear and mixed up. It is needed that we calm down and support the caller, help him understand that from his own activity depends the successful way out of the search for his missing relative. In the same time we try to manage his attacks, aggression and emotions.

We feel enraged and annoyed from the unrealistic expectations of the caller that we are the ones to find the victims and with a “magic stick” bring them to their relatives. In the end of each such conversation in us are kept not only the transferred negative emotions of the caller but also an oppressive feeling of uncertainty. It is possible that we can trace the case, but mostly we don’t get any more information about the victims.

On another point of view, exist the phone calls related to the prevention of trafficking- giving information to the people who plan to work abroad.

Sometimes it’s very hard for us to convince the people what are the responsibility and the risk that they undertake when going to work in another country. There are particular details that play a significant role for drawing the people into slavery like practices or trafficking. A lot of these details are unknown. Exactly when we are trying to explain the risks, we are confronted with difficulties- the opposition of people that ’s coming from the illusions of the easier life abroad and their desire to escape in looking for a financial stability. In their fantasies, they don’t recognize the possible risks and this is the reason why it is so hard for us to show them how the real situation is. We try to “lighten up” the problem so that even if they decide to take the risk, the callers to be aware of the situation and know the possible dangers and harms. In the same time, people must know that not all companies that offer jobs abroad are phantoms.

Difficult and exhausting are the conversations related to trafficking as is the thought of so many people, mainly women, put under inhuman suffering and violence trying to find a way to a better life. Even though we’ve been well trained, we are always under tension that exactly when you are at work, answering the phone, there is a possibility to receive a call from a woman that has been involved in trafficking. But if even one girl or woman have been saved and brought back to a normal way of life, the fact that you have been able to help, that the woman has a chance to escape from the “hell” and is able to receive help, brings real satisfaction and a feeling of justice.

# Prostitution and Commercial Sex Workers in Bulgaria

Cvetina Arsova  
Psychologist

Prostitution is becoming a serious problem with huge dimensions in Bulgaria. It can only be studied by means of the human rights approach given the proper understanding of the needs of women in prostitution in terms of their physical, mental and sexual health and psycho-social support.

There are no representative data on the group's demographic and epidemiological picture. Research findings show that the group is extremely diverse in terms of age (most women are between 16- and 18-year-old), ethnicity (Bulgarian women constitute 4.7%, the Roma population 33.5%), education (mostly women with elementary education), and social-economic status (ranging from businesswomen to unqualified workers, unemployed and farm-workers). Besides the prostitutes' group being rather heterogeneous (there are several subgroups based on their different working place - street and highway prostitution, hotel prostitution, club companions), it is highly vulnerable and difficult to reach. Even the first attempts to get in touch with this group imply the feeling of a conflict between human rights and the situation of women involved in sex business.

There are several factors which determine women prostitutes' vulnerability:

- **Crime-generating Factors**

The close interrelation with organised crime and the high mobility make the business untouchable. It is almost impossible for women prostitutes in Bulgaria to have independent practice. Any attempt at independent practice is severely hindered by organised crime groupings that fully control the business. On the other hand, the law further facilitates the criminalization of this process by not regulating it as a legal phenomenon.

- **Violence and Safety Factors**

The main relationship pattern in paid sex business is based on violence. Mechanisms for developing women's dependence on those who "take care" of their security are sustained, thus turning them into victims. The everyday fear for survival (often related to deep physical, mental and sexual traumas) and the need to fulfil the requirements set by procurers, clients and the police replace any other apprehension such as the fear of diseases. Even when women are "voluntarily" involved in sex business, they become objects of manipulation, sanctions, and punishment. Getting out of the business is almost impossible and is not done at one's own will. Often, forced prostitution evolves into trafficking out of the country.

*In some cases it is a matter of "baiting" - you are offered a job abroad or in a different town and, being brought there, you are subject to violence losing your support environment. Another mechanism to force you is by saying you have been bought. For example, the procurer comes and says to you "You were bought for \$2,000 and you have to earn this money for me".*

- **Social Status of the Group**

Most of those involved in sex business are young women without sufficient social and life experience, with poor education and limited performance opportunities. The difficult economic situation is a factor for the involvement of many young men and

women from ethnic minorities into prostitution, which further aggravates their vulnerability due to the existing attitudes of social marginalization and racism.

- **Stigmatization**

The response to the prostitution issue by society is extremely immature, which is a mixture of both discriminative attitudes and aggressive reactions and double moral standards. This attitude stigmatizes the image of the woman - "prostitute" by implying that she herself is to blame for what she is doing and, therefore, should bear the shame of the implications. This pattern of laying the blame on the victim deepens the feeling of inferiority and encourages immersing in anonymity as a form of defense against the society which is rejecting them.

- **Risky Behavior**

Practicing risky sexual behavior is rather rule than an exception among the group. The high vulnerability rate is related to the impossibility to negotiate safe sex, to practicing high-risk sexual behavior and not using lubricants. The young men and women from Roma ethnic origin who work on the street appear to be the most vulnerable group. They often have to provide sex for food or shelter; they are highly mobile, often abuse drugs (inhale glue or administer shots of heroine), practice sexual behaviour with a comparatively higher risk and are much less aware of HIV/AIDS risks and other negative consequences for their sexual and mental health. This self-destructive behavior is often the only way to "cope with" reality.

- **Social Network and Support**

The lack of a reference social group and a support network impede the recovery of these women and are the source of further marginalization. The feeling of isolation and loneliness is very common among them. Under these circumstances they can hardly build up their own prospects for the future or an identity different from that of prostitutes. The future brings uncertainty and insecurity that are beyond women's control.

<i>"There is no one I can share my feelings with. I am used to keeping everything inside my own self. I have no plans, it is here that plans are being made for me, but you never know what might happen. "</i>
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The efficient care and support for women involved in prostitution are based on the hypothesis that they are victims of violence. The traumatic identity of the woman involved in prostitution is often shaped in her early childhood as a consequence of traumatic experience. Later on regardless of the concrete circumstances and the context of her involvement in prostitution (trafficking, negative free or positive free choice), the woman automatically becomes the target of violence.

In this situation, the professionals' basic assumption is that the woman involved in prostitution needs care and support related to her emotional life, recovery and strengthening of her personality, and developing a feeling of integrity after the traumatic experience; restoring her relationship with the community; ensuring psychological and social support, and autonomization. Meeting these needs requires a professional partnership environment that helps break the one-to-one relationship victim-perpetrator and provides therapeutic and social support. This is the only way for the woman to gain back her feeling of responsibility and control over her life .

The professional attitude in dealing with prostituting women includes a multi-level provision of care and support – crisis situation, physical safety, diminishing damages caused by risky behavior (sexual behavior and drug abuse), psychological help, socialization beyond dependency, gaining back the feeling of integrity and common sense.

## **The Small Lessons**

*Maria Stefanova*

Journalist

As a professional working with the language I have always been annoyed at the usage of the word “trafficking”. Throughout my practice as a journalist for more than 10 years, I have often come across violence in different forms. My feminine nature and my journalist attitude have helped me cope and overcome that unpleasant feeling we refer to as “having butterflies in your stomach”. I have had numerous occasions to help elderly women, disadvantaged children and a few Bulgarian students who had been awarded scholarships for prestigious US Universities. What has always surprised me is not the fact that united efforts yield results, but the fact that we, Bulgarians, seem not to be aware how much we could achieve if we work together.

In 1999 I was the coordinator of the project “Informational Campaign against Trafficking in Women from Bulgaria” with the International Organization for Migration. It is this complicated formulation that I regarded as a potential to tackle a certain problem by means of joint efforts. The participation of governmental institutions, non-governmental organizations and international organizations was a guarantee for a good start-up of the work on this area reduced, which is usually defined as prostitution.

This, however, is neither precise, nor absolutely true. In many people’s minds, trafficking in women stands for prostitution from which the element of violence is excluded. However, violence is always implied when innocent, ignorant, careless, uneducated women are deceived by cunning and experienced traffickers who are more or less “trained” in the business with live flash.

The complexity of the definition of the word “trafficking” for both the Bulgarian and the international institutions ensues from the fact that there is no precise answer as to the point at which the process of trafficking involves elements of violence. In my view, violence under the form of deceiving and giving false promises accompanies the trafficking process from the very beginning.

Outside my work within the awareness campaign I met different girls who had been trafficked. I had and still have my own opinion of each individual case. Regardless of the way they had got trapped in the network – leaving either for Macedonia or Kosovo – they have ended up in Albania. I have the intuition and the experience which have always given me a clue to girls’ real motives. I can hardly forget the first woman I met. She was a mature woman with four children who seemed to suffer the separation from her family. There was something wrong, however. The very first attempt to find a job for her brought along my disappointment. Undoubtedly, it was impossible for her to survive with four children and no income. She turned down the offer, the argument being that the job was not prestigious enough. She was right. My disappointment, however, was even greater. Then it occurred to me that it was normal for fear to get the upper hand. She has escaped from nowhere to get nowhere and I was offering her to go back to the starting point of facing the everyday need to survive with no money. If there were an efficient protection system, retraining opportunities, a place to live at, probably these girls would not hesitate as to what to do. The stress and the shock they have lived through are so overwhelming that the key to solving their problem is the subtle approach. Solutions available to offer are not applicable in these situations.

The stories of girls coming back turned out to be both different and similar. Each one of them had the feeling of being robbed, deceived and disappointed. They were trying

to find their own answers to what had happened to them hoping somebody could help them.

What, in my view, is still missing in Bulgaria is adequate help for these girls. It goes without saying that now, as some of them have managed to tear free from forced prostitution, what they need is specialized and complex support. Across the world there are different programs which support the process of resocialization of girls - victims of forced prostitution who want to get back to normal life. In Bulgaria this process is still in its embryo phase. Of course, the state, especially our state which has not yet completed the transitional process, cannot ensure the care for the victims of trafficking and provide ready solutions. Hence the need for non-governmental organizations and similar structures, which are more flexible, more open, more advanced and independent, to step in and fill in the gap.

I was surprised at there being few such organizations in Bulgaria. What was even more surprising, however, was the attitude of governmental institutions towards the problem. Instead of governmental organizations making use of the experience and knowledge of non-governmental ones, their efforts were going different ways and still are.

My expectations have never been that the Police, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and the Border Police would be partners in their efforts to help victims of trafficking and thus give them the chance to go back to normal life. It is, however, inadmissible for the state not to accept the limited experience that has been accumulated and the ongoing attempts to this end by non-governmental organizations. Throughout my involvement with the trafficking issue there were more surprises than I had expected. What makes me happy, however, is that efforts are being made to solve this problem. I truly wish we would skip several years and find ourselves in a society which provides adequate care for women - survivors of violence and trafficking.

I have no doubts this will come true, as almost anybody, with few exceptions, I have worked with on this issue has been receptive. I believe the phase of the first lessons learnt is over. The next phase is joint work.

# **Trafficking in Women and the Possibilities for Legal Protection of the Victims**

Mila Georgieva  
Prosecutor

Up till recently it was only Animus / La Strada and the International Organisation for Migration that were the two organisations dealing with the issue of trafficking in women in Bulgaria. The public opinion was not actively focused on the problem for many reasons. One of them is related to its latent manifestation in Bulgaria. The clear indication of its mechanisms is to be seen only outside the country.

Being taken out of the country by means of tempting job offers with high payment victims of trafficking face the wall of problems as soon as they were far away from their homeland. Away from their family and friends they cannot get timely and effective help.

While the problem was already gaining momentum in countries such as the Check Republic, Poland, Germany, Italy, France, etc. the real content term “trafficking in women” was properly understood only within limited social framework. Moreover, it was for too long a time that our society was not informed about the real nature of this type of crime and its negative implications.

What indeed should have been known with regard to trafficking in women?

First of all, it is a violation of fundamental human rights – the right of freedom.

- upon their arrival traffickers take away women’s passport thus making them dependent on their good will
- they restrict women’s personal freedom by keeping them locked under strict control in secret lodgings
- they take women out to work and keep an eye on them all the time thus preventing any deviation from their duties as prostitutes
- when they are back after their “working hours” each of them is supposed to hand in a certain sum, not less than \$100
- In case of an attempt at escaping or disobedient behaviour, women are subject to physical repression – severe battering in the abdominal area and other parts of the body which are not to be seen under their underwear.

Practice shows that there have even been cases of girls being killed for the purpose of scaring the other “sex-workers”.

The above mentioned basic levers of that business force women into a situation of not being able to overcome the problem and break free from this slavery. One might wonder if there are no law-enforcement and police authorities these women could approach for help. Practice shows, however, that to a certain extent trafficking is a serious offense in the scheme of organized crime and, because of corruption, these authorities cannot provide efficient and timely protection in the above mentioned countries. Moreover, according to some women’s stories there are cases when they are forced to offer services to policemen for free.

Despite all the obstacles to be overcome there is an increasing number of girls who succeed in breaking free from the traffickers’ hegemony, return home and seek



approach the judicial authorities in order to seek punishment for the crime committed against them.

Practice shows, however that it is not so easy to achieve a fair trial and the expected results are not optimistic in relation to the victims' expectations.

One might wonder what the reason for that is, as the crime has been investigated and charges have been raised against the perpetrator. There are witnesses. There are texts in the law which provide for an effective punishment.

Well, this is true. It is also true, however, that traffickers often keep under control the drug trafficking business, too. Hence, these are clients who can afford good lawyers that are well familiar with all the details in the law and can use any loopholes and tricks to slow down the legal proceedings, make it more complicated, bring the case to a point where the deed cannot be proven, which automatically implies closing the case. Even if the case is brought to the courtroom, the trial is usually quite traumatising for the victim.

In cases like this the lawyers will request that the witness be interrogated in the courtroom. She will be asked awkward questions. The whole mechanism of rendering services to clients will be brought to light. An attempt will be made to lay the blame on the victim. In the end there might even be an attempt at using the "performance" scheme - the poor decent man, the trafficker, has been blackmailed by a corrupted young girl in order to provide her with clients.

My long-standing professional experience does not allow me to be optimistic about such a trial having a "happy end" and the victim being protected against the horror memories of her recent slavery.

However, there is some hope. In similar cases, the recently introduced institution of the protected witness can be used. The victim's interrogation is to be conducted only by judges. Yet another source of hope is the fact that ever more often programs like SECI yield results. Traffickers are caught while still on our territory. The international team dealing with trafficking in human beings is familiar with the traffickers' international map, with the links among them, the regions where it is most probable for them to seek victims. As a result of this it is almost on a weekly basis that we learn about newly detected routes.

The struggle against trafficking in women is already on the path towards globalization in our country by means of a close collaboration of our non-governmental organisations with international organizations and the Program of the US Ministry of Justice. This globalisation approach brought the issue up to the attention of the United Nations, which resulted in signing international acts that were signed in Sicily in December 2000. This approach has proven to be the appropriate one and gives us optimism about the problem being solved.

## CASE STUDIES ON TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN IN BULGARIA

**Milena Stateva**  
***Clinical psychologist***

*This article presents the findings of the first Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) in support of women survivors of trafficking in women (TIW) and of women at risk of trafficking in Bulgaria. The number of Bulgarian women trafficked abroad is estimated at about 10,000<sup>2</sup>. Only a small number manage to escape. Most of them remain nameless.*

*The research was conducted by a part from the team of **Animus Association/La Strada programme** (Marina Tzvetkova and Milena Stateva, consulted by Nadia Kozhoubarova) in the confident and protected environment provided by the care programmes of the Rehabilitation Centre for Women, Adolescents and Children Survivors of violence at Animus Association Foundation on behalf of women survivors. It was thus impossible for the team to stay in a neutral position, as required by conventional comprehensive research. There is no information concerning labour, migration and criminal issues, either. Therefore the purpose of the research is not to provide the full picture of trafficking in women in Bulgaria. It aims at describing the survivors' situation from the women's point of view, at studying the situation after their return to the country and identifying the measures to be undertaken to support trafficked women based on their own ideas of rehabilitation. Everything the team of Animus/La Strada knows about TIW in Bulgaria has been learnt from the survivors. The direct involvement in support of women survivors provides the opportunity to Animus/La Strada professionals to represent their point of view and position.*

Being directly involved in the work to support to women survivors of trafficking I have often been in touch with my own strong emotions such as despair, helplessness, sorrow, anger... Many times have I experienced the need to deny in my mind that there is such severe violence as trafficking in women, and many times I have felt the need to do something, even beyond human capacity, to stop this crime. As a psychologist I am aware that these strong emotions are a sign of my client's suffering. I am also aware that most of these emotions have resulted from my clash with the limitations of reality – the impossibility to prevent the pain of so many women, to rescue all survivors or to cure all severe psychological and physical consequences of trafficking. I believe that the only way to offer new opportunities in reality and to bear the suffering of another person without rejection or denial is by means of understanding.

I hope this article will be helpful to all practitioners who face the issue in their work and especially to those from the supportive professions; for the researchers, who have chosen the FPAR methodology even if their interest is not directed towards TIW, as well as for everybody who wants to know more about the issue, the human nature or the research methodology. I hope that by the time you have read through the text many questions and related issues will have arisen, and it will encourage some of you to analyse other aspects or to look for more answers. I also hope that in the end many of you will come up with other ideas for actions in the field of trafficking apart from those outlined here. As far as I am concerned, however, the main aim of the research presented below is to inspire real and effective actions in support of the (potential) survivors.

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<sup>2</sup> This number draws a general conclusion based on the data Animus Association receives from other NGOs about the number of Bulgarian women victims of trafficking in other countries. See also Kozhoubarova, N. *Bulgarian Trafficking in Women: the starting point of La Strada – Bulgaria, 1998*

The research is the result of Nadia Kozhouharova's participation at the FPAR Training implemented by the Global Alliance against Trafficking in women held November 1<sup>st</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup>, 1999. Several months later, GAATW invited *Animus/La Strada* to take part in an international research project, based on the FPAR methodology. Four other countries also took part in it – India, Mongolia, the Philippines, and North Korea. Each of the research projects had different priorities, depending on the priorities of the respective organisation working on it – from work in support of women migrant workers to work with women offering sex services. What they all had in common was the objective of exploring the problem, changing the attitudes of the “researched persons” – representatives of the community and different institutions or the women in unequal position, and initiating activities for solving this problem. Each stage of the research was discussed by e-mail so that each partner was involved in the respective problem and was able to offer ideas and feedback to the research team.

However, its history dates back to the very beginning of *Animus Association's* involvement in the field of trafficking. Being faced with the issue for the first time, the team decided to analyse the situation in Bulgaria and to prepare a report: ***Bulgarian Trafficking in Women: the Starting Point of La Strada – Bulgaria***. More than two years have passed ever since and we are no longer that alone on the side of the survivors. The issue has become tangible in the public space and more specialists are showing willingness to help and understand survivors. However, most of our clients are still alone – marginalised and abandoned. As a whole the society is still unaware of the real nature of their sufferance. Thus, such a detailed research on TIW three years after joining *La Strada Program* was a natural and indispensable continuation as it is also a summary and analysis of this three-year experience. It was Marina Tzvetkova who started the research by designing the project and co-ordinating its implementation with the foreign partners and it was myself that completed it, consulted by Nadia Kozhouharova. However, it was the whole team of Animus Association that participated by means of discussing each step within the team of psychologists, and through the technical support of the rest of our colleagues.

### **Research philosophy and theoretical framework**

Our professional interest is directed towards the psychological trauma. The basic priority of the organisation is trauma recovery for survivors of violence. Thus, the principles of this approach coincide with our professional philosophy, as well as with the methods we used in our work. They are also very close to the good practice in working with women suffering violence.

The research methodology is based on the main principles of the feminist paradigm and the participatory action approach. The starting point is **the significance of gender and gender asymmetry**, which is totally denied in a patriarchal society such as the Bulgarian<sup>3</sup> one. We strongly believe that there are significant differences between the female and male gender. The first group of differences is related to the inequality between genders with regards to power. In our opinion, trafficking in women is the most severe form of gender-based violence, and its roots are found in this imbalance of power. This is also confirmed by data that demonstrates that trafficking in women is most widespread<sup>4</sup> form of trafficking in human beings. However, although gender is the main variable, it is not the only one with regard to trafficking in women; hence, one of the objectives of this research is to identify the other significant variables influencing the issue.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, there is no difference between the words for ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ in the Bulgarian language

<sup>4</sup> Kozhouharova, N. *Bulgarian Trafficking in Women: the Starting Point of La Strada – Bulgaria*, 1998

The second group of differences refers to the way men and women view the world and each other.

*...It is often argued that since gender differences structure personal experience and belief, and male dominance prevails in society as a whole, conventional social science is primarily an expression of men presented as if it were human experience<sup>5</sup>.*

That is why we choose to use the **experiences** of both “researchers” and “the researched” as an alternative to conventional research methods – a source of information embedded in the feminist social science approach as a “significant indicator of the “reality” against which hypotheses are tested<sup>6</sup>.” Such claims are based on the belief that “personal experiences can be neither invalidated nor rejected, because if something was felt it occurred, and if it was felt it was absolutely real for the woman feeling and experiencing it’.” The **participatory dynamic semi-structured interviews** and the **involvement of researchers** in all actions in support of survivors seemed to be the most appropriate way to obtain this information. The **qualitative database content analysis** is the other source of information that is used in this context.

The main aim of the research is to produce knowledge that will be useful in dealing with the problems of women survivors of trafficking in the context of human rights. Therefore, we considered it advisable to “focus neither on the method nor on the experience, but rather seek to correct the experience by the use of method, and the method by the use of experience<sup>8</sup>.” In our opinion, using either the experiential or the conventional methods on their own would not result in a full picture of that aspect of trafficking we intended to analyse. Hence, we also used a **quantitative analysis** of the clients’ database.

**Rejection of the hierarchy in research relationship** is the other principle in the feminist approach we closely followed. We agreed upon the symmetric researcher-researched relationship being more ethical and useful for both objectives – to acquire some knowledge whose source is the experience of the women involved, as well as to support the client’s rehabilitation through her empowerment. The researchers began their work based on the idea that the true experts in this research are the women survivors themselves and the role of the researchers’ team is to facilitate the collection of the data provided by them.

Thus, it also fits with the last distinctive feature of the feminist research methodology – **the emancipation of women as the goal of research and criterion on validity**. We consider women’s empowerment as the first step towards their emancipation. This research also aims to change attitudes by breaking “myths” and bias related to women who are trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation. The encouragement of women survivors to be participants, not the objects of investigation, in this research set the pattern for a new approach in their treatment. Finally, an important point in designing the research conceptual framework was Mies’ statement on the goals of such a research:

*“According to (historical, dialectical and materialist theory of knowledge) the “truth” of a theory is not dependent on the application of certain methodological principles and rules, but on its potential to orient the process of praxis towards progressive emancipation and humanisation.”<sup>9</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> HAMMERSLEY, M. *On Feminist Methodology*, Sociology, vol.26, No2, May 1992, p.187

<sup>6</sup> HARDING, *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press

<sup>7</sup> STANLEY, L. and WISE, S *Breaking out: Feminist consciousness and feminist research*. London: Routledge and Paul, p.53

<sup>8</sup> HAMMERSLEY, M. *On Feminist Methodology*, Sociology, vol.26, No2, May 1992, p.192

<sup>9</sup> MIES, M. “Towards a methodology for feminist research” in Bowles and Duelli Klein (eds), p.124

One of the main goals of our action research is not just to produce knowledge but also to contribute to improving the support provided to survivors.

### **Research implementation**

The research team started its work in April 2000 after a discussion within the whole team of *Animus/La Strada* at which the general areas of project implementation were considered. The preparation phase of the FPAR project included determining the concept of the research, the topics for research and the research methods – semi-structured in-depth interviews, database analysis and case studies<sup>10</sup>. Procedures were established in line with good practices in working with survivors of violence.

**Semi-structured dynamical interviews.** The first method we selected as the most appropriate was the semi-structured dynamic interview. On the one hand, it raised some ethical issues of conflict between AAF's priority of a service providing psychological support and the research itself. That is why, each research action directly relating to a client was discussed in the whole team and was subordinated only to the clients' rehabilitation and only in those cases in which it did not contradict the professional ethics. On the other hand, it is a method, which is also applied to clinical assessments for the purpose of developing a social and emotional support plan. Therefore, in spite of the fact that just five women appeared to be appropriate for being interviewed by the researcher, the whole database of the Centre is built on the grounds of this method.

**Database analysis.** Trafficking is illegal and it is orchestrated by organised crime. There are no data about it; there are no representative statistics. Institutions and organisations, which face this problem (police, legislative authorities, social services, etc.), do not have a data collection system or the data relates only to their service. Meanwhile, trafficking does exist and is continuously on the increase. It is the Rehabilitation Centre at AAF that has the only targeted database in Bulgaria of women survivors of trafficking.

AAF started working on this issue in 1997, when the first women survivors of trafficking accessed the Centre. In 1998 AAF became the Bulgarian partner of the La Strada Program. At the same time, the Centre developed a special care programme for direct support to survivors<sup>11</sup>. Under this programme, depending on their needs, the clients are entitled to social assistance, crisis intervention, counselling, psychotherapy and/or single consultations. There is also a help-line, where women who prefer to stay anonymous can receive emotional support and important information.

According to the results of general review of the AAF record forms that there were 559 contacts with the Centre relating to trafficking in women from the **beginning of 1997** to September **2000**. These include cases of women calling on the help-line, women calling and/or visiting the Centre.

***The Centre's database.*** The Centre's database includes 50<sup>12</sup> case-records of clients of the care programs who visited the Centre until August 2000 and had an in-take interview. In addition, it includes those who were provided with assistance by our social workers or through co-ordination with other services without the women having to actually visit the Centre in person. Records of the clients who visited AAF in 1997 are

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<sup>10</sup> In this article we include just one of the case studies

<sup>11</sup> Financed by NOVIB/MATRA

<sup>12</sup> This number also includes the women who were interviewed and the women whose cases are presented as related stories in the third part of the research

also included in the research, although there was still no well-developed record system. These cases were analysed on the basis of all available data and it was sufficient to collect information on the general topics important for the research objectives. Database analysis was confronted with several difficulties. Unfortunately, much of the data were incomplete, as the forms had been filled in for the purpose of psychotherapeutic and social work. However, these are the only real data available on trafficking in women in Bulgaria. Some of the missing data was reconstructed after consultations with the case managers of the relevant women. This helped us learn more about the personality of each client, her feelings and some missing details in the records. By means of these methods, we were able to provide a picture of trafficking in women in Bulgaria depicted by the clients themselves.

The previous experience of the therapeutic team at the Rehabilitation Centre points to numerous biases against survivors of trafficking, which impact their effective treatment and rehabilitation in Bulgarian society. This results in the lack of information and knowledge about the ways to save them and ensure their further re-socialisation. The purpose of the database analysis is to reveal the real situation. In terms of a way to eliminate prejudices about survivors, identify the groups at highest risk and devise *prevention* strategies, we chose to review our clients' profile by ethnic origin, age, educational background, marital status and family background, as well as to investigate the mechanisms which had been used to recruit them into trafficking.

The second course of the researchers' interest was directed towards improving the survivors's support system. As it was mentioned above, the number of Bulgarian women survivors is estimated at about 10,000. Compared to this, the number of women who reach the Centre is insignificant. It is very difficult and risky for women to escape and only a small number of women reached *Animus/La Strada*. Hence the small number in research sample compared to the scale of the problem. Nevertheless we believe it does not diminish the value of the findings, since the focus is on qualitative information. However, the knowledge about the countries of destination, the ways our clients survive and rescue and reach our service helps us build an effective strategy to further develop the network of organisations with which we work. Identifying the services used by clients after entering the Rehabilitation Centre provides data on their specific needs.

***Help-line database.*** AAF's Help-Line for Women Survivors of Violence - domestic, sexual and trafficking, is the first one in Bulgaria. It started operating in October 1997 and since March 1998 has been running as a 24-hour program. In early 2000 a widespread awareness campaign was launched jointly with the International Organisation for Migration. 509 calls related to trafficking have been registered since June 1998 when *Animus Association* joined the La Strada Program. As the Help-line is a program ensuring anonymity for its clients, although we know the number of the calls made, we are not able to extrapolate how many people they relate to. Therefore, it is only general trends that are registered through the analysis of the database. We identify four general categories – calls from potential victims, calls from women survivors of trafficking, calls from relatives and other related calls.

**Case Studies.** Case studies are the third source of information included in this research. These are the analysis of stories of women who have visited the Centre more than once (i.e. have repeatedly used the service on a different occasion, sometimes a year or so later). This is a sign of experiencing a deeper and permanent crisis following the initial

short-term care provided by the Centre and points to the need of long-term rehabilitation for women survivors of trafficking.

On the other hand, the purpose of presenting these four stories of women survivors of trafficking is to fill in this part of the research, which is still unclear – the women's situation after leaving the Rehabilitation Centre. As a rule, we do not know what the subsequent experience of clients who are survivors of TIW is. Upon returning home, some of them fall in isolation, as there are still places in Bulgaria with bad or no telephone communications. Some of the women are illiterate, which makes communication by correspondence difficult.

According to our hypothesis, the hostile social and economic environment, as well as the lack of a supportive environment, does not allow the women to be integrated into society after escaping from trafficking. Most often the only opportunity available to them is to go back to prostitution and suffer violence again. We regard the lack of supportive families and friends, as well as the lack of appropriate care provided by government institutions and of long-term rehabilitation programs as the key factors for these circumstances. As mentioned above, one of the characteristics of the psychological trauma after suffering trafficking is the inability to stay in a trusting and long-term relationship. It is due to the lack of trust in people in general and the feeling of hopelessness – the belief that nobody can help you. Therefore, what the women need is a stable relationship with a caring person or an experienced specialist to stay with her regardless of her choice. The case study illustrates this process and complements the picture of TIW in Bulgaria as shown in the database analysis.

Describing these stories, the researcher was confronted with many of the difficulties described above. It is very hard for women to recover their memories and to describe the situation, especially if more time has elapsed. Human consciousness tends to split and forget the most painful and traumatic information. It often happens that women are not sure about the time the event occurred or cannot recall the sequence of events or other details. Sometimes they can either invent something or forget something else due to the trauma they have suffered. The researcher uses records and talks with the case managers. However, the presented case studies tell but a part of the story. We are aware of this being the reality of trafficking.

### **Data analysis and findings**

Survivors of trafficking who approach the Rehabilitation Centre are in a state of acute emotional crisis. They are ashamed of what has happened to them and can hardly tell what they have been forced to do. They feel angry with themselves, with the perpetrators and with the world. They are swamped by the fear of being punished by the pimps, of being blamed, betrayed or judged. They do not have either money, an ID or a place to go, which makes them feel very insecure. They are exhausted as a result of the long way back home and the numerous interviews with police and border control officers they have had abroad and in Bulgaria. Some of them need treatment in a hospital or a mental health institution because of the severity of their physical and psychological traumas. Others prefer to go home immediately after the meeting with a consultant. There have also been women who have called but have not turned up at the Centre. All these make it difficult or sometimes impossible to collect all the information needed for the purposes of the research.

**Interviews.** Marina conducted a total of 5 interviews during the period April – August 2000. Three of the women were Bulgarians, one of them being trafficked internally in the country. The other two came from the former USSR and had intended to pass through the country but had fallen into TIW in Bulgaria. The team considered including these two women in the research as indicative based on the similarities between their situation in the Newly Independent States and the one of the Bulgarian women survivors. The situation of these women represents three different aspects of trafficking in women in Bulgaria.

The first two women arrived in May 2000 after escaping from trafficking with the assistance of the International Organisation of Migration. In early June 2000, a woman who had suffered internal trafficking in Bulgaria was rescued by another client of *Animus* who was a survivor of trafficking and had escaped with the assistance of the police. These interviews were not planned in advance and they took place in July 2000. They were conducted in two parts, as the women had been provided with crisis intervention outside the Centre's main programmes. They also had accommodation and social support ensured. Marina also provided additional support by means of social advocacy for their human rights while the women reported their situation to the police - one of the women had suffered severe psychological trauma, which had resulted in a psychotic crisis. Thus the researcher was also an active participant in meeting their immediate needs in spite of not being a practitioner from the supportive professions.

All of the women had had no documents and had lived under very bad conditions - they had been threatened and beaten. Four of them had suffered sexual violence by their pimps. They had not been allowed to go out and use the phone. Four of them had escaped with the help of the police while one had managed to escape by herself. Three of the women were afraid to go back home but the others were not, as they had been trafficked on their way abroad, not in their country of origin. All of them wanted to find a job and have an independent life. The data from the interviews identified unemployment and the wish for a better life as the main factors contributing to the vulnerability of women to trafficking. Most of the interviewed women had a bad life style and were seeking for a better life. Three of them (all Bulgarian women interviewed) did not have secondary education. All of the interviewed women wanted to work. They all wanted to tell experience and share this with other woman in order to prevent them from trafficking. They all believed that if the economic situation in their country had been better they would not have become victims of trafficking.

**Database analysis.** A total of **50** case records have been analysed. This includes **42** Bulgarian women (84%), and **8** women (16%) from the Newly Independent States. Bulgaria was a transit country for **4** of the foreign women (8%) and a receiving country for the other **4** (8%). All the **8** were assisted for their safe return home by *Animus/La Strada*. **4** (16%) of the Bulgarian women have become victims of internal trafficking, **1** of them has been subsequently sold abroad.

As the work in support of survivors of organised crime is very dangerous in spite of security measures, currently *Animus/La Strada* focuses its work mainly on Bulgarian women trafficked abroad. This does not imply, however, that Bulgaria is only a country of origin. It is rather the reverse that holds true – the fact that women trafficked in and through the country have started accessing the service may be considered as evidence of Bulgaria becoming a country of transit as well. Our experience also shows that almost all



of our clients are trafficked first within Bulgaria and then abroad. As trafficking channels are not directly related to our work, we do not hold written data to confirm this.

One of the main myths in Bulgarian society is that trafficked women are only ethnic minorities, uneducated, very young girls from villages. This is not confirmed by the data we received. **7%** of the 43 Bulgarian women (3) come from Sofia, the capital. **55%** (23) come from other towns and **38%** (16) – from villages. These figures show that most of the women who have used our service come do not come from the capital city, but from other cities and towns, fewer - from villages. However, as the Centre is based in Sofia, it is quite for women to be concerned about confidentiality being ashamed of what has happened to them.

**7** of the survivors are minority women (14%). The results of the 1992 census in Bulgaria shows the basic minority groups (Turkish and Roma) constitute 13% of the population, which suggests that women from ethnic minorities are at no greater risk than Bulgarians. However, the research sample being so small, this conclusion cannot be fully relied upon.

**Chart 1** A general overview of the data shows that women in the research were aged **15 - 40** and Chart 1 clearly shows that women of all age groups are represented. This finding contests the media image of trafficked “girls”. However, the chart points to the ones at highest risk as being the adolescents in the **15 - 21** age group (50%), followed by women aged **21 - 30** (20%), who can be viewed as a group at second highest risk. The third group of middle-aged women aged **30 - 40** is also at a considerable risk (16%).

There were no education data for **26** of the women (52%). **5** women had graduated high school, (10%). **9** women (18%) had had to interrupt their studies because of trafficking, economic or other reasons. There were **8** schoolgirls who had wanted to graduate high school (16%). **1** woman had a university degree (2%), and one was a university student. If we take into account only the women for whom we have data concerning their educational background the picture will become clearer:

<i>Reported: <b>24:</b></i>
<i>Primary education: <b>9 (37.5%)</b></i>
<i>Schoolgirls: <b>8 (33.4%)</b></i>
<i>High school: <b>5 (20.8%)</b></i>
<i>Higher Education: <b>1 (4.2 %)</b></i>
<i>Students: <b>1 (4.2%)</b></i>

Thus, we can see that more then 70% of the clients who have submitted this information have only primary education, either because their education was interrupted or because they were still attending school. This result correlates with the age distribution of the sample. On the one hand, it is evidently related to the age of most of the women (50% percentage of the women aged 15 - 21). On other hand, the lower education makes women more vulnerable to unemployment and therefore to being deceived with an offer for a better job abroad.

With regard to the women’s marital status, we found out that the number of women who were or had been married amounted to **13** (26%). At the time of their involvement in the TIW **5** women had been married or had lived together with a male partner (10%). **6** women were divorced or lived separated from their husbands (12%). **2** of the women were widows (4%). There were **25** unmarried women (50%). We did not have information about **12** women or 24% of the total number. There were girls under **16** who had already been married, as well as middle-aged women who had not been. Hence marital status cannot be considered a significant variable.

**13** women (26%) had children (regardless of the marital status). While they were in a situation of trafficking their relatives took care of the children. The pimps often controlled the women by threats to kill or kidnap their children, thus forcing them into sexual exploitation.

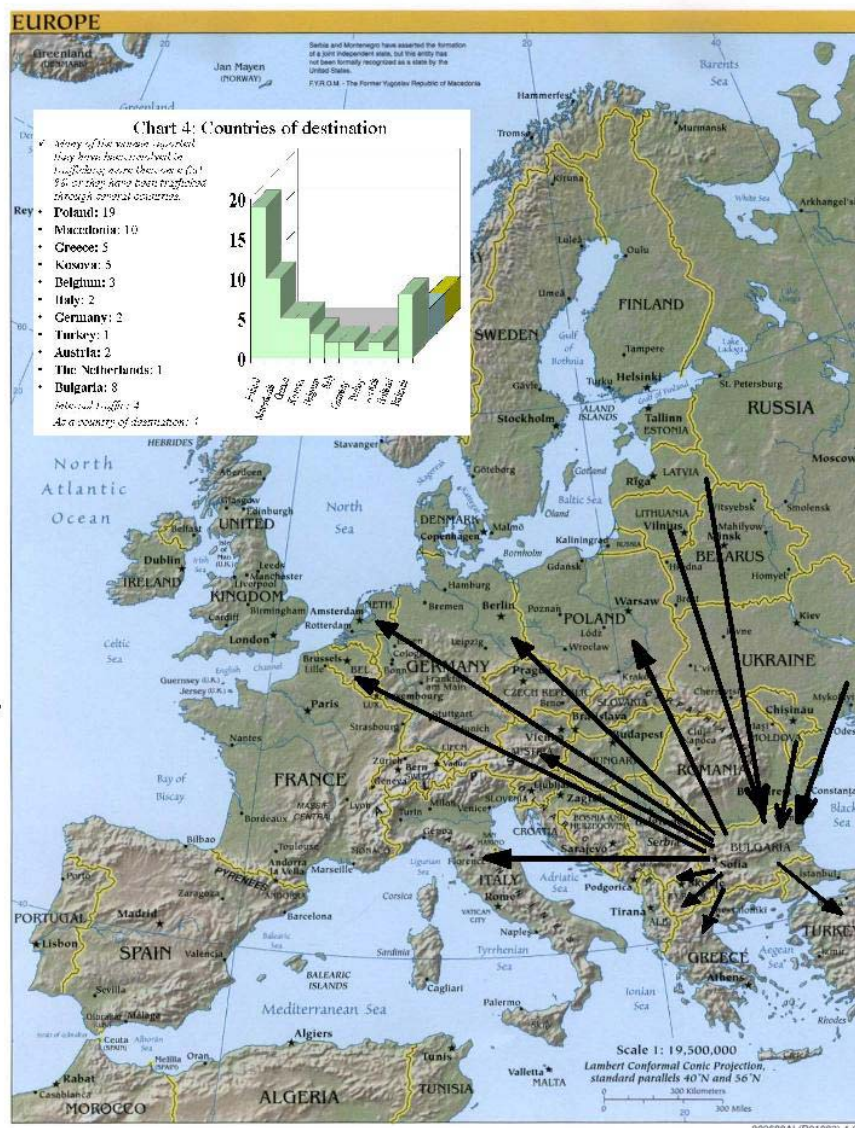
**Chart 2** The data about the women's family background proved to be very important. There was no written information about the generic families of **23** of them (46%). **10** women had been brought up in families with severe forms of domestic violence (43.5%). This included **4** women who had suffered domestic violence (17%). **3** (13%) of the women had been subjected to incest in childhood as a form of domestic violence. The third group of **3** women (13%) reported incest and rape in later childhood.

These data point to a clear picture of the relationship between the various forms of violence and trafficking in women. That is why we regard our psychotherapeutic work with women and adolescent survivors of domestic and sexual violence as being also preventive with regard to trafficking.

**3** (13%) of the women had been brought up in families of separated or divorced parents (without data for domestic violence). There was **1** orphan woman who had lost both parents in her childhood. There were **8** (34.4%) women brought up by a single parent. Out of these, **2** had more than 3 siblings (8.7%). **3** women had been brought up in a traditional nuclear family (13%) - see again Chart 2.

These results demonstrate that an unstable family structure may, to a certain degree, influence future involvement in trafficking, as domestic violence can be considered as one of the main factors. Analysing the results in terms of women's rehabilitation and further re-socialisation, it is obvious that the majority of our clients do not enjoy a supportive environment to build their new lives on upon their return home.

**Chart 3** 35 of the 50 women in the research sample have reported how they were involved in trafficking. Most of them (14 women representing 39%) have been forcibly involved **through kidnapping and coercion**. The second big group consists of 12 women (33%) who have been deceived with promises **for a better life and a job**. 8 of these 12 women (16%) were long-term unemployed. The third group includes 8 women **sold by their relatives, boyfriends or husbands** (22%). These are the cases when domestic violence again interweaves with trafficking in women. Two women have been involved otherwise: one as **a tourist**, and the other has been coerced by **blackmailing** for financial debts.



Analysing the data about the countries of destination it needs to be emphasized that many of the women have been involved in trafficking more than once (20 %) or they have been trafficked to several countries. It is one of the psychological ways perpetrators use to submit the women to their will. Thus, regardless country they have been taken to, the situation is the same -

they are just nobody<sup>13</sup>.

The analysis shows that the women who access the Rehabilitation Centre have escaped mainly from countries in Central and Eastern Europe. It does not imply the TIW from Bulgaria is directed only to these countries. There are several other related influence. In the first place, there are close relationships established with other *La Strada* teams, as well as the contacts with the Bulgarian Embassies and Consulates in these countries, especially in Poland (19 women - 38%), as shown in the chart. A second factor is the dynamics of the development of organised criminal networks in Eastern Europe and the countries in which they are active. 5 women (10%) survived trafficking in Greece, 1 woman had been trafficked to Turkey, which are both neighbouring countries. Trafficking in women for the purpose of sexual exploitation is part of illegal migration as a whole. A third factor is related to the political developments and the crisis in our region. For example, after KFOR entered Macedonia and Kosova, the number of rescued girls increased (5 women - 10%). 10 women (20%) were forced into sexual exploitation in Western Europe - 3 in Belgium, 2 in Italy, 2 in Germany, 1 in the

<sup>13</sup> See *Tchomarova, M.* What do women survivors in trafficking suffer and why?

Netherlands. Therefore, another aspect to be kept in mind before drawing any conclusions is related to policies in countries like Belgium and The Netherlands, where survivors are supported by the state and have the opportunity either to return safely or to stay there as legal emigrants.

**Chart 5** A clear and very interesting picture appears in revealing the mechanisms of escape. As far as these mechanisms are concerned, we have information relating to 36 women. 12 women (33%) were able to escape by themselves, with the support of accidental people and clients. In our opinion, this is a strategy of escape that appears to be effective, although women find it difficult to trust others. It can be improved by involving more clients and accidental people, the society being made more aware of the benefits of such assistance, as well as how important the proper understanding of women survivors is. However, at present most of the women who have escaped have done so as a result of actions by the police (or military structures, e.g. KFOR), the Border Police, and National Service for Combating Organised Crime, etc. – 22 women (61%). There were 2 women rescued by their relatives (6%). There may be two different reasons for this. The first is that TIW is directed by organised crime and it is very dangerous for the relatives to undertake direct action by themselves, since the perpetrators often threaten them. Moreover, the traffickers have an extensive network all over the world and it is almost impossible for the average citizen to follow their channels. Another possible reason could be their family background. As it was shown above, most women did not enjoy a supportive environment or families to undertake such actions.

Before this research started, one of our hypotheses as psychologists was that the most likely unconscious mechanisms for escape would be for women to get so sick or pregnant that they were no longer fit to work<sup>14</sup>. It turned out that 3 of the women had got pregnant in a situation of trafficking and 3 had been in a very bad mental and physical state upon arrival. Thus, our hypothesis was confirmed to a great extent.

**Chart 6** It was very important for us to analyse the way clients had reached *Animus/La Strada*. There are very well developed NGOs, as well as adequate legislation enabling their work in many countries. That is why more than half of the clients (58%), 29 women, had been referred to us by **other NGOs**. Throughout the three-year work of *Animus/La Strada* we established not only contacts but also well developed working procedures with other NGOs and with some governmental services and institutions. Thus 9 of our clients (18%) had got in touch with the Centre through **Bulgarian embassies and consulates**. It is nearly impossible for women survivors of trafficking, who succeed in escaping to return back home without contacting these services. An action that could be recommended in this direction is to extend the network not only by disseminating information, but also by enhancing personal contacts with the responsible officials. The **police** had referred 5 women (10%). This is a new development in Bulgaria. For example, comparing Charts 5 and 6 gives us grounds to conclude that foreign police very often refer clients to NGOs, since the greatest number of our clients escaped due to the intervention of the police and then contacted our service through foreign NGOs. 7 women (14%) contacted us through their **relatives**. Some of the relatives called us after the women had been rescued and needed consultation for developing a security plan or in relation to PTSD<sup>15</sup> symptoms which had emerged. Others contacted us with the request to support their efforts to bring back a woman to

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<sup>14</sup> See Tchomarov, M. What do women survivors in trafficking suffer and why?

<sup>15</sup> Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder



Bulgaria, the woman thus becoming our client. The third group called us after their daughters who had previously been our clients had once again disappeared or fallen into a new crisis.

**Chart 7** The care programs of the Rehabilitation centre are designed on the basis of an individual approach towards each client depending on her needs. Therefore, we assessed that the analysis of the services used by the women will give a clear picture of their concrete needs after their return. As most of the women do not come from Sofia (94%) and the majority would rather return to their birthplaces, the biggest number of the clients (40) have used the social program (80%). Upon returning the women are alone, they have lost too much from their previous life (even the memories of it), without shelter, ID, money, food, etc. Their acute social crisis and the trauma of the severe violence they have experienced are closely related to their emotional needs. Recent research in other areas shows that timely crisis intervention reduces the severity of later traumatic symptoms and can be viewed as a prophylactic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and its consequences. **17 women (34%)** received **crisis intervention** and **13 women (26%)** received just **one-time consultations**. **6 (12%)** of our clients were able to stay longer in the city in order to use the **psychotherapeutic and counselling** program<sup>16</sup>. It is obvious from the figures above that many of the women have suffered a series of traumas since early childhood. Psychotherapy is the only way for these symptoms to be overcome. However, in order to be effective it requires a stable social environment. This is extremely hard in the Bulgarian situation, as the women have to struggle for their everyday survival. In general, the tendency is for the social program and crisis intervention to be the first step in survivors' rehabilitation. Psychological counselling and one-time consultations are aimed at solving women's concrete problems (e.g. making a decision) after the crisis has passed.

**Help-line Database.** The Help-line database includes **509** calls related to trafficking for the period June 1998 - September 2000. **37%** of them are calls from **potential victims** of trafficking. They discuss issues their motivation for going abroad with the consultant. It is possible that some of the women who call are survivors of other kinds of violence (see results in the above section) and this may be their reason for making such a decision. If this appears to be the case, the consultants are trained to work with other forms of violence – sexual or domestic – and to motivate the woman to look for specialised direct help. It could also be a decision made as a result of another kind of personal crisis. The aim then is that the caller should be facilitated to make an informed choice before going abroad. Other related issues are security and reducing potential risks. Another field to discuss is the actions to be undertaken in case of becoming a victim of trafficking. The main purpose is for the women to know that they are entitled to support and understanding. The consultants are also able to give information regarding labour legislation, contracts to be signed, etc.

**Chart 8** There have been 49 calls (**10%**) from women, who **are currently in a situation of trafficking** or have recently escaped from it. In the former case the women calls in a situation of crisis due to the urgent need to escape or just in order to ask for any kind of information, which could help her make up her mind – escape with a risk to her life or stay surviving but coerced. This conversation requires different skills from the consultant - assess the risk to the woman and quickly identify and provide the right information.

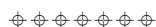
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<sup>16</sup> The total number of women here is more than 50 because some women used more than one service

The third group of calls on the Help-line are the ones by the **relatives** of victims and/or potential victims. There have been 163 such calls (**32%**). These are relatives concerned about young women who want to go abroad being convinced that they are in no danger. Yet another part of calls comes from relatives who are looking for missing girls. These are the more difficult ones. The consultant has to deal with the feelings of loss and despair of parents and friends and encourage them to undertake particular steps.

The fourth group of calls comes from **people who are interested** in the issue and who just want to share their opinion on trafficking in women or our work, or calls from people who misunderstood the help-line, thinking it offers jobs abroad, for example. These have been 106 calls or **21%** of the total.

Thus, it may be concluded that at present the Help-line is engaged mainly in prevention work with regard to trafficking. The comparison of the calls by type throughout the three years shows that despite of the dynamics of other calls, the number of calls from the victims has remained consistent. Since the beginning of 2000, the number of calls from potential victims, relatives and other people has increased. This is probably related to the launching of the awareness campaign conducted by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), which has actively promoted the help line throughout the whole country. Our hypothesis is that the number of calls from victims has not increased, since the help-line number has not been widely publicised abroad. An appropriate action to undertake is to develop a special strategy to reach this type of client.



### **Maria's story**

*Here is one of the stories presented as a case study in the research. Some of the personal details and the name of the woman are changed and others have not been mentioned in order to observe our clients' dignity and confidentiality. Anyway, it reveals the typical mechanisms of involvement into trafficking and describes events that have really happened. This story illustrates what we mean by saying that TIW does not start just with the emergence of forced prostitution and does not end just with rescuing the survivors.*

When Maria contacted the Rehabilitation Centre she was a 17-year old girl. A year before, she had fallen in love with a Roma man. Because of his ethnicity she refused to introduce him to her family. She was born in a small village, where she lived with her parents and younger brother. Maria was a good student in school, however she only managed to attend school for 8 years as her family was not able to afford it. She was quite an aspiring girl. This may have been the reason for Maria to get easily seduced with promises for a better life, a good car and money for studies.

One day she left with her boyfriend without letting anybody know about this. For 8 months there was no sign of her. Later it appeared that she had been locked for a few weeks in an apartment in a big resort town and then was trafficked into a western country with a false ID as she was underage. Then she arrived in another country with the same person who had promised her that this time she would work as a baby-sitter. In the meantime her parents had informed the police and an investigation had started.

Maria was found accidentally working under a false name on the streets of the capital of a Central-European country. With the help of the Bulgarian Consul there her personality was identified. She was in a state of shock and with severe physical traumas. She was

brought to a shelter for women survivors of trafficking and spent 45 days due to the local law for protecting victims of sexual exploitation and trafficking. According to the data provided by the social workers and doctors of the shelter she was very perplexed and it was very difficult to talk to her - even the Bulgarian interpreter had difficulties talking to her. The only thing she shared was that she had made a big mistake and her relatives had fallen victims to the situation. Sometimes she said that her parents were dead, sometimes she used to say that there was no one to accept her back. She desperately wanted to go home, being unaware that she could not do that without any papers or money. Several times she was caught at the front door ready to leave. Due to her strange behaviour Maria was hospitalised in a psychiatric clinic until her return to Bulgaria.

The organisation of Maria's arrival began with *Animus/La Strada* establishing several contacts with the National Police Directorate. The main issues that were discussed were what could be done in order to provide protection and shelter for her during the first days upon her arrival in Bulgaria. We contacted the Head of the Security Department, the Head of the Passport and Visa Department, the Head of the Press-Centre of the Police and the Head of the "Transient Lodging Centre" at the Police. The information they got was that the Police could arrange protection only if there was immediate menace to her life, proved by unconditional evidence. In the meantime, it appeared that the "Transient Lodging Centre", where we hoped shelter could be ensured, accepted only criminals without documents by force of a court ruling.

We did not have difficulties finding Maria's parents through the local administration of the village although the family did not have a telephone. We arrange their trip to Sofia and accommodation so that they could meet their daughter at the airport. They were also provided with an hour-and-a-half session to be prepared for what had happened to Maria, what trafficking means (that this is a crime against their daughter) and what would be the consequences for her mental condition.

The next task was to organise her treatment in a Bulgarian hospital after her arrival. A meeting was held with the head of the Women's Section at a Psychiatric Clinic in Sofia. On one side, PTSD symptoms are often confused with other psychotic conditions, as it is not a particularly popular diagnosis with Bulgarian psychiatrists, which implied a potential confusion with the treatment. On the other hand, hospitalisation procedures are very bureaucratic and difficult to manage especially for people in the situation Maria and her parents were in.

Finally Maria came back by plane, accompanied by a social worker because of her poor mental state. She was allowed across the border with a special document called a pass-avan, issued by the Bulgarian embassy (since she did not hold a passport). Maria was examined in the hospital by the psychiatrist on duty, who concluded there was no need of hospitalisation. Thus she went home together with her parents.

A week later her parents called us because Maria's mental state had deteriorated. We contacted the Head of the Psychiatric Healthcare Centre in a town close to Maria's village. After contacting the psychiatrist and providing him with the information needed, Maria was hospitalised in the Ward for Borderline States.

### *Second encounter with Maria*

There was no sign of her and her family for almost three years until we received a letter from Maria, asking for help. By that time she was already 20 years old. The letter read that one day she had taken a bottle of acid in the restaurant where worked and had attempted a suicide by drinking it up. She was not aware of what she was doing. Later she remembered that she had just wanted to die. She had burnt her gullet and needed a serious operation. Now she was handicapped.

The doctors, her employees and acquaintances had blamed her for it. They had been angry believing her a stupid girl as she had caused this trauma by herself. For most of the people she was not entitled to benefits. We checked the procedures and started actions insisting on the Health Care Commission recognising her right to social support. In the meantime her mother had contacted us being worried about her condition and not knowing how to help her daughter.

*Animus/La Strada* helped Maria and her mother by contacting a local NGO trained to adopt our model of service. They started collecting all the necessary documentation in order to help them.

### **Conclusion**

Trafficking in women is not a new phenomenon in Bulgaria, despite the fact that for a long time it was outside the public domain. There are several political dimensions that underline the trends in trafficking in women concerning Bulgaria. The transition of the Bulgarian economy led to an increase in poverty among women by limiting employment opportunities for women and increasing their economic marginalisation. Economic instability and decline and the related drop in the income needed for economic survival, contribute to women's marginalisation in society. These major social factors enhance the vulnerability of women and girls to illegal trafficking and economic exploitation.

An important development of recent years is the ongoing shift in Bulgaria from a country of origin of women trafficked abroad, towards a transit country for women trafficked from elsewhere. The crisis in the Balkans, which started with the war in Yugoslavia, has led to a situation whereby trafficking in women both from and through Bulgaria has increased.

There are three main groups of women trafficked in Bulgaria: Bulgarian women trafficked abroad where they are forced mainly into sexual exploitation<sup>17</sup>; Bulgarian women who are forced into prostitution in the country and are later trafficked out of the country; and foreign women who are trafficked through or in Bulgaria.

An important fact about TIW in Bulgaria is that it does not end with the return of the women's to their homes. They have no protection, their chances to survive and further develop are but limited, which leads to the risk of being trafficked again. Due to the predominant patriarchal attitudes, survivors of trafficking often experience re-victimisation – they are blamed by their relatives, the institutions and the society in

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<sup>17</sup> TIW in women includes but is not limited to sexual exploitation only. There are also slavery-like practices and forced marriage. However, being forced into sexual exploitation is the most severe form and therefore the survivors' needs are to a greater extent beyond the capacity of their own resources to cope on their own. The majority of the Centre's clients are survivors of trafficking who were forcibly exploited sexually.



general for what has happened to them. Being in an emotional crisis<sup>18</sup> and suffering the acute symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), survivors are not able to cope with the real burden of their new life by themselves. Going back to the terrible but familiar situation of being sexually exploited very often seems to them the only way to stay alive. The symptoms of their psychological trauma – lack of faith in the future and a sense of the meaninglessness of life, inability to accept trusting relationships, indistinct personal boundaries, waned ability to assess risky situations - make them more vulnerable to further abuse and to repeated trafficking.



The research approach we have applied is different from conventional research methods. It was devised within a feminist paradigm and the emphasis is on qualitative and rich material, rather than quantitative data. In our opinion, the numbers alone do not adequately describe the awful situation these women find themselves in. Statistics are faceless - these women have real stories and real problems. The objective of the research is to tell these stories to a wider audience.

This research represents only a part of the overall picture of trafficking in Bulgaria inasmuch as it is based on the stories of women clients of *Animus/La Strada*. These stories reveal how difficult it is for Bulgarian women to believe they have the opportunity to be self-sufficient and have a better life in their own country. It also demonstrates how difficult it is for them to survive after suffering violence in a neglecting and hostile environment.

Solving the issue is impossible unless efforts are made to empower women by means of an individual care programme for each woman who has survived trafficking or who is exposed to a potential trafficking risk. Meanwhile changes in the relevant legislation, as well as awareness raising among the practitioners who face the issue, the media and the society in general. This is one of the main principles on which *Animus/La Strada* activity is based.

The media represent a very narrow and often negative image of the type of women who are trafficked. They are portrayed as young, illiterate girls from minority ethnic groups and rural areas. The research studied this myth and the findings show that women of all ages and educational backgrounds can be at risk of trafficking. It also appeared that there is no relation with their urban or rural background predicting such risk.

What is the situation women are faced with upon returning home? It is difficult for them to go back - it does not matter whether they live in cities, towns or villages - there will always be people who know them. On the one hand, they can easily be found by the pimps. On the other hand, they feel guilty and ashamed as people know what has happened to them. They are left alone “on the street” and end up going back to the situation of being trafficked. It turns out that the situation of trafficking, in spite of all the atrocities involved, is the only way of surviving the women are aware of.

One of the important objectives of the research was to generate knowledge, which can act as a catalyst for change in the support services available to survivors. Our analysis

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<sup>18</sup> For more information about the psychological symptoms as a result of trafficking see Stoycheva, N. *Developing care programs for women survivors of trafficking at Animus Association*; Kozhouharova, N. *How La Strada helps survivors of trafficking in women*

reveals the need for long-term rehabilitation programs to be developed in Bulgaria in order for women survivors of trafficking to have a chance for re-integration into society.

There is also a need for witness protection programmes to be developed. Women who testify against traffickers currently expose themselves and their families to a considerable risk. The government has yet to develop adequate mechanisms to solve the issue and ensure adequate protection for victims. Survivors of trafficking have numerous needs - this leads to the conclusion that a multi-institutional approach is required, encompassing medical and social services, education, the police and media that are sensitive and report the real facts, not sensational and stereotyping.

This research offers a new view on the data available on TIW. A survey conducted by IOM-Bulgaria back in 1999 demonstrated that although women are aware of the risks of trafficking, a substantial number of them are willing to run that risk. Some of our clients were also aware of this risk, but had never been aware it might affect them. The problem is not only the lack of information. Women need to be empowered to take advantage of that information. In addition, while there still prevails the perception (and reality) of the lack of chances for women in Bulgaria, the lure of the West and of having a job abroad will be the key factor. One of the approaches we suggest is that the emphasis in prevention work should be focused on empowering women to use this information to reduce the risk. Women will still be seek opportunities for performance elsewhere regardless of the frightening implications in case the economical and social situation in Bulgaria and the Balkans is still in a transition phase.