

Opinion – Reflections on the Global Sex Trade and the War in Ukraine

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, MAR 7 2025

Rhetoric on Ukraine is at a high. A presidential shift in policy has the left in the U.S. (and in some parts of Europe) proverbially up in arms. Dissent and argument appear to reign. Where does the truth lie? In order to offer an answer, let me turn back 25 years. Shortly after completing my dissertation research, while still abroad, I briefly considered starting a second research project on human trafficking and sex trade in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) to be completed in subsequent iterations (later cancelled as a project for perhaps obvious reasons). To this end, I did a few informal pre-interview meetings with a couple of actively working prostitutes, and with a couple of their managers (men and women who we informally call, “pimps”). A few additional people gathered in the conversations, also informally. Most of them were nice enough people; to them, it was an industry. As I have mentioned on occasion to students, in comparative politics when we are out in the world making observations, sometimes we see things about which no one really wants to know.

The upshot of those meetings was a singular claim (whether true or not) that Ukraine was, in the North and in the West, a primary crossroads of human trafficking for slavery of men and women, or sex trade itself, always also slavery, with final destinations in MENA. I did not inquire regarding male slavery for labor (or for sex trade). However, if women came from the Northern Hemisphere of Asia or Europe, East or West, I was told, they either traveled from Ukraine or via Ukraine. Most women where I was located (not to be disclosed) were Russian or Eastern European, and the general agreement was that they had all traveled via Ukraine. Ukraine was the last “hub” before the geographical turn South, as far as maps and travel, to MENA (note, source relates to non-MENA human trafficking in Ukraine, see title, and pages 11-12). Many women in the “industry” claimed to be Ukrainian even when they were from further parts of Russian Asia, or elsewhere. In that way, if something went wrong, they would be returned to Ukraine from whence they could be trafficked elsewhere, or returned toward their homes.

Material source information is sparse to confirm or refute these accounts. However, Ukraine is listed as 4th in Europe and Central Asia for holding slaves within its own national territories, 7th in 2018 (the number is even greater in nearby Turkmenistan, and neighboring Belarus, see pages 92-93). More accounts appear regarding human trafficking and sex trade in Ukrainian context in domestic terms.

Much to my dismay in the short-lived research project mentioned above, I discovered that one of the “managers” was a more distant cousin known to me. It takes a lot of people to make function this global industry; we likely all have relatives of some sort involved in it, knowingly or unknowingly. Some are forced into it, and some go willingly. Which, we may never know. (I also have relatives who are saints and Buddhist monks.) In terms of research reports, one might say that he and I had a few words regarding the general advisability of human trafficking and sex trade as appropriate industries for his (very well-educated) time and efforts. He gave me an impassioned justification for his work – he treated the women nicely, others would not – and he told me that this research project was too dangerous for me. Other people might not be as patient, and he could not always protect me from my own forthrightness. I was grateful for the advice. I was left very saddened by the state of the world in which human trafficking and slavery remained a dominating force for so many women and men, was so highly organized, and appeared to reflect a significant percentage of the gross domestic products of some countries. GDP figures in this context are usually masked and hidden. Most sources that I was able to locate indicate that women are

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disproportionately affected by human trafficking and sex trade, globally; however, it is important to note that men are also affected by each.

His account roughly corresponded with those found in other accounts regarding human trafficking and sex trade as industries. The story for men is just as dismal, but I limit my comments to women. The upshot is, thinking in terms of the Northern Hemisphere in Asia and Europe, on which we receive far fewer reports: Opportunity, local arbitrary rule, local tyrannies, or all of the above, are so severe in some locales in this world still today that – when “managers” arrive with “opportunities,” sometimes hidden and sometimes accurately expressed, offering global human trafficking and sex trade with high dollar rewards – some women jump at the chance to have a way to continue Life. However bleak and prone to severe illness it may be better than that available where they are, given that abuse, and even physical torture, of outcast women still exist in hidden quadrants in most societies. The majority of us live peaceably in this same global society and remain blissfully unaware of such conditions.

Jump forward to more recent years. I had a conversation with a Ukrainian leader who I met in passing when I spent a couple of weeks in Eastern Europe. I asked him about Ukraine as a human trafficking and sex trade hub in the North and in the West. I asked: why not more agriculture? Why not hi-tech? Why not *anything* more wholesome and licit than human trafficking of slaves for labor and/or for sex trade, globally? He said that he could not ask the Ukrainian people to engage in more agriculture than they did already after so many years of collective agricultural farms under (historical) Soviet rule, which had amounted to nothing less than slavery of Ukrainians. Some people still felt a deep emotional aversion – perhaps even a trauma response – with regard to agricultural labor. They preferred to use slaves (I was not certain if the person was seeking to irritate, or speaking of simple facts). Not everyone loved agricultural labor (as I do, having grown up on a small informal farm); those who could do it did so. Hi-tech? Tech was there, but it was not enough to keep criminals from using Ukraine in this way. This particular illegal trade was not unlike the drug trade, this leader averred; it was an opportunity that some people did not have the will to reject. Did Ukraine take kickbacks or “tax revenues” from that industry? No answer. What of Ukraine as a refuge, playground, or organizing stage – for non-state actors? No answer.

The agriculture sector is an important industry in Ukraine. According to the World Bank, it represents 60.3% of its merchandise exports (some other sources claim that it makes something in the 40s regarding percentile), while agriculture is less than 7.4% of Ukraine’s gross domestic product (a slightly larger percentage than the position of that industry in the U.S., although the dollar number in the U.S.’s far larger economy is in the trillions). At its height in 2015, before the war with Russia, Ukrainian agriculture represented 12% of Ukraine’s economy. Ukraine’s economy is 57th in the world, placing it a few points above Ethiopia. The country is 42nd in population. That is, it is a middle or upper-middle range economy with a population only slightly larger than that of nearby Uzbekistan. Those numbers suggest stumbling blocks to expanding an economy through legal means, not impossibilities.

The informal economy in Ukraine, on the other hand, is estimated to make as much as 44% (see page 24) of the Ukrainian gross domestic product. That number suggests a significant threat to law and order both within Ukraine and across its borders.

Regarding human trafficking and sex trade, an overall narrative emerged across the limited and preliminary sources in my short-lived research of 25 years ago: (1) where there is demand, there will be supply (e.g., pull factor). (2) Where tyranny and arbitrary rule are so great in some local contexts around the world, in those locales to which the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights has not arrived, some number of women will respond when given the opportunity to leave (whether under false pretenses or real; e.g., push factor). And (3), where opportunity is so little, the answer is the same (e.g., push factor). Some women will still dream that, by so doing and allowing themselves to be seen in “important” circles, they may be picked up, “discovered,” and become the next Marilyn. Regarding push (e.g., dispersion) and pull (e.g., attraction and absorption) factors in legitimate migration processes, see Everett Lee.

Where people, still recoiling and recovering from “collective” farms (read that, slave farms) under the Soviet Union, have options that make more money from human trafficking and sex trade, they may use those avenues rather than legitimate industry. And, it is important to remember that many, if not most people in that industry – both sex trade

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workers and managers – may be there under duress.

We have the technologies and the I.Q. points to correct these conditions. Where is the will? The will becomes stronger if the winds of conflict find their way to our own doorsteps, as they appear to seek to do now (note Zelensky's comment predicting that the U.S. would feel the influence of war in the future). Perhaps we can address the issue at its roots rather than go forth, blithely, into global wars of little positive outcome for anyone.

Russia is no longer the Soviet Union. I can understand why it would seek to keep Ukrainian developments from crossing over its borders and into its territory. Criminality breeds: criminality and unrest. How can we, as a global community, ask for governmental accountability over locales involved in this illegal trade of humans, which may be conducted independently and against the laws of their own governments to say nothing of international law and treaties? I can understand the Ukrainian sensibility regarding collective farms, and that surprisingly large number of informal sector to the Ukrainian economy. If that number were in MENA, it would likely represent a wide array of small products in local markets, and parts of the population that governments have decided to leave alone and untaxed. In a European or post-Soviet context, it almost certainly means illegal market. Illegal market means crime. And criminality cannot be allowed to continue or we all suffer from it eventually.

Human trafficking and sex trade are problems in many countries, almost always tied to illegal trade of other sorts, and to criminal groups. The U.S. has its own problems with it tied to drug trade and illegal smuggling of humans for migration, slavery, and sex slavery, trafficking that is fully illegal and not tied to government complicity in any way. As a percentage of the U.S. population, the raw numbers are very small (403,000 slave persons in 2018 to a national population of 319,929,000, see page 76; Ukraine's numbers are 286,000 slave persons in place in 2018 to a national population of 44,658,000, see page 93, not accounting for total trafficking numbers).

Encourage the expansion of licit economic sectors in Ukraine, and elsewhere where people live under similar conditions. Do anything to encourage lawful industry. Unlawful industry, as we know with the illegal drug trade, ends by affecting us all, internationally, in insidious and sometimes horrible ways. To wit, banditry was a major issue in certain historical moments and locales; it affected women's safety, travel, ability to work in the labor force, ability to move about in the public sphere, and more. It made women dependent upon men (with the possible exceptions – or perhaps non-exceptions – of the Calamity Janes and Annie Oakleys of the American historical Wild West, and similar). And it made men's lives shorter, in part for the regular encounter with crime. May we not return, then, in a new slippery slope, to such 18th and 19th century standards.

About the author:

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