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TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN AND CHILDREN: MOLODVA: MYTHS AND REALITY

Moldova is a very small country; its population is 4.3 million people. According to some unofficial statistics – it is very difficult to estimate and to give formal statistics on the number of people who go abroad every year – the accumulated figure would be 1 million Moldovan citizens who are currently working abroad, some 90% of them illegally.

About 800 000 are minors and children. About 1 million are senior citizens, and 600 000 are *officially* unemployed. So basically that leaves no one. And if we add to that the political situation... I don't know if you are aware, but we have a Communist government now with 90% of the voices in Parliament, so it's basically a drawback for the country and it's really discouraging for me to give you this information. Moldova is struggling through the most severe crisis in its history.

On this foundation the phenomenon of massive migration is born. The people are just massively leaving the country. If you come across any man or woman of any age and ask “would you like to go work abroad?” you will immediately get yes as an answer. Young people especially are looking for the opportunities to go and earn their living abroad. And on this foundation Moldova has been particularly victimized by the traffic in human beings. And the primary categories that would fall under this would be women and children with an emphasis on minor girls.

If we talk about trafficking of course all of you are aware of the gravity of the issue. My colleagues have been mentioning in their presentations the trafficking and drug problems, trafficking in weapons, trafficking in human beings... For Moldova, the latter comes at the very top. And here we talk about trafficking in women and children for sexual exploitation, but not only that. We are talking about trafficking for forced labour slavery in a lot of Western European and other countries. We are talking

about the pornographic industry, many children are trafficked for this industry. Children are also trafficked to big Russian cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg where children are forced to beg in the streets. There is also the extraction of organs. There is a very famous village of Mindjire in Moldova where half of the population have basically sold their kidneys and got some very small sums for that. I think most of you must be aware of this. This also refers to human trafficking.

To a certain extent there has also been in recent years trafficking in men for military conflicts in Chechnya. Of course I will not refer to all that. This is just to give an impression of what the situation in Moldova is like.

We will focus more on the problem of trafficking for which Moldova has been often mentioned in the international media: trafficking in women. Unfortunately, the Moldovan Government's response to that has been very limited and focuses on the creation of the National Committee to Combat Trafficking in 2001. But most of all this can be attributed to the lobbying by civil society and international organizations together. The Government has adopted a plan of action to combat trafficking, but it has no budget support whatsoever, and right now the anti-trafficking program that have been running in the country have been able to be implemented only through the assistance of international donors.

If you come to Moldova, you come across this image, because it is in the streets, on billboards, on TV, everywhere. It is quite shocking, but the reality called for such an image and the slogan we are using says "You are not for sale!" The International Organization for Migration has adopted a trilateral approach to at least partially resolve the gravity of the phenomenon and we try to address the issue from this trilateral perspective.

The first area is of course prevention and awareness. It would not sound realistic if we tried to take the approach of stopping the girls from leaving the country, because it is not real; most of the women would still take the risk and look for the opportunity to work abroad. Together with other NGOs we have been trying to introduce the issue of trafficking as a subject in the school curriculum, as an optional course. All the young

girls that graduate from high school have to be aware at least of what kind of traps might await them if they decide to go abroad. We use a comic strip in the schools for the young girls to describe a very typical story of what might happen to a girl and explain the mechanism of the process of trafficking which is very easy and not sophisticated at all. In the first place, it doesn't cost anything for a woman to go abroad. She doesn't have to pay anything. Most victims come from rural areas of Moldova, which are even less developed than the capital. Most of them are not educated enough and so they would fall easily in the trap of the recruiters. Recruiting in Moldova is done in a very easy way, by people, friends, acquaintances and by employment ads in the newspapers. The advantage of that is that the girls don't have to pay anything. The travel expenses are basically covered by the traffickers.

And of course we would be naive to suggest that the process is only limited to Moldova geographically. It is very regional at least if not international, because the destinations to which the Moldovan women travel to vary a lot. Starting from the Western European countries, the Balkans and even there is a channel through to Moscow and to Israel and Arab countries. Geographically, it is very widespread. The easy trap that the women fall into really deals with the possibility to get a job for free, not having to pay for the passport, visa, travel expenses, and this applies all over the country. And of course there are logistical details set up in each country; the recruiters would usually transport the girls in small groups of three or four.

For the Balkans, they would usually travel through Romania, because there is easy access to Romania for Moldovan citizens, where they would be taken over by their Romanian counterparts. The town of Timisoara has been recognized as a very famous market place for women. This is where the transaction takes place, where the girls are taken over by the persons coming from Former Yugoslavia, from Serbia and from Albania. They are transported and distributed to bars in the Balkans, and they circulate around. The mechanics works in such a way that the victims are sold and resold multiple times. They tell us their story sometimes, and the maximum times a woman has been sold and resold is believed to be fifty times. She has been basically recirculated in the Balkan area.

The profile is quite clear. I don't have to expand on that. These are usually very young women and 85% come from rural areas of Moldova and they have experience of a certain degree of domestic violence in their families that is also a push factor to be trafficked. This is also a fact because a patriarchal society like Moldova tends to push women away from the country.

In terms of what kinds of methods are being used by the traffickers, I think that everybody knows and I don't have to explain, that many women who manage to come back to Moldova with the facilitation of Interpol, IOM or some other organization, have experienced some very high degree of violence, stress and abuse, both sexual and physical.

The medical issues are also quite serious. Out of the more than 1000 women brought back to Moldova, none was healthy, not a single case was not infected with STDs. That means that there is a 100% infection rate, along with an HIV/AIDS amongst them. So it requires a very systematic, comprehensive approach, including rehabilitation and reintegration assistance for them. The consequences are quite clear.

The rehabilitation centres that we have opened with the assistance of international donors in Chisinau offer quite comprehensive assistance in terms of the rehabilitation and reintegration of women, which is quite a problem at this stage because if we talk about reintegration in the classic sense of the word, it is very difficult for an ordinary well-educated citizen to find a decent job and decent living in the country.

Prosecution and criminalization still remains a very big issue for us for various reasons. The first one is the corruption within Moldova. This is the corruption we talked about, the corruption with law enforcement or with higher ranking officials which stops the issue from being addressed properly. Out of the 500 cases that have been opened in the recent two years since the legislation was introduced in Moldova, only two cases of successful prosecution took place. One got 2 years and the other got 10 years. This is but a drop in the ocean. It requires a very systematic regional approach because otherwise Moldova alone can solve the problem on its territory, but all the chains, all the trafficking rings

require very comprehensive police cooperation, a law-enforcement cooperation, because this leads to successful prosecution which is not currently happening in Moldova.

What kind of services do we offer to the women who come back to Moldova? We offer a lot of vocational training within the very limited resources that we have. And now we are currently implementing a very comprehensive EU assistance project.

We see that the Balkan countries are in first place when it comes to repatriation of women to Moldova, but this is not an indicator. There are seemingly only few Western European countries mentioned, it is not due to the fact Moldovan women are not being trafficked to Western European countries, but because most EU countries just deport them despite the fact of them being signatories to the Palermo Protocol. The voluntary repatriation mechanisms should really be well developed if we are talking about regional cooperation, because for us, for the country of origin, the victims become invisible and we can't really provide assistance.

There is finally an issue for the destination countries. Temporary residence for the victims permits them to testify against the perpetrators. This temporary residence privilege should happen independently of whether or not the victim wants to testify. I think she should be offered a chance for a temporary residence permit anyway. This is an issue which is widely discussed now and I would like to attract your attention to it as well.

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