

One of the most valuable lessons learned from this social experiment was how to foster cooperative work between the government and NGOs through pooling experience and information, and making use of the advan-

tages of each body. In order to do so, it was necessary to overcome prejudices on both sides and in the words of an NGO activist in Moldova: “learn how to shake hands without a clenched fist.”

From Teacher To Trafficked Woman

Karyn Grossman Gershon

In her faded jeans, a black blazer, flats, and delicate earrings, Tanya looks more like the school teacher she was trained to be than a woman who lived through six years of hell as a trafficked woman in Spain. Until now, she has not shared her story publicly because the Russian press has insensitively portrayed the experiences of trafficked women in sexually charged ways and exposed their identities in the communities where they are being repatriated.

The collapse of the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991 initially resulted in a dramatic economic decline for many people living in the region. For example, in Tanya’s city, just hours outside of Moscow, people were laid off from government-owned factories and others began receiving their salaries very sporadically. With the government and economy in transition, social services to the needy dried up. Russians living in small cities with shuttered factories and no natural resources began a long period of trying to figure out how their economy would shift to sustain their communities.

When Tanya’s father died, she realized that she could not realistically support herself and her mother. She heard that a local job placement agency was sending women to Spain and that the agency would advance all of her expenses. Tanya was told that she would be a hostess in a bar and would be responsible for encouraging patrons to buy drinks. She would receive 50 percent of the purchases and the bar, the other 50 percent. She was promised inexpensive housing and was assured that no sex was involved. In return, she had to repay the \$1700 advanced for her expenses, plus 50 percent interest in two months — a total of \$2850. The agency’s representative confidently told her that she would make enough to repay the debt on schedule and then would be free to keep all future earnings or, set off on her own.

Upon arriving in Spain, the agency took Tanya’s passport as “a precaution to ensure repayment of her debt.” When Tanya expressed concern, she was told that she could return home, but “How would she repay her debt?”

The promised apartment had a kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms. Twenty women lived in the apartment, sleeping in shifts on bunk beds and under the constant supervision of a guard. The guard escorted the women daily to the bar and occasionally to the supermarket for supplies. The women received only 20 percent of the money from the drinks they sold.

Despite the difficult situation, Tanya forged ahead until the agency announced that the bar had been sold and would be re-opening as a strip club. The women were given the option to repay their debt within two days or remain as strippers and prostitutes. Tanya nervously shared her situation with one of her regular customers at the bar and he offered to pay her debt and set her up in an apartment. Tanya’s savior was initially kind to her and indicated that he would eventually marry her. Over the next months, Tanya’s Spanish improved and she realized that this man was married and, moreover, he was increasingly isolating her. Without much money or a work visa, she was trapped. She asked to return to Russia. At this point, he began beating her and keeping her locked in the apartment.

Over the next two years, Tanya used every opportunity to get to a phone to contact the Russian embassy and the Spanish police. In each instance, she was given little assistance and treated with complete disdain. Her abuser learned of her attempts, escalated the beatings, and tightened security. Finally, she was able to get access to a phone and reached her mother in Russia. She told her mother where she was being held and asked her to send help.

Tanya’s mother, a traditional Russian Orthodox woman from a provincial region, could not understand what had happened. She had no idea whom to ask for help and she was petrified that if she was indiscreet, her daughter would never be able to return to their community because her reputation would be so damaged. Fortunately, one of her friends knew that the Jewish community had organized an interfaith response to trafficking.

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RESOURCES ON TRAFFICKING

American Jewish World Service guidelines for funding Anti-Trafficking Initiatives: www.AJWS.org

Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism: www.RAC.org

Project Keshet: www.projectkeshet.org

Project Keshet in the FSU: www.projectkeshet.ru

National Council of Jewish Women: www.ncjw.org

Avodah: The Jewish Service Corps: www.avodah.net

RedLight Children: www.redlightchildren.org


IN ISRAEL: Atzum-Justice Works: www.atzum.org

Juhu Thukral, Esq. was until recently the director of the Sex Workers Project at the Urban Justice Center, where she provided legal representation to trafficked persons. She has been an advocate for the rights of immigrant women in the areas of health, work, and sexuality for over fifteen years.

Project Keshet's commitment to the issue of trafficking emerged when women in the organization's network began informally studying Jewish texts as a basis for community activism. In 1998, their study of "*pidyon shivuyim*," the freeing of captives, came face-to-face with articles in the *New York Times* highlighting trafficking in women globally and particularly in Israel. According to the Israel Women's Network, approximately 3,000 women in Israel were in the trafficking pipeline, a large percentage from the former Soviet Union. While Israel is not one of the largest recipients of trafficked women, it remains one of the most visible. By addressing the issue of trafficking, the women in Project Keshet's network aligned their Jewish identity and activism. They began to organize anti-trafficking activities in their communities and to demonstrate that Jews who had embraced their religious identity could remain in this region and share their Jewish values in a way that helped Jews and non-Jews alike.

Project Keshet connected Tanya's mother with an officer in her local police department, who formally requested that the Spanish po-

lice raid the apartment where Tanya was being held. While prosecuting her abuser would have been ideal, it was agreed that the Spanish police could move faster and more safely if they arrested Tanya for being in Spain on a visa violation and sent her back to Russia.

Today, Tanya lives with her mother. With a very high unemployment rate in her city and outdated teaching credentials, she does not anticipate achieving financial self-sufficiency in the near future. Using a small grant for vocational training, she is studying to be a baker, a low-paying job that does not draw on her strengths. She has been invited to participate in the next ORT KeshetNet vocational computer training program in her community. She has received some medical care but no counseling. In the meanwhile, she has been getting discreetly involved in anti-trafficking activism to help save other women and to regain her sense of self. Considering that there are more than 400,000 Russian women who are currently being trafficked, she counts herself fortunate to be among the couple of thousand who have been reunited with their families. 

Human Rights and Trafficking

Juhu Thukral

Anti-trafficking advocates often speak of the need to protect the "human rights" of trafficked persons, while the U.S. government touts its "victim-centered" approach to the problem. These catchphrases convey the genuine concern that trafficking elicits on the global stage, as tales of child labor, sexual coercion, and beatings in the workplace horrify a well-meaning public. However, there is little agreement in the advocacy community or government as to what it means to respect the human rights of trafficked persons, or what a truly victim-centered approach might entail.

One reason for this lack of clarity is the muddling of prostitution and trafficking. Some advocates and government officials argue that trafficking, which is coerced labor of any kind — including sexual labor such as prostitution — is really all about prostitution and not much else.

This position sets the stage for a largely criminal justice solution to the problem of trafficking in persons. It denies that people are vulnerable because of inadequate opportunities for legal migration; lack of comprehensive legal protections for many low-wage and immigrant workers, such as guest workers or undoc-

umented persons; economic concerns that drive people to migrate to other countries to seek a way to support their families; and lack of understanding on the part of many immigrants as to the rights and protections that they can demand in their new country.

For example, a young woman from Mexico is convinced by her husband that if she comes to the U.S. to work for a few years, they can save enough money to build a house for their family. Only when she arrives does she realize that he is putting her into prostitution, and he coerces and pleads with her, promising that it is only for a short period of time, so they can build that dream house. She believes that she can endure long enough and will survive, if only she can earn him enough money for the house. In the meantime, she knows better than to disobey. Another example: an English-speaking teacher from Russia decides to visit the U.S. for a few months, hoping to work and save up a little money, given how little she can make as a teacher back home. Having overstayed her visa, she works for a man who promises to help her obtain legal status. Instead, he forces her to work in his home for almost no money, and reg-