

Author: Sian Jones

London Women in Black and Aldermaston Women's Peace Camp < sian@gn.apc.org >

NATO and the Trafficking of Women

Women have a multitude of relationships to the military: they command regiments, enlist as soldiers, work in the arms industry, clean the kitchens and toilets of military bases... or oppose the military in protests and peace camps. Some women have little choice about their relationship with the military: they are killed, injured, forced from their homes, and bereaved by armed conflict. Others are recruited, sometimes 'voluntarily', but very often forcibly, to provide sexual services to male military personnel. Many of these are women and girls trafficked for the purposes of forced prostitution.

The conflict in the former Yugoslavia resulted in the presence of around 30,000 NATO personnel in Bosnia Herzegovina in 1995, and a few years later there would be 40,000 in Kosovo. To serve the men, an extensive sex industry based on forcible trafficking was brought into existence in these countries and in Macedonia, the site of NATO's R&R facility.

Where there are devastated infrastructures, massive unemployment and barely functioning economies, trafficking provides both organised crime and "entrepreneurial individuals" with an easy way of entering the "free market economy". NATO creates the demand: it's estimated that members of NATO forces spent over \$40 million a month in purchases in the Balkans between 24 March and 10 June 1999 alone. Post-communist countries of nearby eastern Europe experiencing economic hardship, such as Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia, Romania and Moldova, provided the commodity – the women and girls.

Some were only too willing to travel to the "west", promised good job prospects as waitresses, bar staff or dancers, at wages they could only dream of at home. While some understood that they had to be illegally smuggled into the Balkans, none was prepared for the violence and sexual exploitation that awaited them there. During the trafficking process women are coerced, threatened, beaten and raped by their traffickers, to keep them compliant. Their documents are taken away, their movement is controlled, they are often imprisoned. The promised wages often never materialise. They are withheld by the traffickers supposedly to repay the woman's "debt" (for clothes and make-up, for instance) or simply to prevent them from escaping.

In both Bosnia and Kosovo some individual soldiers, along with NATO contractors and UN police, were actively involved in the trafficking process, receiving trafficked women and girls at borders, smuggling them into military bases and acting as pimps. For years NATO ignored what was going on, suggesting the wrongdoers were merely a few "bad apples". This complicity extended in 2002 to shutting down an investigation in Kosovo by NATO personnel into the abuse of Ukrainian and Russian women by Russian soldiers, who were also suspected of being involved in trafficking. The investigation stopped so as not to threaten NATO's relationship with Russia.

Perhaps because of their record of sexual exploitation elsewhere, the US attempted to prevent the involvement of their forces in trafficking and exploitation of trafficked women and girls in Bosnia and Kosovo. Their personnel were prohibited from going off-base except on official duty. However, this didn't stop women being smuggled into bases, nor the development of a sex industry based on trafficking in the Kosovo town of Ferizaj, just down the road from Bondsteel, then the largest US base in eastern Europe.

At the 2004 Istanbul Summit, NATO adopted a Policy Against Human Trafficking, which described human trafficking as a crime, a violation of human rights and a "modern day slave trade that fuels corruption and organised crime". However for NATO trafficking is mainly a security issue. Thus the policy went on to suggest that it has the potential to "destabilise fragile governments". So, while the policy recognises that NATO forces are part of the problem, and provides for "securing standards of individual behaviour", it does not explicitly prohibit NATO forces from engaging in or facilitating trafficking, or from having sex with trafficked women. Private contractors employed by NATO can be penalised for involvement in trafficking - but in the few instances reported they have merely been repatriated.

In theory all NATO forces receive awareness training on "the problem of trafficking and how this modern day slave trade impacts on human rights, stability and security". They are given guidelines that prohibit involvement in trafficking, and in Kosovo they were prohibited visiting clubs and bars where trafficked women worked. In practice, however, the policy has failed because each NATO member state is free to decide how to interpret it. While one or two NATO have disciplined soldiers involved in trafficking, immunity from prosecution afforded to NATO forces means that no suspected NATO traffickers have ever been prosecuted.

For feminist anti-militarists, opposition to NATO includes proposing alternatives to military security. Real security means that women and girls may live without violence, without coercion, and free of the poverty that drives them into the hands of traffickers. NATO should start taking its anti-trafficking policy seriously and start acting to provide women with real security.