



Fear and debts

TOY BOX

Of all immigrants coming to the Czech Republic, trafficked women suffer most injustice.

One day they will say that their lives in the Czech Republic were hell on earth. Shunned by society, they live in houses with their shutters down, in places they could hardly show on the map. Deprived of their identity documents, they are allowed to leave the house only under escort, and are morally abused with their debts every day. Of all immigrants coming to the Czech Republic, trafficked women seem to suffer from most injustice and exploitation. Yet, even they help the national economy to grow, and they constitute a fair contribution to the local budgets in Czech towns and communities.

It is Wednesday afternoon. The open space outside a one-storey house is full of mothers with prams, of children running around and screaming. You would probably think this was an ordinary kindergarten. Yet, in order to get inside you have to unlock two doors. And there are good reasons for the tight security: the asylum centre located in one of Prague's suburbs has given shelter to women who were previously involved in prostitution and who decided to escape from the realm of organized crime and human trafficking. Non-profit organizations say the Czech Republic has in recent years attracted increasing numbers of prostitutes from Ukraine and Vietnam.

In what ways do they get here and what makes an ordinary girl from Ukraine or Vietnam become a prostitute? Jindřiška Krpálková from Caritas Prague, a long-term protector of women in emergency situations, says that the trigger is nothing more than the willingness to trust other people. The typical story features a family living in a small Ukrainian village, with no husband, father or brother being around to protect the women. One day, a well-clad gentleman arrives in a gleaming car of Western design, with a briefcase in his hand and businessman-like behaviour. Or an even more likely story: a member of the family provides a recommendation: "I have an acquaintance abroad. The West is where money is earned." And the young woman decides she wants to follow him abroad. The closest family are happy, thinking their dear one has just embarked on a Cinderella story. Little do they know that the fairytale is soon to become a nightmare.

When a wife is worth a pig

The story will probably go on in one of the following ways. The man with the briefcase hands the woman over to someone else. That person is responsible for getting her across the border. And the thing is, the woman has so far been without her identity documents. Another person will pick her up and take her to her destination. Each of the go-betweens has a single, clearly-defined responsibility, which helps to cover the whole thing up. Alternatively, the woman leaves with the man who recruited her, having been promised she and he would do business in the West together. But then the woman is sold. And this is, unfortunately, not a metaphor as it might seem: in fact, one person pays to another person for a particular person. The victim of the deal is forced to work for the person who bought her. The prices that the prostitute dealers pay for one girl from the East vary – the price for one “modern-day slave” from Ukraine is currently approximately 3000 euro. “But women have been sold for much less than that,” says Jindřiška Krpálková of Caritas. “I even know a case where a man from Slovakia sold his pregnant wife for a pig.”

I've bought you, you work for me

Should you feel like looking for the Amsterdam-like “streets of love”, you would find one in the north of the Czech Republic: the road leading to the border-crossing called Cínovec. Most people driving along the picturesque serpentine roads of the Krušné Hory Mountains feel very little concern: some may think something like, “Those things are probably going on in civilized conditions, the girls will make a fortune, their clients enjoy the deal, too, so why to make a fuss about it”. There are things in the background, however, which few people know about. But back to our woman from Ukraine who has been sold. Actually, her dream has just crashed. The man with the briefcase, who has until now looked like a trustworthy businessman, will now show his other face. The girl is told that she is in debt for crossing the border, for getting a job, and for getting accommodation. Or to put it more bluntly: “I have bought you for 30 thousand, and you will work for me until I get the money back. There are, unfortunately, no vacancies for event hostesses, so you will be providing company for men.” Those girls who fail to understand face a sad end as they risk being beaten up, raped, and locked up with no chance of escaping. Only when it's too late will most girls realize that their Czech “business” dream has shattered. “I know about a woman who only realized she had been sold when she saw two men outside her car exchanging a wad of banknotes. But it was too late to do anything – the bodyguard firmly grabbed her arm and took her to where she was supposed to go,” says Jindřiška Krpálková.

But they do it voluntarily

This is where the woman embarks on a merry-go-round which is not easy to get off. Most of what she earns goes to the dealers, and she is charged exorbitant fees for rent and meals. In reality, she is no

longer in “debt” since she might have earned many times more than what she was sold for. But the fictional debt and threats keep her in an inferior and disadvantageous position. She only knows first names of the people around her. She has no knowledge of the language. Several months later she is moved to a new place but she hardly knows where it is.

Even if she wants to tell her story to the police in the future she will probably remember irrelevant facts such as the colour of the house she lived in. Any escape attempts result in threats: “Remember that I know very well where your grandmother and two small kids live.” Foreign girls facing a fate like this have few ways to protect themselves. They are never left unobserved, and when outside, they are always accompanied: either by trustworthy prostitutes or bodyguards. The police often refuse to believe them. Jindřiška Krpálková describes the following story: “I met a woman who had run away from a Czech brothel back to Ukraine. But the dealers found her and she was badly beaten. She contacted the local police, but one of the police officers made her sleep with him. And she also saw the mafia talking to the police, probably about her.” Indeed, it is often the dealers who threaten the women with the police: “If you run away, you'll be picked up by the police since you are an illegal immigrant.” Jindřiška Krpálková says this dark side of prostitution is not a frequent topic for several reasons. First, there is what she calls the “voluntariness myth”, which dominates across Europe and makes prostitution an even more complicated issue. “I often hear people saying: But they do it voluntarily. In my opinion it has to do with the fact that most men enjoy sex, and therefore fail to understand that having sex twenty times a day may not be that much fun,” says Krpálková. She says the women look happy as it is part of their work, and are expected to do so anyway; moreover, most of the girls are regularly given alcohol and drugs. Needless to say, such things even deepen their powerlessness.

We are all going to end up in trouble

The town of Teplice and its surroundings in the north of the country is full of women addicted to drugs. It is Sunday afternoon, and Elena (22) from Slovakia is standing in one of the streets outside the centre. The Roma girl has a fragile build and medium long black hair, and she uses thick layers of make-up to hide acne typical of methamphetamine addicts. She grew up in a children's home and has no one to help her in the Czech Republic. When asked whether she was afraid of bad things happening to her, she said resignedly: “No, I'm not. We are all going to end up in trouble sooner or later.”

When prostitution translates into new pavements

Most of the clients coming to brothels simply do not worry about the prostitutes' troubles. The men do not care what the women or girls they are with feel – after all, they did not pay to have a chat. There are numerous internet sites where the clients share their experience. A typical message says, “There was this little girl who kept crying the whole time, she was such a bore.” But no one cares why some

of the prostitutes are bruised, pale and undernourished. And the police have limited access to places like these. Unless they have evidence that someone in these private institutions has been abused, they are not allowed to enter. Streetworkers seem to be the only contact with the world at large whom the prostitutes trust – these people bring them information leaflets, condoms and even chocolate since many of the girls suffer from malnutrition. Streetworkers are the only safe way out.

Those women who want to share their sad stories are free to seek shelter in asylum centers. In some of the Czech towns with high rates of prostitution, there is little political will to address these issues. A typical image of places along the E30 road in South Moravia has a brothel with a sign on it announcing “sale”, and a man working happily in his garden right next door. When you ask him whether he minds living next door to prostitutes, he will most likely answer that he has got used to it.

Indeed, brothels pay taxes, so their presence is beneficial to communities in which they are located. And they also employ local people for cleaning or bodyguarding. Modern-day slaves, who live inside in hiding and humiliation, have their share in the national economy like anyone else. Even though they enjoy little of the money that they are paid by their clients, they get the well-functioning economic machine going. And it may well be that they help towns pay for pavement repairs.

Translation: David Mraček



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