

Researcher studies the globalization of sex trafficking and the organizations that work to stop it

December 12 2011

In today's world, human trafficking is not an isolated problem, but a growing global issue. A Kansas State University professor is studying ways that anti-trafficking groups are fighting back.

"The focus of my research is not just to say how much sex trafficking is occurring, but how forms of it are changing," said Nadia Shapkina, assistant professor of sociology, who is looking at the geography, history and economic impact of trafficking. "The [sex trade](#) has been a global industry for a long time. But now, with the globalization of technology and transportation, it is becoming even more transnationalized."

One form of the sex trade that has evolved in recent years is sex tourism, which combines aspects of tourism with the purchase of sexual services, particularly of young women. About 95 percent of sex tourists are men from wealthy countries who come to tourist destinations -- such as Greece, Thailand or Australia -- for both entertainment and sex.

"Sex trafficking delivers women to customers, but sex tourism delivers customers to the place of consumption," Shapkina said. "Sex tourism becomes a very lucrative business. Technology, communication and transportation all allow that and they enable the trafficking of women as well."

Sex tourism operations are often led by skilled businessmen who know

how to appeal and advertise to middle- and upper-class men with money and resources to travel and consume sexual services. Their messages have spread worldwide, Shapkina said, pointing to the United States, where multiple cases of labor and sex trafficking have been investigated.

"It doesn't necessarily mean that the market has increased, but it might mean that authorities have started detecting this criminal practice," Shapkina said. "It is hard to estimate the size of the sex trade because it is so underground. But what we can say is that it is very transnationalized and even the U.S. is affected by this negative aspect of globalization."

The globalization of human trafficking has also led to a rise in anti-trafficking activism. Shapkina is looking at how governments, international organizations, nongovernmental organizations and celebrity activists are collaborating to combat trafficking. She is mapping out organizations to understand what kind of resources they have, how successful they are and what they can achieve.

In the process, she has noticed challenges that many activist groups face. It is often difficult to coordinate actions across national borders because legal systems and cultures vary across countries. For instance, some countries such as Saudi Arabia penalize female victims of human trafficking, while countries such as Germany take a more humanistic approach by providing services for the victims.

Similarly, Shapkina is finding that many activist organizations turn to the government for help. Sometimes the governments respond and sometimes they don't, especially if the country has a strong sex tourism presence and governments benefit from the revenues from the sex trade.

Allegiances also play a role in a country's willingness to criminalize human trafficking. For instance, Turkey had no presence of active anti-trafficking organizations, but when the country wanted to join the

European Union it began involving nonprofit organizations to work on the problem. A similar situation is happening in Ukraine as it tries to join the European Union and has to satisfy human rights and gender equality standard policies of the union.

"I have focused on Eastern Europe because the trafficking of women has become a problem in the region," said Shapkina, who is originally from Russia. "Many nongovernmental organizations have been forming in that area, and they want to focus on human trafficking. That is very new and we need to explain what is going on there."

Shapkina is also following human trafficking in the United States, where many initial anti-trafficking campaigns focused on foreign-born populations and immigrants as victims. That led to a realization of domestic exploitation, and prompted activists to focus on domestic trafficking, especially of minors.

"Clearly, the sex trade is a social problem, especially a gender inequality problem," Shapkina said. "This is what makes this trade possible, which involves the economic disempowerment of women. That's why we need to empower women economically and politically."

Shapkina recently gave a presentation on the global sex trade at an international conference titled "Gendered Commodity Chains: Bringing Households and Women into Global Commodity Chain Analysis" at Binghamton University, which is part of the State University of New York. An article based on the conference presentation will be published in 2012. Shapkina has also written a chapter about sex tourism in Ukraine. The chapter will be published in 2012 in the book "Sex Tourism in Ukraine: A Social Problem."

Provided by Kansas State University

Citation: Researcher studies the globalization of sex trafficking and the organizations that work to stop it (2011, December 12) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-12-globalization-sex-trafficking.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.