

Women in the Balkans: How the Plight of Balkan Women Affects Sex Trafficking Today

Eastern Europe is known as one of the most prevalent locations for human trafficking, particularly of women and girls for sex. While most of the countries in the region struggle with this problem, those in the Balkans region have unique situations that create environments in which women are especially vulnerable. Throughout this period, we see patterns of discriminatory attitudes that view women as property and objects, leading to either discriminatory laws or weak protective laws for women. Weak laws and discriminatory attitudes lead to women being treated as property, with little or no support system to help them. This cycle has played a role in the sex trafficking industry in the Western Balkans, in which women are treated as property and sold as commodity. Historical objectification of women throughout these nations has contributed to the attitudes and norms that fuel sex trafficking. In order to get a full understanding of the treatment of women in this region, we will look at the three most recent eras, as well as the transition periods in between. We will explore the attitudes and treatment toward women through the Ottoman Empire, the Communist period, and the modern EU-influenced era, as well as look at the impact of the transition periods of the Balkan Wars and the Yugoslav Wars. By exploring the history and current atmosphere surrounding gender equality in this region, we can show that the historical and even modern objectification and discrimination against women in the Western Balkans has deeply impacted the thriving sex trafficking industry today, including the weak anti-trafficking efforts and general attitudes about sex trafficking victims.

Methodology & Existing Literature

While a significant amount of data exists discussing the Ottoman Empire and the period of Yugoslavia, English-language information on the history of women during this time period in this region is generally scarce. Some books exist, such as *Women in the Ottoman Balkans: Gender, Culture, and History* and *Gender Politics in the Western Balkans: Women and Society in Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav Successor States*, as well as some journal articles and other articles relating to the history of the region or the history of gender equality. Because of the lack of direct information on this topic, we will look at sources that discuss slavery in this era, the patriarchal system, gender roles, war tactics, and general history of the Balkans region. Most of the information discussing the topic of human trafficking and gender-based violence in the region, including the causal factors, focuses primarily on the post-Yugoslav period, starting from the wars of the early 90s and the start of democracy and the free market. While this time is an important factor to understanding the sex trafficking industry in that region today, discovering the situation for women prior to this time might help us understand how women were treated in recent history as well as how they are viewed and treated today.

Much more literature is available discussing the 1990s through today. Because of the nature of the Bosnian War and the involvement of the international community, much has been written on the plight of women during this time and following the wars. More recently, with human trafficking becoming a globally known issue, the Western Balkans have been even further researched regarding women's issues, the sex industry, and human trafficking. Scholars have discussed wage gaps, domestic violence, and EU accession standards for gender equality, all relating to the current scope of gender equality in the Balkans. Using this wide range of a time period, as well as the variety of sources, will help with understanding the plight of women throughout this region, today and in the past.

Ottoman Empire

The rule of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century largely influenced the status and treatment of women in the Balkans during this time. The rulers of the empire followed and were largely influenced by Islamic law; however, because of differences in religion throughout the empire, “women’s experiences and possibilities were...complex and varied” (Dursteler).

Although women in rural areas of the region had less opportunities and freedoms than those in the urban areas because of the mindset and culture, women throughout this area were generally seen as belonging to their families or their husbands with little to no rights of their own. During this time, the patriarchal family system ruled, meaning that marriage and family rights were granted primarily to men. Women did have some choice in refusing marriage, although not in most cases, or trying to separate from an unwanted husband, but more Muslim women than non-Muslim women enjoyed these rights (Dursteler). Generally, the role of the woman in a household was to take care of the house and children; everything of “importance” was left to the husband. Women did not play a large role in the public sphere, but they did contribute to the culture and society of the time, as editors Amila Buturovic and Irvin Cemil Schick write in their book *Women in the Ottoman Balkans* (Buturovic, 2007).

Another feature of the Ottoman Empire that contributed toward the attitude and treatment of women was the slave trade. Ottoman rulers kept harems, buying women from their native people, and women from all regions of the empire were sold or forced into them; however, the Ottomans were not the only groups who enslaved women. According to one source, during a period of Greek rebellion for independence, one rebel group “captured innocent Turkish peasant girls [from a Turkish village in Greece] to sell as slaves to gain some income for supporting their

war machines” (Erler, 2006). Additionally, the enslavement of women and girls was used as a revenge tactic against rival ethnic or religious groups because this was the equivalent to taking property and damaging honor for the men. Mischa Glenny, in his account of Balkans history, writes that following the First Serbian Uprising, Governor Süleyman Paşa “ordered the reimposition of a harsh feudal regime,” in which “women and children were raped and sometimes taken by force into harems” (Glenny, 2012, p. 18). As author Yavuz Erler states, “It could be claimed that neither side of the Balkans were without fault in abusing women’s freedoms” (Erler, 2006). Eventually black slavery was abolished due to its abolishment in the West, but white slavery, particularly of women, remained in the empire. Even after its abolishment, punishments were minimal and slave traders experienced relative freedom to continue their business without hindrance from the government, showing that attitudes about the status of women led to weak laws for their protection (Erler, 2006). This component of the discrimination against women was also closely connected to conflict-related violence against women. Similar to slavery, the violence was carried out by all groups, usually in the form of rape and murder for women of the targeted group, who were used as a tool against their own men by either Ottoman rulers or even rebel groups.

The late 1800s and early 1900s saw a progression in opportunities and rights for women. Greater education and rights for people in general gave way to a call for greater rights for women and girls. While some women were able to obtain jobs in industries such as silk and cigarettes, many were not able to obtain a proper education. During this time, many intellectuals and groups

such as the Young Turks “critiqued traditional Ottoman attitudes and practices toward family and women and urged a shift toward more ‘civilized,’ that is, ‘Western,’ practices” (Dursteler). The patriarchal society persisted, though, emphasizing that marriage was more important for women than jobs.

In the autobiographical narrative *Natalija: Life in the Balkan Powder Keg, 1880-1956*, Natalija describes her experiences growing up in a small town in Serbia. She watches as her sister is forced to marry someone she does not love, whom she later leaves. Natalija begs to continue her schooling after only four years of education, but her parents, who live in a rural area, do not see the importance of further education for a young girl because they believe her worth comes through her marriage. Her aunt, however, brings her to Belgrade to continue her education. This shows the contrast between rural and city life for girls, as well as the beginning changes of opportunities for women. Later in the story, her sister dissolves the marriage with her husband and then refuses to marry anyone else if she does not love them. The late 1800s and early 1900s are the beginning of new choices and independence for women, at least in some areas of life, but women who made independent choices were often chastised by family for not following societal roles (Irvin, 2009). Overall, the period of the Ottoman Empire was marked by a heavily patriarchal society, many laws restricting women and few protecting them, and attitudes that women were the property of men—either their fathers, brothers, or husbands.

First & Second Balkan Wars

The Balkan Wars were a transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Communist regime. These events impacted not only society as a whole but also the plight of women. Reports of the events told of the “‘complete extermination of an alien population,’ in which villages were

burned, rape was used as a weapon and streams of refugees and the wounded were left to fend for themselves, with many of them dying. ...Many who were involved in the Balkans in the 1990s would recognise [sic] the experience” (Cooper, 2013). While many know of rape being used during the Bosnian War, instances of raping women during war occurred throughout much of the Balkans’ history, including during the First and Second Balkan Wars. The systematic rape of women was, as mentioned before, a revenge tactic toward enemy groups. It was seen as a weapon that destroyed the men’s property and honor. Destroying a woman’s honor or even taking her life was a way to prevent the literal furthering of a nation; women who were raped, and especially those who were killed, would not be bearing children to continue their own society. Later, we will explore more about the idea of rape as a weapon in the Balkans.

Notably, during these wars, 20 women joined war effort as military doctors. These women “played a definite role during the Balkan wars in wiping out epidemics [sic of dysentery, smallpocks [sic], abdominal typhus, recurrent fever, typhus fever and cholera, that were raging throughout the country” (Lazovic, 2007, p. 80). Although their work was overlooked by authors who had written about the medical services of the wars, these women had been recognized and highly commended by the head of sanitary service for their efforts. This shows that during this time, the roles for women were beginning to change, even if only in rare or extreme circumstances. Several women’s organizations also formed previous to and during this period; these organizations spoke out for increased opportunities for women to obtain education and jobs. The war era saw a period of time where women were needed due to shortages of employees, supplies, and men in general.

The World Wars, Communism, and Yugoslavia

The establishment and development of the nation of Yugoslavia brought generally positive changes for women's rights and opportunities, however small they may have been. World War I connected this region to the modern world, which influenced many aspects of culture, including the status and treatment of women. Women played a large role in the building of the new society: "The fragile society of the postwar Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes benefited immensely from the humanitarian efforts of its women" (Ramet, 1999, p. 34). Many intellectuals and women's organizations argued for the expansion of feminism and women's rights after World War I, during which women were left to run the home and ultimately the economy.

In 1919, a variety of women's groups and organizations from the region joined in Belgrade to form the National Women's Alliance of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. The alliance members worked for "national unity, equality of women and men in private and public law, equal pay for equal work, the protection of women, the protection of children and youth, equal education opportunities for boys and girls at home and in school, a single moral code for women and men, a war against prostitution, and a war against alcohol" (Ramet, 1999, p. 35-36). A National Women's Union also formed for more conservative women's groups, although only a few of the groups in both the National Women's Alliance and the National Women's Unions were considered true feminists. These groups, however, saw slow and minimal change; in Serbia, the civil code of 1844 still existed, which restricted women in property rights, roles outside of the household, legal matters, and several other areas. According to the law, "A married woman had no right to govern her own property; she could not be guardian for her own children; she could not undertake any legal matter that concerned inheritance without the consent of her husband; if a husband had a legal heir, a wife inherited nothing" (Ramet, 1999, p. 37). Bosnia was no better,

sending threats to the first Bosnian Muslim woman to join the women's congress that convened periodically to discuss women's participation in politics. While women were speaking up and working to improve their situation, much of society stayed the same, particularly during times of war and especially in the rural towns and villages. Women were still largely viewed as the property of their family and their husbands, and many did not see a need for them to be more involved in politics or the economy.

The Partisans made changes allowing women to be involved with the Communist Party movement and effort; here is essentially where the changes stopped, though. Communism brought an era in which women were, by law, equals but were not in actuality through attitudes and actions. Throughout the World Wars, women were used as motivation for men on the battlefield. Wartime songs, advertisements, and recruitment tactics all used objectified women to boost military morale. The wars also physically affected women, who were often raped and murdered by enemy groups targeting certain villages. Bulgarians also took part in this violence on behalf of Germany during World War II, torturing, raping, and killing Macedonian Jewish women and girls in concentration camps in Skopje (Glenny, 2012). Also during this time, the Chetniks used rape and violence against women as tactics against their enemies, particularly Croats and Muslims. Several accounts of attacks against Croats and Muslims by the Chetniks state that women and children were often the primary victims of the attacks, through both rape and murder (Dizdar). These events also carried into the wars of the early 90s, showing that violence against women has carried on in the region for centuries.

During Tito's reign, changes for women were about lip service than action. Tito and his officials continually emphasized the goal of emancipation and equality for women, which began to be achieved in some ways, primarily through availability of education and jobs for women and

a greater sense of equality in urban areas. While women were better off economically and propaganda of the time featured gender equality as a key theme, the general attitudes and values towards women remained largely unchanged. Within the second half of the 20th century, literacy of women, school and university attendance by women and girls, and female work force numbers dramatically increased. Scholars pointed out that two major problems regarding women still existed, though, despite the societal changes: “Women tended to be concentrated in certain professions...and all but excluded from other professions. ...And women remained severely underrepresented in the leadership bodies” (Ramat, 1999, p. 97). In addition to this lack of change in values, the patriarchal family system continued to influence and to govern life in the home. Women not only had jobs outside of the home, but were also expected to continue their jobs inside the home, taking care of everything from cooking to caring for the children (“The Role of Women”). While some surface level improvements were made to increase gender equality, the attitudes and views of women in society failed to be addressed. Although the effect of the wars in the Balkans during the early 90s are often discussed as being a causing factor of modern sex trafficking in the region, the problems that existed during those wars were reflections of previous violence against women and gender discrimination throughout the bulk of the 1900s and before.

The End of Communism and the Bosnian War

Tito’s death and the sequential dismantling of Yugoslavia brought a rough transition to the Western Balkans region, marked by the Yugoslav Wars, of which the most tragic was the Bosnian War. Throughout the wars of the 1990s, the plight of the women in that region became a global issue. With media and political leaders discussing topics such as rape as a weapon during

the Bosnian War and the involvement of UN peacekeeping troops and military personnel in sex trafficking, the region became infamous for how its women were treated. The treatment of women as property and commodity during the 90s has directly shaped the way that the sex trafficking industry operates and thrives in the Western Balkans region today.

Throughout the history of the Western Balkans region, women were devalued and objectified, but this became especially evident during the events of the 90s. In a piece on the effect of ethnonationalism on violence, particularly against women, Julie Mostov explains the view of women by the nations of the former Yugoslav countries: “Women are the biological reproducers of group members, of the ethnonation. They bear sons to fight and daughters to care for the motherland. Women who resist this role are deemed selfish, unwomanly, and unpatriotic” (Mostov, 1995, p. 518). Women were expected to bear multiple children and teach them the ways of their nation in order to continue the country’s population. According to Mostov, even political leaders were admonishing women about abortions and discontent with their role in society.

Changing Nations and the Yugoslav Wars

During the 90s, women were highly affected by the ethnic conflicts and wars with little influence or say over the events. Women were often used as a tool in war, particularly to take revenge on the men of the country they were associated with. Rape as a weapon became a globally known issue during the Bosnian War because of the prevalence of the issue, although it had been used throughout previous wars in the Balkans. While the systematic rape of the civilian women was conducted by the Croats, Bosniaks, and Serbs, the Serbs are known as being the primary perpetrators, particularly against Bosnian Muslim women. Mostov offers some insight to

the purpose behind the use of rape during the Bosnian War. She explains that in this case, women are seen as abused and victimized, but only by those of other nationalities. She states, “Within the nation, women are seen as the property of fathers, husbands, or brothers and as national resources... A woman who has been raped is devalued property, and she signals defeat for the man who fails in his role as protector” (Mostov, 1995, p. 524). She continues to say that the humiliation experienced by the men serves as motivation to fight to protect their territory—both their women and their country. This tactic was also echoed by the Albanians against Serbian women during the war in Kosovo.

Not only were the rapes used within the actual battles to punish or humiliate each other, but they played a large part in media portrayal of the war as well. While some media discussed the fact that all three nations were both victims and perpetrators, many Western media outlets focused on the Serbs as the perpetrators. Croatian media also did this but left out their women as the victims and largely focused on the Bosnian Muslim women who were involved, most likely to keep their public humiliation low and to keep the image of their women untainted. Many sources also reported that Serbian military used Muslim women for sex slaves, on their own and in brothels. Croats were also accused of using Serbian women for similar purposes, and the war in Kosovo led to reports of Albanian mafia trafficking refugee women. This is a small picture of how women were used, not only as a symbol against the conflicting ethnicities, but also as commodities for men in the military.

In this time, media also used women as a way to “sell” the war to men. In Bosnia, for instance, magazines contrasted the news from the war with “semi-clad [women]...photographed in awkward positions usually indicating submission” (Ramet, 1999, p. 191). The women were often wearing uniforms and were shown expressing their love of their nation, patriotism, and

strong men. According to Ramet, “The subliminal message to the recruits was: If you are a ‘real man,’ you will do your duty for your nation and country, and if you do your duty, your reward will be the gratitude and possibly the bodies of young women, like this one” (Ramet, 1999, p. 192). While these tactics were used by many countries during war, Ramet argues that the nature of the events during the Bosnian War could have had dangerous implications for women at home from using female bodies to encourage nationalism and war effort. Violence against women during this time was carried out in many different ways for a variety of reasons.

During and after the Bosnian War, many women faced the problem of being in mixed marriages. These women faced violence from other ethnic groups, as well as their own husbands at times. Although many chose to leave, they had difficulties finding a community to accept them. To their husbands’ communities, they were the enemy and to their home communities they were traitors because they were seen as still belonging to their husbands (Kaufman, 2004).

Many women during this time also formed anti-war and pro-peace groups that tried to reach across nationalities. While some of them survived the war, many began to dissipate particularly in response to the ethnic cleansing and systematic rapes. This emergence of strong national identity, especially after the war, created a greater urgency for women to bear children to carry on the nations’ populations. Sons were highly celebrated by fathers, communities, and the state. Women’s role as their husbands’ property was reinforced in this time period.

Emergence of the UN & International Community

Following the wars in the Western Balkans, United Nations peacekeepers and foreign military personnel gained a strong presence in the region. Militarism is shown to increase violence against women, including sex trafficking. Reports of military and peacekeepers in

Bosnia keeping sex slaves and transporting large groups of women to unknown locations were exposed in the news and highly publicized. According to one author, “Although sex trafficking that was closely connected to ethnic conflicts stayed mainly within borders of war-affected and neighboring countries, it contributed to the expansion of prostitution and made good basis for these countries to become attractive destination for trafficking in women from other parts of Eastern Europe” (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2003). Although the UN expressed regret at the actions of the peacekeepers, those accused of the crimes in Bosnia-Herzegovina were giving immunity from prosecution of crimes under the Dayton Agreement. After the war ended and the agreement was established, peacekeepers flooded into Bosnia, establishing a new market for organized crime groups who were trafficking women and girls for forced prostitution. Researchers and journalists interested in this influx of foreign women to the country began to investigate the situation. When interviewing soldiers, “one soldier confided that the women could not leave the brothel, a fact he had learned after inviting the women to a party at the soldiers’ rented house” (Friman, 2007). The trafficking stayed largely hidden, with fronts as nightclubs and brothels.

Contractors hired by the US government also participated in the use of forced prostitutes and trafficking victims. Men from the US contracted DynCorp even purchased women for themselves, further solidifying the idea that these women were seen simply as products on the market. Even after the complicity of the international community was exposed, trafficked women were still seen as criminals rather than victims. Because of the immunity of the peacekeepers and the high-profile nature of many of the cases, “women identified as trafficking victims...generally faced criminal charges, imprisonment, fines, and ‘deportation’ across the inter-entity boundary line [from Republika Srpska to the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina]” (Friman, 2007). Although much of the international community was working to help these women, many were

still more concerned about keeping the interests of the perpetrators involved. The whistleblowers involved in the DynCorp case were fired, although investigations of the case led to several employees being forced to resign for alleged sex trafficking. The United Nations International Police Task Force (IPTF) was also accused of covering up sex trafficking cases involving UN peacekeeping troops due to the fact that none of the officers supposedly involved received any sort of retribution for their actions; this severely damaged the UN's credibility.

The market for trafficked women grew significantly when the UN and military troops moved into Bosnia, making it a major destination country for trafficking victims. One State Department cable stated that “as many as 10,000 foreign nationals—overwhelmingly young women—have been trafficked to or through Bosnia for voluntary or involuntary employment in the sex trade” (Friman, 2007). A similar situation happened in Kosovo following the introduction of the Kosovo Protection Force (KFOR). Crime and human rights abuse reports relating to trafficking were virtually non-existent before the emergence of the KFOR. After the troops moved in, the sex trafficking industry exploded, with a reported 80 percent of the clients being international. Foreign military and aid groups, in addition to the citizens of the Balkans countries, treat women from that region and even from other parts of Eastern Europe as commodity, a body to be sold.

Building Democracy and Capitalism

Throughout this period of Balkans history, democratization began to take root and to enact change throughout the countries, regardless of how small the change was. Democratization of the post-communist countries slowly began to change traditional roles and views of women, at least in urban areas. Rule of law and democracy did not reach rural areas as quickly or fully as it

did the cities. For example, in rural areas of Albania, code law still exists, which limits women's rights and roles in society. For the most part, women in these parts of Albania are still viewed as property of the husband or father—to the point that blood feuds have been fought over possession of a woman. Albania also has the unique cultural phenomenon of “sworn virgins,” or women who essentially become like men socially, culturally, and politically. These women can never marry or have families of their own, but they hold property rights, political rights, and other social rights that women in society do not have. These women do exist in other Western Balkan states, but they are primarily found in Albania (“Albanian sworn virgin,” 2014). While this practice has largely died out with the end of Communism, the continued use of code law, particularly in northern Albania, creates an environment for sworn virgins to still exist because of the lack of women's rights.

Democratization of the Balkan states also gave organized crime groups and traffickers greater access to the borders, and created a system that left gaps in employment of women in their home countries. The Communist era provided jobs for both women and men, but the declining economy combined with the war-ridden regime changes left many people, especially women, without jobs and in poverty. These factors left women and girls, especially in rural areas, vulnerable to human trafficking rings who promised job opportunities in the West. Traffickers prey on economic disparity between men and women, and they even use the promise of marriage to lure women into trafficking, showing that some traditional values for expectations of women still exist. Even in an increasingly democratic society, “women and young girls are seen as a source of income, without consideration of the consequences of their being trafficked” (Friman, 2007).

In general, the increased democratization of these countries has benefited women at the societal level. While economic and employment disparities still exist, women have gained more rights and gained a greater voice. Although women were traditionally excluded and uninvolved in the political process, they have more recently been trying to advocate for greater educational and entrepreneurial opportunities. Many women's groups in the region have "explored how to elect more women, take more prominent positions within a party and build leadership skills" ("Women in the Balkans," 2011). However, even though quotas have been set up for the number of women in parliament, these quotas are often unable to be filled and have not made much of an impact on the actual inclusion of women in policy and government besides in seat number. Some researchers have also pointed out the problem that the military, the UN, and the peacekeeping troops have historically existed as male-dominated structures, leading to further institutionalized gender inequality through the international community in the region (Jaffer, 2003). Women in the Balkans are continuing to break traditional roles and create a space for themselves in politics and in society, but even with continued democratization, there is much left to be done.

Gender Issues and the EU Era

Issues of gender equality and women's rights have been finding their way to government officials recently, particularly due to talks of European Union (EU) accession. As of July 2013, Croatia is the first of these few countries to become a member of the EU. The rest of the countries are in the process of application or negotiations, on their way to becoming members. In order to become EU members, these states must meet certain accession requirements, including meeting requirements about ensuring gender equality, combating domestic violence, and reducing human trafficking.

Many studies conducted show that states adopting gender equality and domestic violence legislation in the EU accession process are largely motivated by compliance to EU standards. A significant amount of member-states greatly slowed, if not stopped or regressed, the process of implementing these laws after they reached EU-member status (Avdeyeva, 2013). In fact, with Croatia's accession in July 2013, a European Parliament report on Western Balkan countries (Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, FYR Macedonia) showed that even with the adoption of most existing legislation concerning gender equality and anti-discrimination, many of these states still faced significant problems. For instance, the report notes the need for political participation by women, the lack of knowledge by the public about related legislation, the under-employment of women and lack of representation in the labor market, the discrimination against women entrepreneurs, the high presence of violence against women and domestic abuse, and the high number of Balkan women trafficked to EU states (Cornelissen, 2013). The report also highly encourages those states in negotiations with the EU to work with EU partners to remedy some of these problems and adopt/implement the related legislation. While the European Parliament stresses the importance of taking care of these problems, one cannot help but consider that Croatia was accepted as a member only three months after this report was produced.

Women in Modern Balkan Society

The push for greater gender equality continues, and much has improved, particularly in urban areas; however, objectification of women and domestic violence, alongside sex trafficking, still play a major role in Balkan society. As in many societies, women are expected to look a certain way and fill a certain role. Feminist historian Krassimira Daskalova, discussing the

Balkans, states, “The message conveyed is that beauty is the most valuable female ‘asset’ and that every woman should try to make herself sexually attractive to men and to become a source of men's pleasure” (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2003). Regardless of the respect and rights they have gained, women of this region are still often viewed as objects by both nationals and foreigners. Some experts blame media, saying, “Media re-constructed the traditional opposition between men’s sexual needs and women as passive sexual objects and men’s property, which is further used to justify violence and blame the victim. At the same time, global mass media reinforced this trend through the circulation of stereotyped gender images ‘deliberately made attractive for marketing purposes’” (Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2003). Stereotypes of Balkan women can be found in media throughout the globe, not just in the region itself. This can be seen through the phenomenon of mail-order brides from this region. In an early-2000s’ survey of 14,000 mail-order brides, 64 percent were found to be of Eastern European origin, with around 67 percent of those women holding a Bachelor’s degree or above (Daskalova). Because of their origin, “Western man expect them to be DIFFERENT [sic] than their own women: kind, family oriented, ‘feminine,’ and traditional” (Daskalova). The impact of globalization on this region has furthered the reach of traffickers through promises of work in the West and easy access to clients abroad. As one source states, “Globalization has facilitated speedy, low-cost, and anonymous communications... Web sites advertise sex tourism overseas and internationally market child pornography and ‘brides’ available for marriage, often a discreet cover for sexual trafficking” (Shelley, 2010).

Many organizations and individuals have been and are continuing to work for further gender equality in this region. In order to achieve this, many groups educate young men, empower girls from minorities such as the Roma, and build political networks specifically for

women. Research done in recent years shows that women earn 11 percent less than men working in the same or similar jobs in Serbia, which is even better than in Montenegro where they earn around 16 percent less (Foundation for the Advancement of Economics, 2013).

According to economic researchers, “Women in Serbia...face high barriers at the point of entry into the labour [sic] market, so they need to be better qualified than men on average to be able to access employment in the first place” (Foundation for the Advancement of Economics, 2013).

While numbers show that there seems to be a low wage gap, the low labor market participation on behalf of women who are actually more qualified than male employees is most likely what accounts for this rather than actual wage equality. Economists contrast this region to Western Europe where the wage gap is narrow, but women are less qualified on average. Experts also discuss the presence of the “glass ceiling,” where women cannot obtain top-level positions, regardless of high qualifications. This also contributes to the wage gap.

Another way that groups are working towards gender equality is through the fight against domestic violence and violence against women. According to Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE), “Over 54% of women in Serbia have experienced family violence in their lifetime” (Women Against Violence Europe, 2012). Similarly, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, anywhere from 41 percent to 56 percent of women have experienced psychological abuse from an intimate partner, while 8 percent have experienced sexual abuse by an intimate partner (WAVE, 2012). Numbers for victims of domestic violence are relatively high in the Western Balkans, even in Croatia, which has recently become an EU member. While all of these countries have signed treaties and enacted laws against domestic violence and violence against women, many of them do not have adequate shelters, services, or legal support for the victims, if any at all. Of the women estimated to have been victims of domestic violence in Serbia, only 10 percent actually reported the

incident (UNDP, 2013). The low incidence reports are likely due to a lack of trust of authorities, a lack of services for victims, and the overall attitude toward domestic violence. According to surveys conducted in Serbia by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “17% of boys think that sexual violence is caused by woman’s ‘inappropriate behavior’... 14% of boys have insulted his [sic] girlfriend or some other young women and 6-7% have been violent through pressuring for sexual relation, physical violence or threatening” (UNDP, 2012).

While Croatia has been improving the situation for domestic violence victims and was even globally recognized for a domestic violence public service announcement they produced in March 2013, the country still has many issues it faces. For example, a report from 2012 showed that “because of vague language in Croatia’s law making ‘psychological violence’ an offense, police are arresting not only men when they physically assault and batter their wives, but also the victim when husbands claim that their wives verbally insulted them and therefore committed ‘psychological violence’” (Advocates for Human Rights, 2012). Domestic violence victims also often had their children taken away from them, and shelters were lacking basic resources due to strict government funding laws. While many women experienced apathetic attitudes on behalf of the prosecutors, women’s advocates in Croatia claimed that police forces were actually on the forefront of combating domestic violence. Croatia’s accession to the EU has pushed for some improvements in gender equality issues such as domestic violence, but much is still left to be done.

Sex Trafficking in the Balkans

Related to issues of gender equality, and one of the focus areas of the EU, is the problem of human trafficking in and from the Balkans. These countries function as countries of origin,

transit, and even destination. According to the European Parliament, at least 30 percent of foreign victims found in EU states are from the Western Balkans (Cornelissen, 2013). These countries are also used as transit states because of their proximity to EU countries (Romania, Hungary, Italy, Greece, now Croatia, etc.), as well as seaports (Adriatic, Mediterranean, etc.). High trafficking also exists among Balkan states. For example, the 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report (TIP) states that foreign victims in Serbia were typically found to have originated in Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova. While women are often trafficked by local organized crime groups, the Russian mafia is also heavily involved with the trafficking industry in the Western Balkans. As previously shown, this region has a history of viewing women as property of men and commodities to be used, which has significantly contributed not only to the trafficking problem but to the overall attitudes about sex trafficking.

While the countries in the Balkans have at least national-level laws against sex trafficking, in Serbia, Albania, and Bosnia-Herzegovina in particular, victims continue to be punished for crimes of prostitution rather than be treated as victims. In a report on Serbia's anti-trafficking laws, the author states, "The most frequent misdemeanors which are or may be direct results of human trafficking are prostitution and (illegal) residence of foreign nationals in Serbia. ...women of Serbian citizenship who have become victims of human trafficking...are not recognized as the victims...instead, they are prosecuted for engaging in prostitution" (Kostic, 2012). Women are viewed as criminals by both authorities and the public, rather than victims of exploitation, even if force is known to be part of the case.

Studies on human trafficking in the Balkan region show that the face of human trafficking has changed throughout the years. While sex trafficking still remains the prevalent form of human trafficking, how and where the victims are exploited has shifted in the past 20

years. One report states that “in the 1990s, victims were stereotyped as young Eastern European women in slutty outfits at loud bars [and]...had been dragged into the region by organized crime groups to perform at nightclubs and in brothels” (OCCRP, 2012). Now the victims are characterized as being “underage and mostly local...in private apartments and secluded locations. And the traffickers are local gangs or individual criminals...even families of the victim” (OCCRP, 2012). Internal trafficking has been on the rise throughout Balkan countries in recent years, first instigated by an increase in the presence of the international community; however, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Center for Protection of Women and Children reported that research conducted in 2004 showed that “80 percent of men who patronize these premises [businesses functioning as brothels] are native residents” (Friman, 2007). Balkan women continue to be exploited and sold as commodities throughout this region and to both western and eastern countries as well.

Combating Sex Trafficking in the Balkans

Fighting human trafficking in this region is a multi-faceted approach that requires more than just establishing laws, building shelters, or educating the public. Although all the Balkans countries have signed onto international laws and adopted anti-trafficking legislation, an overall lack of implementation and enforcement exists throughout the governments. While some anti-trafficking NGOs exist in the region, a large amount of the work is done by international and intergovernmental organizations. These groups categorized their approaches to combating trafficking into “two major categories—law enforcement and human rights approaches” (Friman, 2007). However, the actual approach to combating sex trafficking in the Western Balkans must be more nuanced considering the complex issues surrounding the industry.

Since anti-trafficking legislation exists in these countries, part of the solution involves establishing the importance of implementing and enforcing the existing laws. Many international organizations such as IOM, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe work with Balkan governments to provide resources, models, and support in ensuring that the existing legislation is actually carried out and is followed consistently throughout each country. As mentioned earlier, the law enforcement officials tend to be more on-board with anti-trafficking laws than prosecutors and judicial officials, who often blame the victim, ignore the perpetrator, or even dismiss the case altogether. Women's groups and organizations also push for a change in attitude concerning anti-sex trafficking legislation so that women forced into prostitution are treated as victims and provided with adequate and proper services, rather than condemned as criminals.

Many organizations, particularly NGOs, work to change attitudes about women/girls and gender equality, as well. Groups such as Care, WAVE, and FAIR Girls, in addition to international organizations such as UN Women and UNDP, work to educate men, boys, and general communities about gender equality, women's rights, and domestic violence. Many of these organizations also push to change societal attitudes towards sex trafficking victims so that they are seen as victims instead of criminals or promiscuous women—people rather than property. As previously mentioned, groups like WAVE also work to change attitudes about domestic violence, where women are often seen as “deserving” or the instigators. Changing societal views about women can help establish attitudes that will allow women who are sex trafficking victims to be treated with care.

Another area that can make an impact on the sex trafficking industry is the economy and the disparity in employment between men and women. The wage gap between genders is a huge

problem in most of these countries, as is the lack of employment for women, many of whom have at least Bachelor's degrees. In this region, most girls are literate and well educated, but the discrimination shows up in the work force, since women often have to meet higher requirements than men for the same jobs and are discriminated against if they are working for themselves, likely due to the fact that they are going against traditional women's roles. Additionally, finding a balance between making concessions with gender equality to meet EU standards and improving gender equality for its own sake is a key piece to making lasting, effective change in this area of the world. As seen with Romania, Bulgaria, and even somewhat with Croatia, countries often slow down or even backslide in progressing gender equality and anti-human trafficking efforts after EU accession, especially since they are priorities more often in words rather than in practice. Shifting attitudes about women, as well as creating an equal labor market, can help create change in this area that will last beyond EU accession.

Conclusion

The sex trafficking industry in the Western Balkans stems from historical attitudes towards and treatment of women. Gender-based violence and discrimination have existed in the region for centuries through targeting women in war, the patriarchal society and family system, and the slave trade—antiquated and modern. Women belonged to their husbands and were to be protected as the bearers of the future nations but were also seen as property to be owned and even exploited. In the 90s and 2000s, this was still the prominent view by the men of the region, particularly throughout the wars when rape was used as a weapon. With rapid regime change, “the violent Yugoslav fragmentation and economic downturns altered traditional social relations in ways that led to more exploitative trafficking exchanges of women and young girls and the

proliferation of new networks of suppliers, distributors, and clients” (Friman, 2007).

Additionally, mass migration and the emergence of organized crime groups due to the fall of Communism increased the prevalence of trafficking in the region. Women were used as commodity by UN peacekeeping forces and foreign military entities, as well as their own men. Democratization and post-conflict rebuilding saw a shift in women’s rights, although traditional values and roles still existed particularly in rural areas.

Women, to this day, are still working to create a strong voice for themselves in many of these Western Balkan societies. Although their place in society has increased, gaps in employment opportunities and political participation show that these countries still have a long way to go. These factors have directly influenced the sex trafficking industry today, especially since employment is still difficult for many women to find, the nature of sex trafficking in the region has changed, and women still face much discrimination by men and even by the state. Improvements have been made, and many groups are working with this region to continue the change, but gender equality still has a long way to go. In the growing global fight against human trafficking, the Balkans have been named a prominent area for sex trafficking—a characteristic that many are now working to change. Understanding the historical context of women in society, as well as the modern context, can help us determine the root causes of sex trafficking in the Balkans, which will in turn allow us to develop long-term solutions to be able to combat modern day slavery in the Western Balkans.

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