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## Ukrainian Women: Victims of Putin's War and Sex Industry Predators

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### Keywords

Ukraine, war, refugees, women, Vladimir Putin, sex buyers, traffickers, sex work advocates, humanitarian disaster, rape, exploitation, sex trafficking

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## EDITORIAL

# UKRAINIAN WOMEN: VICTIMS OF PUTIN'S WAR AND SEX INDUSTRY PREDATORS

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## KEYWORDS

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**T**HE PREDATORS ARE AWAITING THE ARRIVAL of Ukrainian women refugees. The sex buyers, pimps, and *sex work* advocacy groups are eager to prey on them.

There are reports about rapes, abductions, and deportations from social media sources and mainstream publications. Feminist researchers are playing a critical role by documenting the misogynistic, predatory views of sex buyers. And police report seeing suspicious men at the border talking to women as they leave Ukraine.

To date, four million refugees, most of them women and children, have left Ukraine, and there are an estimated 6.5 million people displaced inside the country (United Nations High Commission on Refugees, 2022). In a country with a population of 44 million, approximately one-quarter of them have been driven from their homes. This number is the largest number of displaced persons and refugees in Europe since World War II.

The cause of this humanitarian disaster is Russian leader Vladimir Putin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, the neighboring country to the west of Russia. Putin considers the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 to be "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20<sup>th</sup>] century" (NBC News, 2010). For the last three decades, his political and military goals have been to reconstitute the empire under his leadership—often at the point of a gun. He tolerates no opposition. He doesn't care who or what he destroys. His methods are genocidal.

As they flee, most refugees carry only a backpack or one small suitcase. And in some cases, their personal belongings have been sacrificed so they can carry a cat or a dog (Associated Press, 2022). Such a large, vulnerable group of women and children are targets for traffickers, especially pimps from European sex industries. The United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres, said: "For predators and human

traffickers, the war in Ukraine is not a tragedy. It's an opportunity. And women and girls are the targets" (UN News, 2022).

With no male family member accompanying them, many women have to cope and make decisions on their own. Many of them do not speak any language other than Ukrainian or Russian. And many of them have never been outside Ukraine before. They are exposed and in need of assistance.

## ABDUCTIONS AND DEPORTATIONS OF UKRAINIAN CITIZENS

There have been chilling reports of Ukrainian citizens being kidnapped by Russian forces in the last two weeks. Zmina—A Human Rights Center in Kyiv is documenting the journalists and officials who have been abducted (Zmina, 2022a). They are producing a video naming men and women who have been *Taken* (Zmina, 2022b). Tetiana Pechonchyk, the head of Zmina, said that activists, volunteers, community representatives, elected officials, and council workers were among those abducted (Irvine Partners, March 29).

There are also reports of people being forcibly deported from heavily bombed cities where there is no electricity, water, or food supplies. Verification is difficult, but there are many reports on social media from officials, friends, and relatives of people who have been taken away.

The numbers deported range from 6000 to 30,000. In particular, the mayor of Mariupol, a city under heavy siege on the coast of the Sea of Azov, has reported that between 20,000 and 30,000 residents have been forcibly "evacuated" by Russian occupying forces (Kirby, 2022, March 26; Polityuk & Heritage, 2022, March 24).

The people are said to be moved to camps in Russian-occupied territories or unknown locations inside Russia (The New Voice of Ukraine (UNIAN), 2022). Russian soldiers take them by buses to nearby camps or trains farther into Russia (Kirby, 2022). People are taken to "filtration" camps, where people are checked and sorted by the military or Russian government officials (Kirby, 2022). The Russians take their passports and personal identity documents. From there, people are sent to other locations in Russia. Russian media reports that it has erected tents for "people in a life support camp as part of humanitarian aid" (Kirby, 2022). There are reports of communications from some people who say they were forced to go on the buses (Kirby, 2022).

The best documentation of people's movement and setting up camps is from an analysis of satellite images (Kirby, 2022). Dated images show the building of tent camps on the southeast Ukrainian coast outside the besieged city of Mariupol and inside Russia. The satellite images also reveal dozens of vehicles, including buses, in a convoy, moving out of Mariupol toward the tent camps (Kirby, 2022).

There is a history of deportations of 100,000s of people in the Soviet Union from 1936 to 1952 during the rule of communist dictator Joseph Stalin (UNHCR, 1996). The goals, then and now, are to destroy communities and opposition by breaking-up communities and depopulating cities.

Since most men are fighting or assisting in defense of Ukraine, one can assume that most of the deported people are women and children. To date, we know nothing about the intentions of the Russians or the fate of the deportees.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE

There are reported cases of sexual violence against Ukrainian women and girls inside and outside Ukraine (McGrath, 2022).

- In Poland, a man was detained on the suspicion that he raped a 19-year-old woman. He offered her shelter after she fled Ukraine (McGrath, 2022).
- In Duesseldorf, Germany, two men were arrested after an 18-year-old woman, who was housed on a hotel boat for refugees, reported being raped (Germany pledges to protect, 2022).

Women and girls still inside Ukraine are at risk as well. Ukraine's attorney general, Iryna Venediktova, announced the first rape charges against a Russian soldier.

- The prosecutor in Brovary in the Kyiv region accepted the report from a woman that a Russian soldier killed her unarmed husband and then repeatedly raped her (Venediktova, 2022).
- Recently young girls evacuated from Mariupol, a besieged city on the coast of the Sea of Azov, were admitted to a hospital in Zaporizhzhia to be treated for rectovaginal tears (Rudenko, 2022, April 2).

There will be many victims of rape in Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine. Their stories will not emerge until they are free.

## SEX TRAFFICKING

Women and girls are susceptible to sex traffickers inside and outside Ukraine. There are reports that predators are contacting vulnerable women and girls online, at border locations, and in refugee camps (McGrath, 2022).

Trafficking in women from Ukraine has been an ongoing criminal activity since the end of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991 (Hughes, 2001; Verkhovna Rada (Parliament), 1991).

I researched the trafficking of women from Ukraine with a Ukrainian research partner, Tatyana Denisova, 20 years ago. We wrote about corruption, organized crime, and the demand for victims from western European countries, Russia, and even the far east (Hughes & Denisova, 2001). According to data from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), from 2017 to 2020, most victims of trafficking from Ukraine were identified in Russia (UNODC, 2022).<sup>1</sup> Most traffickers moved women across the eastern border of Ukraine into Russia, which was more accessible and less risky than trafficking them to western Europe, which did occur. Also, there were no language barriers in Russia, and historic connections existed.

However, now the flow of refugees is in the opposite direction. Almost all people are escaping the war by moving west to cross the border into Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary, and Slovakia; only seven percent of refugees are moving east to Russia (UNODC, 2022). It's not known how this will affect the trafficking networks and the organized crime groups that operate there.

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<sup>1</sup> The UNODC report says the numbers include trafficking for forced labor and sexual exploitation.

## AWARENESS

Most activists and humanitarian support agencies know how vulnerable Ukrainian women will be to sexual exploitation and violence. At border crossings, police watch for suspicious activity and interrupt it. The police say that they move away when they approach the suspicious men (Euronews, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). After decades of awareness-raising and training, officials and non-governmental organizations are aware of the potential for trafficking.

In destination countries, such as Germany, police in Berlin are warning women and children on social media in Ukrainian and Russian languages against accepting suspicious offers from men (McGrath, 2022). In Romania and Poland, plain-clothes police officers look for potential criminals trying to exploit victims. In Romania, the men are warned away (McGrath, 2022).

## TARGETING UKRAINIAN WOMEN REFUGEES

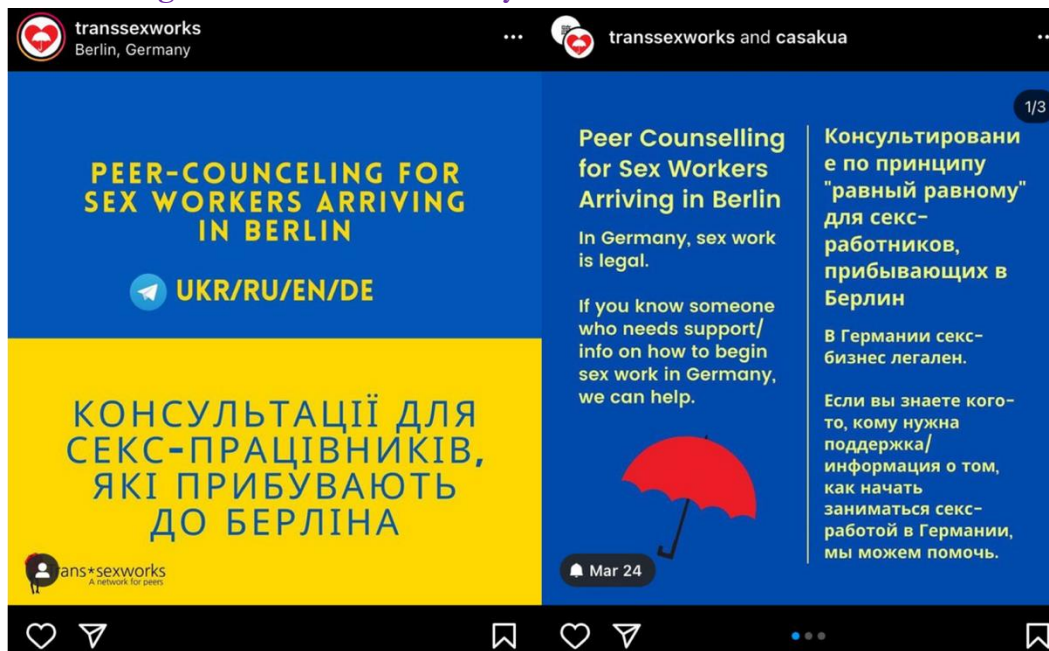
Feminist researchers are documenting the exploitation of Ukrainian women by searching social media for signs of trafficking and the anticipated sexual exploitation of victims once they arrive in western Europe.

Right after the Russian invasion, pornography users began searching Google for “Ukrainian girls,” “Ukrainian porn,” and “war porn” (Gluck, 2022). XVideos added tags for “Ukraine teen,” “Ukraine prostitute,” and added thousands of videos inviting users to click (Gluck, 2022). The videos were unlikely to be Ukrainian refugees, but the site earned money by leading users to think they might be. On Reddit, users asked for pornographic details of sexual assaults in Ukraine (Gluck, 2022). To date, there have not been documented cases of sex trafficking of refugees, but the practice is common. It will occur.

Misogyny and the objectification of women are so pervasive that it is part of the casual conversation among men as they go about their jobs of providing humanitarian assistance. A Brazilian State Deputy traveled to the Ukrainian border on a humanitarian mission to assess the aid needed for Ukrainians fleeing the war. Arthur Moledo do Val recorded an audio message that was leaked. He is heard telling someone that the vulnerable women are “cheap because they’re poor.” He rated the attractiveness of the women refugees and said: “Picture a line of 200 meters or more, the absolute best, you don’t get even close to the level of beauty found in the refugee line here” (As quoted by Reduxx Team, 2022). He brags about how many Ukrainian women followers he has on Instagram, indicating he has access to women and could easily recruit them for sexual exploitation. He describes vulgar sex acts he’d perform on the “chicks” he sees among the refugees (Reduxx Team, 2022).

Promoters for the sex industry in Germany, where prostitution is legal, are offering Ukrainian information on how to enter German prostitution (Gluck, 2022, March 24). The Berlin-based organization Trans\*Sexworks (<http://transsexworks.com/>) has announcements in Ukrainian, Russian, English, and German on their Instagram site saying, “We are now offering peer-counseling (sic) and support in Ukrainian, Russian, and English for all sex-workers fleeing the war in Ukraine” (Gluck, 2022. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Notice on Trans\*Sexworks Instagram Offering Information on How to Begin Sex Work in Germany.



Since prostitution and brothels are legal in Germany, the government works with the sex industry and its allies. The German government funds Trans\*Sexworks. (Kraus, 2022, April 2). Trans\*Sexworks normalizes prostitution and describes the advantages of working in prostitution.

It is very common for people to do sex work in a time of need and financial insecurity. Fleeing war is one of those. Sex work is a way to make money anonymously, with no work permit, without educational certificates and without speaking much German/English. Welfare and minimum wage jobs do not cover the costs of sending money abroad to family and friends that might still be in Ukraine. Not everyone will have access to welfare or be able to work a minimum wage job (Transsexworks.com, 2022, April 2).

The German Interior Minister, Nancy Faeser, says she wants to protect Ukrainian women from traffickers and has announced a “high police presence at train stations” (Protecting Ukrainian women, 2022, March 20); at the same time, another branch of the government says Trans\*Sexworks is listed in the Ministry of Family, Seniors, Women, and Youth’s official guide to the country’s prostitution law (Prostituiertenschutzgesetz) as a counseling center.

Trans\*Sexwork says it is not trying to “recruit” Ukrainian refugees into prostitution. They say they have “entry consultations” for individuals wanting to begin prostitution in Germany (Reuters Fact Check, 2022, March 30).

Ingeborg Kraus (Norak & Kraus, 2018; 2019; 2020), a German trauma psychologist, wrote a complaint to the German Ministry of Interior about advocating prostitution for people fleeing the war in Ukraine. (She posted the complaint on Change.org if you’d like to sign it <https://www.change.org/p/sexkauf-bestrafen-prostitution-abbauen/u/30364168>).

## ONGOING AND FUTURE WORK

Women's groups in every European country work to end sexual exploitation and violence. In mid-March, there was an online meeting entitled Stop Sexual and Reproductive Exploitation of Ukrainian Refugees. It allowed women's groups to share what they knew about the situation in Ukraine and the harm to women and children. Many local, regional, and international non-governmental organizations and government agencies provide services to victims of violence and trafficking. I encourage everyone to donate money to these groups.

Feminist researchers continue to document the exploiters' activities. I did this years ago (Hughes, 2001a; 2001b, 2002.) Collecting the statements by men who buy women or use pornography is essential work. It provides frontline documentation and theoretical insight into men's cruel behavior and misogynous attitudes towards women.

The increased attention to the victimization of Ukrainian women will provide an opportunity to focus on the western European sex industry's demand for victims. There is a continent-wide effort to press countries to end their tolerance or legalization of prostitution and adopt the Nordic model, also called the Swedish model (Nordic Model Alliance, 2022). This set of laws criminalizes the men who buy sex and commit so many acts of violence against the women and the pimps, brothel owners, and managers, or as they are called "managers." Research documentation shows that legalized or decriminalized prostitution increases the sex trafficking of women and children (Cho, Dreher & Neumayer, 2013, Shapiro & Hughes, 2017).

The forces that promote and profit from commercial sexual exploitation have been on the march for decades. They had a recent victory in Belgium when the Federal Parliament decriminalized prostitution (Chini, Maïthé, 2022, March 18).

Beyond our work against sexual violence and exploitation, we need to engage in dialogues and advocacy for democracy and the rule of law. Political scholars and advocates for democracy have been anxiously watching and discussing the rise of authoritarianism in Europe (and other western nations, such as Australia and the United States) and its threat to democracy (Applebaum, 2020; Snyder, 2017; 2019). Our only hope of gaining rights and dignity for women is through democratic processes that include good governance and effective opposition to corruption and corporate oligarchs who buy influence in parliaments.

We must sustain our work for women daily through immediate assistance to victims. Still, we must never forget the critical democratic systems with advocates for human and women's rights that ensure an end to violence and exploitation.

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