

Bucharest Daily News "Only one chance in Bucharest for sex trade victims"

In Bucharest there is only one center for trafficked women. In an apartment at a secret address four girls who were victims of sex trafficking are looking to put their lives back together. In an exclusive interview with Bucharest Daily News, they spoke about their ordeals and how police in some countries worked together with the traffickers.

Ioana was sold by her own sister when she was 21. Now, two years later, she is assisted by the Association for Developing Alternative Practices for Reintegration and Education (Adpare), which works to integrate trafficking victims back into society.

She is now working as a waitress in a bar. Sitting on the floor in the Adpare apartment, chain smoking as she tells her story, she relives the humiliation and fear she went through for almost two years. Ioana comes from a poor and shattered family, as her parents are divorced. "My mother remarried a murderer who killed two people. He was a drunk and a very violent man, who was beating us frequently. I had seven brothers and sisters and it was very hard for us to live there," says the girl. She had to leave home and work in a bread factory, where she slept near an oven on a small armchair. She was fired because she was always tired. She ended up selling pretzels in a market and sleeping on benches in parks.

When one of her sisters came back from Turkey, she asked Ioana to go with her to Greece to work in a clothes factory. "I don't know for sure if it was my sister. I don't want to say that because I don't want the police to arrest her," she says, adding that her sister promised they would go together to Greece and work in a factory. "She introduced me to some guys who made me a passport in a day. We left the country and we were supposed to meet my sister in Bulgaria. Instead of meeting her, we met a Serbian man," Ioana recounts.

"I started to have doubts when they took us to a public bathroom and told us to take our clothes off. I refused, but they said they needed to see if we have any marks on our bodies, which may cause problems when passing the border," says Ioana. She found their explanation hard to believe, but had to conform and took her clothes off. "I had a burn on my left buttock because I used to sleep near the oven at the bread factory. When the Serbian saw the mark, he said he didn't want me. I didn't care, I wanted to go home. I started crying and said I wanted to go back. They told me to calm down as nothing bad would happen to me."

Ioana's voice gets more and more hesitating. She keeps playing with a pack of cigarettes and starts crying. She lights another cigarette and after a few minutes she's ready to continue.

She says she was sold about 15 times from one pimp to another. She tried to run away several times, but always failed as she was guarded all the time. Eventually, she was taken to an apartment and left alone there for two weeks. "A man brought me a pack of biscuits and a cola every two days. I felt like I was going mad in those weeks. He also brought me soap to wash and be clean for the men he brought to see me. No one wanted to buy me for a long time, as I was crying and looking scared all the time," says Ioana. She was then purchased by a Serbian gypsy. "He took me to a miserable house, with dirt

everywhere and all kinds of insects, such as bed bugs and lice. He raped me there, on the filthy bed," says Ioana, with an expression of anger and disgust on her face.

Taken from one man to another, forced to have sex although she was scared and crying, Ioana was bought by a very important man in the Serbian underworld. "He was always beating me and the other girls, having sex with us when ever he pleased and humiliating us," says the girl, with a trace of anger in her voice.

Ioana made a friend there, a man from Albania who was about 45 years old. "He didn't sleep with me, he only wanted to talk. I told him I was forced to prostitute and he said he would help me run away," says the girl. The Albanian wanted to buy her from the Serbian, but the price was too high: 8,000 euros.

After about two years of being bought and sold, she was saved by the police, but her problems didn't stop there. The police filed charges against her pimp, who was also wanted by Interpol, but she lost the trial and her real name and photo appeared throughout the media in Serbia. "My panderer's men even tried to shoot me in the court's hall, but the police protected me," says Ioana.

In the end, she got back to Romania. But when she found out her mother was killed by her stepfather and that her brothers were in orphanages, Ioana decided to kill herself. "I swallowed a handful of pills because I wanted to sleep forever," she says.

When she was in the hospital she met GMS, the president of Adpare.

S's team opened the Adpare Foundation in 2002, the only center in Bucharest that offers a place to live, assistance and psychological support to the victims of trafficking.

Ioana decided to join the center, decided to end any relations with her sister and refused to file charges against her. She now lives with three other girls in the center's apartment. Ana, 19, is one of them. She also comes from a poor family with problems, with an alcoholic stepfather who was insulting her and even came on to her several times. "I told my mother he came on to me and she said I was lying. She even told me to leave home," says Ana.

She was 18 when her best friend suggested they should leave for Ireland where they would work in a store. She accepted and her friend introduced her to two men who took her out of the country in a few days.

Ana was taken to an apartment in Dublin where she was forced to prostitute. She says somebody was always keeping an eye on her so she wouldn't run. Her customers were paying 130 euros for half an hour of sexual relations and 260 euros for a whole hour. "All the money went to my pimp. I didn't receive any money for many months in a row," says Ana.

She tried to run away several times but she couldn't succeed. Soon the police raided the place and sent Ana back home: "The police took us from our beds. We had to give statements. Of course, I told everything: how many girls there were, about the prices and everything else."

"I think my best friend knew all along what would happen to me," she says in quiet voice. Ana has a boyfriend at the moment. She was afraid to tell him the truth at the beginning, but she recently told him everything she went through. "His reaction was not ugly at all, he told me the past is gone and I have to think only about the present," says Ana. She still doesn't feel safe because her pimp is still free.

After going through such tribulations, young women like Ioana and Ana find it incredibly hard to start new lives and put the past behind them. This is where the Adpare Foundation

steps in, helping the girls communicate their fears and feelings and showing them they should also think about their achievements while putting the bad things aside.

The Adpare Foundation - hope for the victims of sex trafficking

The center's primary funding comes from Holland, from a similar center to the Adpare model. "A stewardess found out about us from an interview I gave to a newspaper in Holland about what happens to the girls. She came to visit us and was so impressed that in a few months she mobilized many of her colleagues. We now have pilots who come to help us. They repaired our toilet, shower and the computers," says S. When the pilots have flights to Romania, they visit the girls and help the center any way they can. The rent is paid by a Romanian woman who got married in Holland. "She is of great help to us and we have a lot to thank her for," says S.

The center receives cases from the International Organization for Migration (OIM). "The girls are asked by representatives when they are taken to OIM shelters if they want to receive assistance from us," says S.

The address of the center is kept secret because of security reasons and because of the negative reactions people have. "The neighbors know we take care of girls from poor families, no one knows they are victims of human trafficking. We had very bad reactions even from people we didn't expect to have such responses," says S.

The four girls living in the center run the apartment themselves. Each of them has chores to do. "They became a family," says S.

S says the reintegration process is quite difficult at the beginning, as the girls' tragic experiences stop them from building a trusting relationship with other people.

The next step is vocational counseling, when social workers decide together with the young women what profession is suitable for their aptitudes. The courses chosen most often are hairdresser, manicurist-pedicurist, and computer secretary.

The girls are usually sold by their relatives or friends

There are several methods the panderers use to find girls and force them to prostitute. Most of the time people close to the victim are involved in the trafficking. "We even had a case of a father selling his daughter, without knowing what he was doing. He was promised his family would be helped if he gave up his daughter," says S. The girl wound up in Macedonia where she was forced to prostitute and was locked up. She was found in a police raid.

S says the pimps or the intermediaries convince the girls by giving them examples of people who have a good life abroad. "They even show the girls photographs of people working and making a lot of money abroad, which usually has the expected effect," she says. "The successful example works perfectly," says S.

There were cases when the relatives of the girls knew what was going to happen to them abroad and still sold them to the traffickers. "For example, an uncle promised his two nieces he would bring them to Bucharest for summer vacation. The two sisters, both minors, were from the countryside and were in a bad financial situation. He told them they would work in a supermarket, arranging products on the shelves," says S. When they arrived in Bucharest, they were taken to a woman who locked the girls in a house. Some men took them and sold them separately in France.

Another way to find girls for trafficking used by the panderers is through companies that promise the girls jobs abroad. "For example, there are a lot of artistic management firms who make extraordinary promises to the girls. Most of them are naive enough and accept

the offers," says S.

Once over the border, the girls are very well guarded. Many try to run away, but the consequences were tragic for some. "We had a girl who ran away from her pimp and found a decent job in Bosnia. But he found and shot her. He emptied the gun into her stomach," says S. "The girl lived, but we had to take her to Holland for a month as she needed medical help," explained S. "The panderer who shot her is now in prison," she added.

Authorities' attitude worsens the girls' situation

Besides having to live with their memories, the girls have to put up with the negative reactions some people have upon hearing they were trafficking victims. "Many believe that a victim of trafficking is a prostitute. They don't make any difference between these terms, although the difference is obvious. Another term used is forced prostitution. I don't agree, it is slavery, it is not forced prostitution. Prostitution involves receiving money in exchange for services. These girls don't receive any money; they have a lot of fictitious debts. And they never get rid of these debts. The panderer will sell them to someone else and everything starts all over. There is no way out of this, unless they are found or if they manage to run away, which is usually impossible," explains S.

Even the authorities, who are supposed to help the girls, don't take this phenomenon seriously. School authorities were very reluctant when the girls tried to register. "The School Inspectorate rejected their applications, saying they don't have permanent residence in Bucharest. This is not normal, taking into consideration the fact that many schools have dorms for children who don't have residence in Bucharest," explained S. The solution was to appeal directly to the high school principals, asking them to respect the confidentiality of the girls.

Even when going to the doctor the girls have to bear further insults. "One doctor once told a victim who had syphilis that she deserved her fate and isolated her in a separate room," says S.

In the former Yugoslavia there are major problems in this domain, as the human trafficking networks are very numerous. S says that in the former Yugoslavia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia, a victim has no place to go even if she manages to run away, and if they go to the local police, they are sold back to the panderers: "The international police carry out raids and they are the girls' only hope."

The negative reactions the authorities and those close to the girls have when they hear what happened to them make the reintegration process harder. S says this is a matter of mentality. "People should get rid of their prejudices and try to help the girls because they really do need help," added S.

S says they had problems even with the police in Romania, with whom they have to collaborate all the time. She remembered one day when they spotted a trafficking situation near a public park. When they called the police, they were told someone would come in half an hour. Nevertheless, no police car arrived at the scene. "They said no car was available," says S.

Out of the thousands of Romanian girls who fall victim to panderers every year, only about 200 a year get to shelters or centers destined to help victims of trafficking.

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