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Journalist of the Month

Chakarova's 'Price of Sex' Reveals Sex Marketplace

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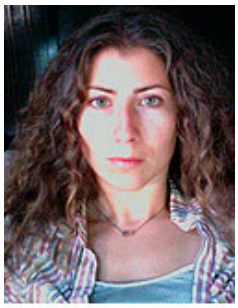
By Anna Louie Sussman
WeNews correspondent

Photographer Mimi Chakarova spent seven years delving into the world of sex trafficking in Eastern Europe, even going undercover to document the situation. The result is an intimate multimedia portrait of these women's lives.



Mimi Chakarova

(WOMENSENEWS)--Jenea saw 50 customers a day the year she worked in Turkey.

She wasn't a bank teller or a hairdresser.

Jenea was one of the estimated 1.39 million people trafficked each year into the sex trade industry, according to the Geneva-based International Labor Organization.

She is also one of the subjects of an intimate multimedia portrait series by photojournalist Mimi Chakarova called "The Price of Sex: Women Speak."

For the seven-year-long investigative series, Chakarova delved deep into the murky world of sex trafficking, interviewing dozens of women--and even posing as a trafficked woman herself. The result is a handful of profiles, narrated through photography, video and audio, which paint a picture of what these women must endure.

Chakarova, in conjunction with the Center for Investigative Reporting, based in Berkeley, Calif., brought these stories to the public in May of this year. They launched www.priceofsex.org, a Web site that unites these women's stories with resources on the issue, allowing people to take action, donate or learn more.

Over the course of the project, Chakarova estimates that she spoke with up to 50 women from Eastern Europe who had been trafficked. At times, her subjects were so traumatized that she could not bring herself to continue interviewing.

"You feel 'Why am I doing this?' It's painful. In those cases I did not push," Chakarova told Women's eNews in a phone interview.

Dark Side of Immigration

Chakarova moved with her family in 1990, when she was 13, to Baltimore

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from Bulgaria, as the country emerged from communism. When she returned to Bulgaria at age 15, she found that many of her peers had left the country in search of work--and many never came back.

"They had gone on their own and their families were not hearing from them," said

Chakarova. "I wanted to look at the dark side of this immigration story."

Chakarova later moved to California to earn her BFA in photography at the San Francisco Art Institute and then spent years visually documenting the lives of vulnerable groups, particularly in Cuba, Kashmir, India, and South Africa. She currently teaches photography at Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, University of California.

In 2002 she turned her attention to the issue of sex trafficking. That year Chakarova, partly supported by the Center for Investigative Reporting and working for PBS Frontline, traveled back to Eastern Europe to look for women to share their experiences and tell their stories on camera. In a video journal that accompanies the portraits, "Sex Trafficking: How It Works," Chakarova explains why she set off on this journey to the dark side.

"I wanted to understand the root causes of why so many women of my generation were sold into prostitution against their will," she says over grainy footage of two women shaking their hips in a glass storefront.

Chakarova discovered that many women left due to lack of other economic opportunities, because they were single mothers or because they were deceived by a boyfriend or someone else close to them.

The women who shared these stories weren't very difficult to find.

"I wish I could say I met them all through nongovernmental organizations, but it's more through word of mouth," said Chakarova. "After interviewing one woman, she would say 'This happened to my friend too, do you want to meet her?'"

The harder part, Chakarova said, was earning their trust.

One trafficking survivor, Vika, waited three years before sharing her story, despite having given Chakarova several interviews.

Others were more forthcoming, because, until they met Chakarova, they hadn't encountered a sympathetic ear.

"The stigmatization is so strong," she said. "These women are tired of living in silence."

Similar Stories Emerge

As she talked to more women, Chakarova began to see a pattern.

"Surprisingly, the story is very, very similar," she said. "There's always a good client who lets them use a mobile phone. They say 'he was a regular, he used to bring me food and treats.'"

The deeper she probed, however, the more the Prince Charming veneer chipped away.

"I'd ask 'Did you tell him you were being forced to do this?' They say 'I was

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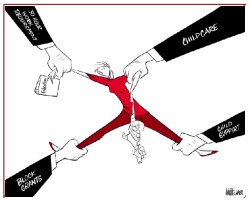

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crying.' 'What's the answer? Did you still have sex?' And they say 'Yes. Because he already paid.'"

Chakarova painstakingly individualizes each narrative, using striking photography, moving image and audio, voiceover and music. The results hover somewhere between documentary and art.

The leading photo agency Magnum recognized her work on trafficking in 2005, when it presented her with its prestigious Inge Morath Award for female photographers under the age of 30.

Chakarova also went to nightclubs undercover, posing as a woman for sale. This dangerous experience gave her a small taste of what her subjects were up against.

"You're entering a place that's selling flesh," she said. "You feel like a piece of meat. Men are constantly approaching you."

In 2002, she met one of her subject's former pimps in southern Turkey, escorted by a trusted Turkish contact who pretended to sell her.

"I knew that this pimp was incredibly violent and brutal," she remembered. "You're just sitting and watching someone set a price for you, knowing that in a matter of hours you could be put to work."

After the meeting, they told the pimp they would weigh his offer against another she had received, then "got on a bus and got the hell out of town."

Films to Raise Awareness

Chakarova hopes the Price of Sex films will be disseminated in high schools as part of public service campaigns across Eastern Europe, where women--particularly rural ones and single mothers--are most susceptible to being trafficked because of a lack of education and job opportunities.

But she admits that sometimes her message is misconstrued.

After "Price of Sex: Moldova" aired on PBS Frontline in March 2007, her editors called to say that a viewer in Hungary had written a disturbing comment.

"His comment said more or less 'Yeah, Moldovan women are the cheapest. My buddies and I can get two Moldovans for the price of one Hungarian woman.' I said we absolutely have to post this comment. It shows how people can watch women be completely degraded, and say 'Yeah, it's a bargain,'" she said.

Chakarova says she has to make a conscious effort to temper her attitudes towards men.

"I have to be very careful to understand that I've entered darkness, but I have to remind myself that's not the full picture, that there's a lot of goodness out there. And a lot of men who do not engage in paying for sex," she said.

Anna Louie Sussman is a Beirut-based freelance journalist.

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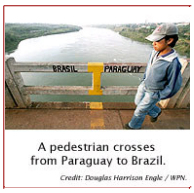

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