

# Disposable Women, *Not Natasha*, and the Economics and Politics of Sex Trafficking

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“To be honest I give more importance to taking the story out into the world once it is finished. That plays again an important part in the photographic process.”

Dana Popa

“Media alone cannot transform public policy, but it can influence change, create social awareness and make more accessible the language of public policy.”

Forum on Migration and Communication

Sandwiched between Romania and Ukraine, Moldova is the poorest country in what is called, without a hint of irony, the new Europe. In 2006, Dana Popa (who was then a post-graduate student on the MA Photojournalism and Documentary programme at The London College of Communication) travelled to Moldova and began a project to tell the stories of young girls sex trafficked across Europe.<sup>1</sup> Popa was then commissioned by the London-based human rights and photography organisation *Autograph ABP* to develop the work. She returned. The result is the exhibition, and small book, *Not Natasha*. *Natasha*, as Popa tells us at the very start, is the generic name given by punters to prostitutes with East European looks. It is a name that instantly strips these women of their sense of self, identity and individuality. The women hate it. Their testimonies are recorded here and the stories they tell are of betrayal, captivity and abuse. These are women who have not simply been exploited, deceived or seduced, but systematically violated, degraded and repeatedly raped.

When Popa has talked about the work, she often begins gently with a shot taken from the window of her mother’s flat in a middle-class area of a prosperous town in Romania. This is a shot taken from within but the prospect without is bleak: it is twilight; the camera pans along a dreary block of flats on the other side of a long, straight road. Popa begins her story: At the end of the road as the daylight dims, women are brought and here, and just beyond the middle-class apartments, sex is bought; bodies are sold. Her point is clear. At the end of many streets – just around a corner, just beyond where we care to look the same story is repeated. We choose, she says, not to look; not to see; and consequently not to think of who is there. We learn not to speak about it; we choose to disavow our knowledge. Popa however does not. She is driven to look further; to think about what lies beyond the end of the street, to trace the lives of those women, in that place, there, who are bought and sold. It is a story that goes well beyond what we either care to see or what we want to know. It takes her on a bleak journey across Europe to the edge of Asia: From London to Moldova, across the Black Sea to Istanbul and back again.

## Survival, Missing Women and Working in Soho

Sex trafficking is commonly seen as a sub-set of, and secondary to, the wider problem of human trafficking; a general exploitation rather than specific sexual abuse, torture and rape. Popa shows us that it is not. Sex trafficking lies at the intersection of two problems. On the one hand, a problem of economic migration and the trafficking of people: of men, women, children who are desperate to escape lives of poverty and persecution. On the other hand, it

is a specific problem of gender: it is primarily women who are sex trafficked. As Mark Sealy states, remarkably: “It was not until 1993 that the General Assembly of the United Nations finally adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women”. Article One reads: “For the purposes of this Declaration, the term ‘violence against women’ means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life”.<sup>2</sup> Add to this the fact that in Moldova a third of the workforce lives and works abroad, and, in 2006, 80% of households remained unable to generate a subsistence income of \$48 a month.<sup>3</sup> Female unemployment, as Popa tells us, may well be as high as 68%. The consequence is that those who are most vulnerable, young women, often no more than children, are most at risk. It is estimated that in Moldova since 1989 (with full ‘independence’ granted in 1991) somewhere between 200,000 and 400,000 women have been sold into prostitution elsewhere. This could be as high as 10% of the female population.<sup>4</sup> These staggering numbers make Moldova the main exporter of ‘sex slaves’ for the European continent. Increasingly, Moldova has also become a major destination for sex tourism. This exacerbates the problem by creating internal sex trafficking.

Writers such as Siddharth Kara remind us that this is the direct result of general “powerful macroeconomic forces unleashed during the process of economic globalization in the post-Cold War era.” These economic forces “have been more responsible than any other force for the unforgivable rise in contemporary slavery.” But sex slavery is particular. As he points out, “even though only 4% of all slaves are sex slaves worldwide, [they] generate almost 40% of the total profits.”<sup>5</sup>

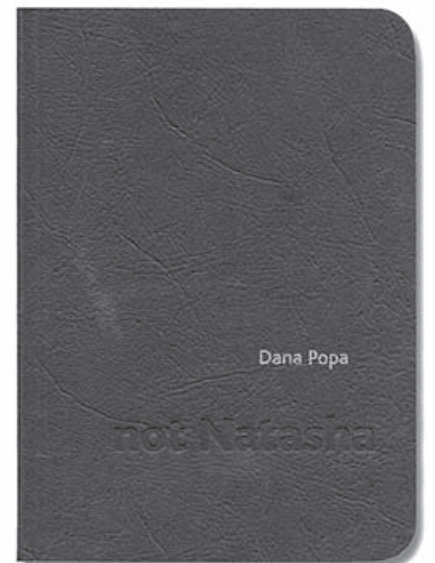
This is a harsh reality for women in struggling, fledgling capitalist economies who are routinely forced by the economic equivalent of a scorched earth policy to leave ‘home’ either to support their families who are less mobile, and less employable, because they are too old (or too young), or employable but only at rates that are far below what it now costs to live, or to seek better futures elsewhere as families fall apart and there is no one to support them. As Zimmerman suggests, it is the congruence of “[e]xtreme poverty, a severe reduction in economic earning capacity and multiple forms of discrimination, disadvantage and abuse” that are the “risk factors that make some women and girls increasingly vulnerable in their countries of origin to being recruited and coerced into the sex industry”.<sup>6</sup> But it is also true that some of these women are neither recruited nor coerced. They are simply sold into sexual slavery. As one woman testifies: “My Husband-to-be sold me for \$2,200.”

Sex trafficking is then an international, illicit, highly profitable activity. Kara points out that “unlike narcotics which must be harvested, refined and packaged, the female (or we might add, male) body requires no such processing and can be repeatedly consumed.”<sup>7</sup> However, it is indeed the bodies of women and children – and most commonly of all, therefore, very young women that are at the sharpest end and most women who enter

prostitution do so first as minors and, “approximately 80 per cent of transnational victims of trafficking and forced labour are women and girls, up to 50 per cent of which are minors”.<sup>8</sup> There is a picture here of two sisters holding hands. They have open, pretty faces and look no more than 13. They are simply disposable.

It is this world of extreme exploitation that Popa sets out not so much to expose, but more to unearth, to bear witness, and give vision and voice to what is overlooked or simply unheard. These are extraordinary photographs that, despite their narratives of brutality, are gentle. This is deliberate. There is no sensational or sentimental ‘retinal excitement’ offered here; she simply opens up a space for the viewer. We are tucked in between her images, the photographs, and the stories the girls and women have recounted to her, and we begin to contemplate. Tucking-in features a lot in Popa’s images: neatly folded corners, a carefully made-up makeshift bed with its thin, washed out counterpane carefully smoothed by the stroke of a hand; cushions neatly stacked, throws folded, a remnant of lace artfully draped, a sleeping baby swaddled in a net curtain. This attention to care, to detail makes reading the short testimonies painfully uncomfortable. There is no soft padding here; the words are stark; they are assaults. In Popa’s work it is the prose that is raw. These are not captions. Rather, in place of the usual fare of photojournalism a strange stillness fills the photographs. It is as if we are for a moment suspended. This, coupled with a high degree of detail and richness of colour, reverses the usual relationship between form and content in the documentary image. We notice the texture of a piece of thin yellowing paper or the nap of velour fabric. Melancholy and loss are woven between cheerfully coloured fabrics and worn faces; a lone handbag, perfectly arranged sits on a pillow at the top of a bed no longer slept in; in another image we see the possibility of a future, of lives to come as two girls lie on the grass holding hands; smoking they look up and into the sky above. Here, in London, Popa tells us that the girls come to Regent’s Park on a Sunday to watch weddings. Popa is good on metaphor. She uses gentle persuasion to make us look long and to think hard about the economics and sexual politics of trafficking. There is little room for abstraction in her work. Her lens is clear and sharp; her eye deft. We can tell from the angle of the images that she is small in height; she often compensates for this by bringing us close in.

In other images, however, trauma is written on the body: the impossibly sad look of a mother who has lost her daughter and who sits solid and silent, defiant before the camera, holding between finger and thumb a tiny puppet-like image; a child-like, crudely cut out and poor copy of a photograph glued onto a piece of card. This tiny figure is no more than a few centimetres tall. But it is all that she now has left of the daughter, a token



in place of the girl she once held in her hands. These older interiors are made of wood. They are poor interiors, simple and dark, rich in colour, full of floral fabric in vivid turquoise blues and cochineal pink and blood reds. They seem to be full of nature. The world outside that encroaches is much nastier and more dangerous. It is a dumping ground of discarded objects. The clinics where women receive treatment for sexually transmitted diseases and psychological disorder appear pale and wan; the floral fabrics washed out. We see the cut arm of a girl. Her body covered with a sheet; only a listless forearm hangs out. There are images here of the children born from unwanted sexual liaisons; two boys, twins, one stands wearing a crudely made paper mask, the other lies on a bundle of blankets on the floor. Hine meets Arbus. In another image, a woman's face is covered by her hand; an ill-fitting wig is awkwardly propped above her head. Popa knows the 'art' of Arbus and Serrano; Sherman and Woodman, but it is a very different politics that animates these images.

Like the Israeli writer Ariella Azoulay, Popa asks us to consider how, despite an ever growing discourse of human rights, two groups in particular – women and non-citizens – are increasingly abandoned not simply in social, legal and political discourse, but equally, and perhaps increasingly importantly, in the very media that ostensibly represents them. In her book *The Civil Contract in Photography*, Azoulay employs the legal concept of 'contract' (as a binding obligation) in order to move us beyond liberal terms such as empathy, pity or compassion that have organised so much empty rhetoric on 'the gaze'. For Azoulay, and Popa, it is the political sphere of photography that might be reconstructed through the concept of civil contract. Parity of participation (which is one general meaning of justice) is at the heart of their arguments. Azoulay puts it like this:

"[P]hotographed persons are participant *citizens*, just the same as I am".<sup>9</sup> (my emphasis) And we, the spectators, are too. Azoulay and Popa challenge us, urge us to move beyond being participant *observers* and to become members of an active, politically engaged community, to join, in Azoulay's words, a global '*citizenry* of photography' that extends far beyond the borders of the sovereign nation-state. For Popa, "taking the story out into the world once it is finished [plays] an important part in the photographic process."<sup>10</sup>

In Dublin the exhibition became a focal point for a unique collaborative project between The Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS) and the Immigrant Council of Ireland's (ICI) campaign *Turn Off the Red Light*. The ICI is pressing for legislative change to make purchasing, or attempting to purchase, sexual services a criminal offence.<sup>11</sup> (A similar campaign was launched in Glasgow at the end of 2009.<sup>12</sup>) The ICI recognises that sex trafficking takes place both within countries and across borders and indeed it is the "demand for a continuous supply of women to be available for commercial sexual exploitation in destination countries provides a highly profitable market for international traffickers."<sup>13</sup> The State's current response "is complicit with the interests of the trafficker and strengthens the position of the trafficker in relation to the woman who is trafficked. This helps to keep trafficking a

hidden and clandestine problem".<sup>14</sup> Legislation in Ireland has mainly focused on removing prostitution from the streets, but this represents a particular problem for migrant women who constitute 90% of all women involved in indoor prostitution.<sup>15</sup>

In cases of sex trafficking, these women are primarily perceived as illegal immigrants first, and prostitutes second. It is difficult to prove that they have been trafficked, and not simply 'willingly' become sex workers. Most commonly they are deported and so end up being returned to their country of origin.<sup>16</sup> As Popa tells us, the traffickers are often waiting to collect what they perceive as 'goods', rightfully returned to their owners to simply be re-trafficked. Popa's lens becomes darker here: when she photographs from below deck on a boat in the Bosphorus, the window is smeary, the sea a filthy grey. And in another shot taken in a lurid hallway in Soho, harsh neon light illuminates a chipped yellow metal chair against set against a dirty puce-coloured wall. These images are in stark contrast to Popa's use of photography as a means towards restorative justice. Here she harnesses the other side of photography's power: to lay bare, to expose, to explicate. The showing of the work in Dublin harnessed the work to public policy. Here it became part of a far wider programme of education and activism involving *Taoiseach*, Senators, City Councillors (including the Mayor of Dublin), Trades' Union Activists, and Health Professionals.

We might prefer not to listen, not to hear these stories, nor to look at these photographs; it is more comfortable to turn a blind eye or deaf ear. Popa's images, however, are utterly compelling. She challenges us to think beyond what is contained within the photograph's frame and shows us how the local and ordinary lives are linked to a global supply that is driven by high 'consumer demand' well beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Prostitution is not a career choice. As one participant at the closing event reminded the audience, no child has ever uttered the words: 'Daddy, when I grow up I want to be a prostitute'.

*Not Natasha* was exhibited in a *Pop-up Gallery* in Creation Arcade, Duke St., Dublin, 7 July - 5 August 2011.

[www.danapopa.com](http://www.danapopa.com)  
[www.fomacs.org](http://www.fomacs.org)  
[www.immigrantcouncil.ie](http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie)  
[www.autograph-abp.co.uk](http://www.autograph-abp.co.uk)

#### Notes

- 1 I have included this to remind students that they should think big. Many excellent projects can begin at this stage.
- 2 Mark Sealy, 'Beyond the Lens', *Foam*, Spring, 2009.
- 3 Siddharth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Sex Slavery*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 115.
- 4 Dana Popa, *The Telegraph Magazine*, 22 November 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/8139722/The-women-sold-into-sex-slavery.html>. (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 5 Interview Siddharth Kara, Columbia University Press, <http://cup.columbia.edu/static/siddharth-kara-interview> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 6 Cathy Zimmerman et al, *Stolen Smiles: The Physical and Psychological Health Consequences of Women and Adolescents Trafficked in Europe*, (London: London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, 2006)

quoted in *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009) 11. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).

- 7 Siddharth Kara, *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Sex Slavery*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)
- 8 Cited in *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009) 11. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 9 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract in Photography*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 17.
- 10 Dana Popa, *The Telegraph Magazine*, 22 November 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/family/8139722/The-women-sold-into-sex-slavery.html> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 11 Since 1999 the Swedish Government introduced a law that made purchasing, or attempting to purchase, sexual services a criminal offence, punishable by a six month fine or imprisonment.
- 12 <http://www.endprostitutionnow.org>
- 13 *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009) 1. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 14 *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009), 10. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 15 *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger, *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009), 67. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).
- 16 The ICI is campaigning to:
  - \*Ensure immediate access to independent legal representation for all migrant and trafficked women in the sex industry at the point of contact
  - \*Make a renewable reflection and recovery period available to all trafficked women, including migrant women exploited in prostitution who have been identified as suspected victims of trafficking through an inter-agency approach
  - \*Establish a programme, with clear protocols and administrative criteria, through which residence permits would be granted on 'humanitarian grounds' (when required) to all victims of crimes committed against them in the context of prostitution or trafficking
  - \*Residence permits should also be granted to women who have exited prostitution and cannot return to their countries of origin for reasons relating to their safety, age, state of health, family situation and other factors relating to their humanitarian or medical needs
 Cited in *kelleherassociates* in association with Monica O'Connor and Jane Pillinger *Globalization, Sex trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, (Immigrant Council of Ireland, April 2009), 14. <http://www.immigrantcouncil.ie/research-publications/2010/260-globalisation-sex-trafficking-and-prostitution-the-experiences-of-migrant-women-in-ireland> (accessed 24 November, 2011).