

# THE NEW YORKER

A Reporter at Large

## The Countertraffickers

Rescuing the victims of the global sex trade.

by William Finnegan May 5, 2008



Stella Rotaru, at left, of the International Organization for Migration, with one of the group's beneficiaries. Photograph by Bela Doka.

Stella Rotaru's cell-phone number is scribbled on the wall of a women's jail in Dubai. That's what a former inmate told her, and Rotaru does get a lot of calls from Dubai, including some from jail. But she gets calls from many odd places—as well as faxes, e-mails, and text messages—pretty much non-stop. “I never switch off my phone,” she said. “I cannot afford to, morally.” She looked at her battered cell phone, which has pale-gold paint peeling off it, and gave a small laugh.

Rotaru, who is twenty-six, works for the International Organization for Migration, a group connected to the United Nations, in Chisinau, Moldova. She is a repatriation specialist. Her main task is bringing lost Moldovans home. Nearly all her clients are victims of human trafficking, most of them women sold into prostitution abroad, and their stories pour across her desk in stark vignettes and muddled sagas of desperation, violence, betrayal, and sorrow.

Her allies and colleagues in this work are widely scattered. An ebullient Dubai prison officer named Omer, who calls Rotaru “sister,” has been a help. So have Russian policemen, an Israeli lawyer, a Ukrainian psychologist, an Irish social worker, a Turkish women's shelter, Interpol, and various consulates and embassies, as well as travel agents, priests, and partner organizations, including an anti-trafficking group called La Strada, which has offices downstairs from Rotaru's and a dedicated victims' hot line.

Rotaru is often at the airport in Chisinau to meet those Moldovans who manage to get home with her help. In some cases, she goes to pick them up in Odessa, the Black Sea port in Ukraine—Moldova, an ex-Soviet republic, is half-encircled by Ukraine—where a twice-weekly ferry from Istanbul docks. If a victim's family is also present, there may be little or nothing for Rotaru to do. Or there may be a lot.

Rotaru doesn't look like a social worker. She has short, spiky hair of an unnatural brilliance—Red Planet, she told me cheerfully, is the brand name. She is dark-eyed, pale, direct in manner, and elfin in stature, even on the four-inch stiletto heels she always wears. In daylight, she wears vast sunglasses. Her fingernails are long and curved and painted with birds and animals and musical instruments. She talks on the phone and knocks out memos and documents and e-mails in four languages and three alphabets—Russian, Romanian, Swedish, and English. “When Stella is on a rescue call, we must be careful,” Irina Todorova, one of four women who share an office with Rotaru, said. “First, she waves her hand for us to be quiet, and if we don't notice she pushes her chair back, and if we still don't shut up then she starts throwing things.”

Brothel raids in other countries yield many of Rotaru's beneficiaries, as her clients are known. After a raid, she'll get calls from the detainees, or from cops, consulates, families, or friends—even, sometimes, from prostitution customers. “Rescue calls” tend to be more urgent. Women phone clandestinely, from captivity, and Rotaru may have only moments to get the information she needs. The women don't always have the information themselves; in extreme cases, they may not be sure what country they're in. Look out the window, Rotaru will say. Any sign you can see. Exact spellings. Look for an address on matchbooks, or McDonald's bags. What languages do the johns speak? If she can capture a number on caller I.D., it can be useful, although simply calling back without an all-clear is generally too dangerous.

At Christmastime last winter, a nineteen-year-old being held in a casino brothel in Cyprus called and texted Rotaru day and night. They talked about how she could escape from her pimp during the weekly medical exam that women working in the brothel received at a local hospital. Rotaru called someone in Cyprus at an N.G.O., who made sure that a trustworthy policeman would be there. The woman wore an ivory-colored headband, so that she would be recognized. The plan worked. A round-the-clock guard was stationed at the beneficiary's hospital room. Rotaru arranged for travel documents and an air ticket; the young woman flew home in time for New Year's Day, 2008.

How had the woman been trafficked? Rotaru shrugged, and said, “She accepted a high-risk job”—dancing in a casino—“but she didn’t accept prostitution.”

Rotaru sometimes struggles to maintain her professional distance. “You can’t let these stories go through you,” she said. “You have to be practical, and do what you can.” As she was preparing to start this job, a couple of years ago, she read four hundred case reports. “I got so tired, I started laughing at things that aren’t funny. A girl runs away from her pimp, breaks her leg. The pimp makes her work with a broken leg. It’s not funny, but I pictured it and I laughed. That’s when I knew I had read too much.”

Rotaru and Todorova, who is her supervisor, and their boss, Martin Wyss, often work late into the night. (“Never argue with Stella,” Todorova told me. “You will never win.”) Their office is in a shabby part of central Chisinau. The city, which has a population of more than seven hundred thousand, is dilapidated. Much of it was destroyed in the Second World War and rebuilt by the Soviets. Ancient electric buses screech around corners, raining sparks onto the pavement.

Rotaru lives southeast of the city center, in a run-down apartment block. She shares a cramped flat with her younger brother. Their mother, who, before she emigrated, was an accountant, now works as a housekeeper for a family in Bologna. Rotaru’s brother is a student, and has a night job as a cook. He is thinking of going to Ireland. Rotaru, who has a philology degree, and is studying for a master’s in psychology, plans to stay in Moldova. “I love my country,” she said. “I don’t think I could be happy anywhere else.” It was snowing lightly. I watched her stomp up two dark flights to her door. Before collapsing, she had to remember to check that her cell phone was charged.

There are roughly two hundred million migrants today—migrants being defined as people living outside their homelands. The reasons for this are globalization, and wars, and new border freedoms, and, above all, disparities in economic opportunity. Along the nether edge of the huge movement of people, human trafficking thrives.

Migrant smuggling is different from trafficking. Migrants pay smugglers to deliver them, illegally, to their destinations. The line into trafficking is crossed when coercion and fraud are used. (This line is not always clear, and many migrants endure varying degrees of mistreatment.) Trafficking can start with a kidnapping. More commonly, it starts with a broken agreement about a job promised, conditions of work, or one’s true destination. Most victims suffer some combination of threats, violence, forced labor, and effective imprisonment. The commercial sex industry, according to the International Labor Organization, absorbs slightly less than half of all trafficked labor worldwide. Construction, agriculture, domestic service, hazardous industries, armed conflict, and begging are some of the other frequent sites of extreme, illegal exploitation.

Not all trafficking is international. India, for instance, has an immense domestic network, with large numbers of children being sold and resold, for labor and household servitude and prostitution. No reliable numbers exist, though. For cross-border trafficking worldwide, estimates range from half a million people annually to several times that figure.

In some parts of the world, established mafias dominate the trade. According to Phil Williams, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh who has studied trafficking, these can be venerable outfits, like Cosa Nostra and the Yakuza. The big players in Europe today are Russians, Albanians, and Ukrainians (and recently, in Italy, Nigerians). In southeastern Europe, Turkish, Kurdish, Serbian, Greek, Bulgarian, Hungarian, and Romanian networks move Eastern European women into Western Europe and the Middle East. Many of these groups simply added human trafficking to existing crime portfolios, often running women alongside traditional contraband, like drugs and arms. (There are stories of Albanian traffickers in speedboats being intercepted by Italian police vessels and throwing women overboard to distract their pursuers and protect their more valuable cargo, heroin.) Some loosely structured commercial sex markets have been forcibly annexed in

recent years by organized crime. This happened in Finland, for instance, at the hands of Russian and Estonian mobsters.

Many legitimate businesses share, unwittingly or otherwise, in the profits—travel agencies, hotels, tour-bus companies, night clubs—along with accountants, lawyers, doctors, landlords, forgers, and a large, indispensable contingent of corrupt police officers, border guards, and embassy personnel. Everybody seems to be making money except the trafficked women and girls.

Even in this heyday of migration, Moldova is unusual. Of its four million people, more than six hundred thousand are working outside the country—more than a quarter of the economically active population. Remittances account for an estimated third of the gross national product. These percentages are among the world's highest, and the main reason is the economy. In the Soviet system, Moldova had an agricultural niche and also its share of factories, many of them military. With independence, in 1991, factories closed and a strip of the country, known as Transnistria, east of the Dniester River, seceded. Transnistria was Moldova's most industrialized part, and its most Russified. Moscow intervened to stop a civil war over the secession, and since 1992 Russian troops have watched over a "frozen conflict" that leaves Transnistria isolated, unrecognized by any nation, and Moldova sundered.

Moldova was, by the mid-nineties, the poorest country in Europe. (Kosovo may soon claim that spot.) Per-capita income is nearly the same as Sudan's. A doctor earns two hundred dollars a month. Government corruption is pervasive. One of the few local growth industries is travel agencies—firms that promise to get you abroad, legally or otherwise, often for a large fee. Conditions are ideal for human trafficking.

Few people in Moldova today can say that they weren't warned. Internationally funded campaigns to heighten awareness of the dangers of being trafficked have succeeded, according to follow-up polls, in reaching nearly every Moldovan. Stella Rotaru and her colleagues barnstorm the country, plastering villages with hotline numbers and staging concerts. The I.O.M. has screened "Lilya 4-Ever," a powerful 2002 film about the trafficking of a young girl from a post-Soviet wasteland into prostitution in Sweden, in high schools across Moldova. The film, which is based on a real story and ends with the girl's suicide, has also aired on national television.

Still, the counterpropaganda—seductive media images of life abroad, but also hard evidence of the wealth to be earned there—is stronger. Remittances from migrants, many sent through the country's ubiquitous Western Union offices, are estimated by the World Bank at more than a billion dollars annually, financing consumption that, by local standards, is stunning. One's neighbor suddenly buys a car, a bigger house, better food, better clothes. The pull of emigration is particularly powerful for young people, and for parents struggling to feed their children.

Even those in the group at highest risk—poor young women—tend to see trafficking as something that may happen to someone else, but not to them. In surveys, most Moldovans say that they don't know anyone who's been trafficked. That may be partly because women often conceal this experience, even from their own families. (Men, too, who have been trafficked, most commonly for construction or farmwork in Russia or Ukraine, are ashamed to admit that their emigration was an emasculating fiasco.) And most of those who go abroad do get where they've paid to go, and find jobs, for better or for worse. One estimate, accepted by the I.O.M., is that between one and two per cent of all Moldovan migrants may find themselves trafficked at some point. An unworldly, underemployed young person considering a vaguely dubious job offer overseas would probably not be stopped from migrating by those odds. Add desperate poverty and an unhappy household—the standard "push factors"—and the pipeline of likely trafficking victims out of Moldova never runs dry.

According to the United Nations, human trafficking is now the third most lucrative criminal enterprise in the world, after weapons and narcotics. Annual profits are reckoned to be in the tens of billions of dollars. On this scale, trafficking requires extensive transnational networks. But many of the trade's foot soldiers, particularly at the recruiting end, are amateurs, opportunists, even former victims. A Mafia boss in Kiev may be living on a cut of the proceeds from your exploitation, but your personal hell will very likely start, if you're Moldovan, with a betrayal by a friend or a relative angling for a commission. You might even be sold into prostitution by the person sleeping next to you.

"I wanted money, and I was deceived," Lena said. (Some of the names in this article have been changed.) She was from a village in northern Moldova. She had high, thin eyebrows and a worn face. "I was nineteen. My boyfriend told me I could be a waitress in Portugal. We had been together for a year and a half." Her boyfriend organized her trip, paid her airfare, drove her to Odessa, and put her on a plane to Lisbon. A friend of his met her flight, and told her that the waitress job had fallen through. He offered to take Lena to Dubai, where there was, he said, more work. He seemed trustworthy, and they flew there together. An Arab met them in Dubai, and the next day a woman from Uzbekistan took her to an apartment.

"That was when I realized I had been sold," Lena told me. "Because she gave money to the Arab guy, and my passport was taken." There were six Moldovan women already at the Uzbek woman's place. They were working, they said, as prostitutes in discos, all paying off travel debts that the "she-pimp," as Lena called her, claimed they owed her. Their clients were mostly Arabs and Russians. "The she-pimp was very aggressive," Lena said. "She beat disobedient girls." Lena was put to work.

She ended up spending a few years in Dubai, on and off the street, in and out of jail. After escaping with two other women, Lena went to the police, who arrested her. The Uzbek woman declined to hand over the passports of her ex-workers, and went on with her thriving business. Lena phoned her mother from jail but got no help. When the police released her, after a month, Lena was penniless. She went back to work as a prostitute, now freelance. Later, she fell in love with an Egyptian waiter named Salim, moved in with him, and quit sex work. But then she was arrested during a police sweep for having no documents. She was three months pregnant at the time. Making matters worse, the police registered her as a Kazakhstani, because a group of women caught in the same sweep were from Kazakhstan. It took the authorities more than a year to identify and, finally, deport her. In the meantime, she had given birth in jail. Salim never visited her, never saw his son. Lena was not able to reach him, even by phone. "Maybe he was afraid of the police," she said quietly.

Now she was living with her grandmother and her son, who had just turned three, back in the village, and looking for work. She had still not heard from Salim. "I have given up hope," she said. She had been helped, she said, by a psychologist at an American-funded women's center, where I interviewed her. "We talk about what happened in Dubai," she said. She thought that the old boyfriend who sold her to the traffickers was still around, but she had no interest in filing a complaint against him. She was twenty-four now, and had a child to raise.

There is usually a decision to be made, when trafficking victims are repatriated, about whether to pursue criminal charges against those who exploit them. Doing so can be dangerous. But first Rotaru needs to know whether it is even safe for the women to go home. A La Strada survey found that a majority of trafficked Moldovan women had been victims of domestic violence. Rotaru may recommend that they go, instead, to a residential treatment center in Chisinau established by the I.O.M.

Once, Rotaru was waiting at the airport for a girl who had been trafficked to the United Arab Emirates. The girl's father, who had a military background, was drunk. "He was changing all the

time,” Rotaru recalled. “Oh, he couldn’t wait to have his little girl back. Then it was ‘I’m going to kill the bitch!’ Finally, she arrived, and everybody hugged and cried.”

Few victims arrive feeling ready for a fight. Many, according to Rotaru and her colleagues, seem broken. Beatings, rape, and torture are common methods of labor control among pimps, and, along with threats to harm the women’s families, including their children, they usually have the intended effect. That may be why Rotaru took a grim sort of pleasure in the attitude of a girl who had been trafficked as a minor from a village in northern Moldova by a woman who offered her a job as a barmaid in Bahrain. “She had already worked in a market in Ukraine,” Rotaru recalled. “She is one of those rural girls who know how to make their way in the world.” In Bahrain, the girl was forced into prostitution and then was flown to Istanbul, where she overheard her captors negotiating her resale. That night, she drugged her pimp and escaped with a hundred and fifty dollars. The money was enough to get her to Odessa by ferry. Rotaru drove down to meet her.

The girl was seventeen. She was dark-haired, tiny. She spent one night at the Chisinau treatment center, but did not want to work with law enforcement. “She told us she would deal with the recruiter herself,” Rotaru said. “She said, ‘I know how to find her. I will beat her.’ It was an unusual reaction to the trauma. I liked her.”

Were all her beneficiaries from broken, violent, alcoholic, impoverished families?

“Not all,” she said. “We received a call from one of our embassies last year. A girl from a prominent family had been trafficked. They wanted to keep the case quiet, of course. So this tragedy happened to her, but she has good parents. Bright future. Not like most girls.”

Photocopied head shots of young women stared hauntingly from her case files, which she kept in loose-leaf binders. As she flipped through one, the faces swung past. Most of the women had taken some trouble with their hair, their makeup, their jewelry. Some looked excited to be getting a passport. Many were teen-agers.

Rotaru fished out a file. “This is great,” she declared. “Here we have a woman, Violeta. She was trafficked to the Balkans long ago. Her husband first contacted us in December, 2006. He lives in a village in Transnistria with their daughter. The girl cannot remember her mother, but she cries for her all the time. Anyway, we have found her!”

Violeta had answered a newspaper ad offering a waitress job in Italy in 2000. She travelled as far as Albania, on forged papers, but never made it to Italy. She was sold into prostitution in Kosovo. There she worked as a stripper in bars and night clubs, and eventually escaped from her captors after a police raid. Now she was living in a shelter in Pristina, Kosovo’s capital, and wanted to come home. “This is one of the cases that make me want to jump for happiness,” Rotaru said.

Rotaru started at the I.O.M. as an office assistant, and she still dealt with the daily, building-wide lunch order, collecting money, calling the restaurant, handing out the food. I asked if she planned to become a psychologist after she finished her studies.

“No,” she said. “Everybody is a naïve psychologist. I think next year I will study business—M.B.A. I am good at organizing things.”

A fat file on Rotaru’s desk contained a man’s photocopied passport photograph. “Here is a guy who trafficked a lot of women from Transnistria to Emirates,” she said. “He was arrested in Dubai.” She leafed through faxed pages of travel documents, all with the same man’s picture on them, but under various names.

“Is he still in business?”

Rotaru pursed her lips. “It doesn’t matter,” she said. “His friends are still in business.”

Moldova is an important “source country,” but, unlike Russia and Turkey, frequently cited as hubs of trafficking, it does not seem to have a powerful, centralized human-trafficking mafia. (It’s hard to be sure, because of ineffective law enforcement.) Local recruiters work with local front companies, forgers, and corrupt officials. But nearly all Moldovans who find themselves trafficked seem to be sold into non-Moldovan networks.

Trafficking is largely a horizontal business at the Moldovan end—a primitive collection system, basically, of the industry’s raw materials. The business model for human trafficking in the former Soviet Union has been described by Louise Shelley, a professor of public policy at George Mason University, as a “natural resource” model, which treats women purely as a source of short-term profits, like timber or furs, to be sold to intermediaries. Another model, used by Chinese organized-crime groups and dubbed by Shelley “trade and development,” takes a longer view. This model is integrated, controlling the flesh trade from recruitment through brothel management. It cultivates relationships with villages, which can share in the profits, and can be, relatively speaking, less brutal. There are also harsher regional models, such as the wartime system of sex slavery that developed in the Balkans in the nineteen-nineties (or the experience of Japan’s “comfort women,” in the thirties and forties).

Trafficking routes and patterns change. For Moldovan women, the Balkans were the major destination until six or seven years ago. Now, according to La Strada, it’s Russia, Turkey, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, particularly Dubai. Methods also change. Traffickers who once drove terrified captives, sometimes drugged, across the borders in sealed containers, or made them hike through forests and cross freezing rivers, have more recently come to see ordinary air travel as a safer, easier option. Less brutalized women also make, as a rule, better earners as prostitutes.

Traffickers have become smarter, too, about recruitment, increasingly using a technique known, with some dissonance, as “happy trafficking.” (Anti-trafficking organizations object to the phrase.) Happy trafficking involves a Faustian deal. Victims who have worked off their “debts” (invented by pimps, arbitrarily increased by “fines” and alleged costs, and fully reinstated, if not increased, with each resale) are permitted to go home on the condition that they send back someone else—or two or three someone else—to take their place. In order to make the sales pitch persuasive, they must represent their own emigration experience as having been a positive one. They may sometimes admit that it involved prostitution, but never that it was an onerous, degrading job in which, say, they were given no choice about the number of clients, what sexual services to provide, or whether condoms would be used. (A certain number of trafficked women go abroad knowing that they will be working as prostitutes of some sort. They become trafficking victims after the situation goes horribly wrong, and they find that they are trapped.)

Ex-victims turn out to be effective recruiters. Because they are women, they tend to gain the trust of their targets more easily than men might, particularly when those targets are their own friends, sisters, cousins, or daughters. And, after a successful “promotion” to recruiter, some ex-victims take positions in the trade, as traffickers and madams. It is the business they know.

Repatriated victims of trafficking, or V.O.T.s, are also vulnerable to “re-trafficking.” They nearly always come home to the same poverty and domestic troubles. They know the same people, often including the people who trafficked them. Some believe that because they now understand the dangers of emigration they will avoid them the next time. But many women, having worked as prostitutes, seem convinced that they are incapable of earning a living another way.

“It’s good if we find a victim while she is still in the state of fighting her exploitation,” Victor Lutenco, an I.O.M. trafficking-prevention specialist, told me. “Because later the victims develop big psychological problems. Some develop Stockholm syndrome. I saw an arrest in Moscow where

the victim insisted on being handcuffed to her trafficker! Some women become terrified of anybody in uniform, and totally dependent on their pimp.” Even at the treatment center in Chisinau, Lutenco said, “We have some beneficiaries who want to go back. They have seen a higher level of living in the destination country. This puts us in new challenges.”

Public skepticism about the gullibility and true intentions of the young women who become victims is also a challenge. “Victim blaming is the Moldovan national sport,” an anti-trafficking official in Chisinau said. Over time, this stigma, or merely the mentally oppressive threat of it, inclines some victims to leave home again, and risk re-trafficking. It also helps discourage them from pursuing criminal charges against their traffickers.

Irina Todorova says that it is critical for countertraffickers to track the changing tactics of their adversaries. When newspaper ads gave way to the Internet as a prime source of bogus overseas-job offers, it was essential to know the Web sites, the latest destinations, the language of the come-ons. “They are dynamic, and so we must be dynamic,” she said. “And we must always remember, at our trainings”—meetings of government officials, police, and others ostensibly involved in counter-trafficking—“that they may be there, too. Traffickers may be listening.”

Maria didn’t strike me as someone at risk for re-trafficking. The reason was partly her shattered body, but mostly it was her strength of mind. Now in her thirties, she has long red hair, big clear eyes, and a lopsided grin. She grew up in a village near Chisinau and was trafficked to Turkey in 1999. She remembers the staircase that led to the room, on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Istanbul, where she found out that she had been sold into prostitution. A woman who was with her started weeping. Maria looked to the window. There were curtains blowing in on a breeze. She crossed to the window, stepped between the curtains, and jumped. When she hit the ground, she broke both legs and both arms.

I talked to Maria for hours, although she let her psychotherapist, Alina Budeci, who works for La Strada, tell me about what happened in Turkey. Talking about it was too much like reliving it, she said. Maria preferred to talk about her family, and the life that brought her to Turkey.

She had been a teen-age bride, “stolen” by a boy whom she hardly knew. “I tried to run away, but his male friends all stopped me,” she said. “If a boy steals you like this and you don’t get married, it’s a great shame to your family and you.” Her parents, who were peasants, agreed to the match.

The marriage was a disaster. Maria gave birth at eighteen, but her husband drank, beat her, and could not hold a job. “The only happy thing concerning him was my daughter. Otherwise, I hate him.” Her mother counselled her to obey her husband. “She used to say, ‘You have to listen to him, because the sword doesn’t cut the bowed head.’ That’s a saying in Moldova.” (A similar adage, which I heard more than once in Moldova, goes “The woman who is not beaten is like a house that is not cleaned.”) After several years of abuse, Maria fled. She left her daughter with her parents and headed to Odessa, where she sold rug-cleaning machines and other products on the street. Her husband pursued her to Ukraine, and she returned to him briefly, but he drank up her savings and beat her. She went next to Romania, where she found work as a waitress. She returned to Moldova to see her daughter.

Here her narrative broke off. Tears streamed down her face. “Those years when my daughter needed me the most, I wasn’t there,” she said. The troubles with her husband resumed, and Maria and her daughter went to live with her parents. She decided to get a divorce.

“Then a woman came to the village offering jobs in Turkey,” Maria said.

After a long stay in an Istanbul hospital, she returned home. “I was not really a human being,” she said. “I could not walk, could not work.” Despite several surgeries and rehabilitation, she still walks

with a great deal of pain. She put off one operation she needed, she said, when she came to believe that the local doctor wanted to remove the main steel pin in her leg only because it was high-quality metal, which he could resell.

She found a job at a pizza place, where she met a reasonable man. Now they lived together, in Chisinau, with her daughter. Her boyfriend was working in construction. Maria had big plans—to buy the little house they rented and turn the front half into a shop. “I have such a desire for life,” she told me. When she first came to La Strada, Maria gratefully accepted psychotherapy but turned down an offer of clothes. “I said, ‘Please buy books for my daughter instead.’ ” She and Budeci went together to bookstores to choose titles. Maria only finished the eighth grade, but she wants her daughter to go to university. The girl was now fourteen. “She is going through adolescent crisis,” Maria said. “It’s hard for me to understand her disobedience. I was so obedient.”

UNICEF estimates that nearly a third of all Moldovan children have lost at least one parent to emigration; thousands are missing both. These children are known as “social orphans.” Sometimes a relative or a neighbor looks after them. Often, they fend for themselves. Many end up in orphanages. I visited a couple of Moldovan orphanages; they are spartan, premodern places. Agafia Procop, the director of a large orphanage in Chisinau, said that her budget was seventy-four dollars per child per month. “That is for food, teachers’ salaries, all utilities, and maintenance,” she said. “But food alone is forty dollars a month.” We were sitting in her big, dim, chilly office. Like other local orphanages, her institution relies on private charities and non-governmental organizations.

Procop was grateful for the help, but also critical of the European Union. “The E.U. wants Moldovan labor cheap, but it needs to thank me for taking care of the children while their parents are off working,” she said.

Emilia Mocanu, the director of an orphanage in the southern town of Cahul, told me that she worries about what will become of her children when they leave. “Most have no place to go, and are not ready for independent life,” Mocanu said. She added that, as far as she knew, none of her children had been trafficked, but they are thought to be particularly vulnerable. N.G.O.s go to orphanages and give presentations on the dangers of trafficking. She went on, “And after every presentation at least one child will come to me and say, ‘Maybe my mother was trafficked, and that’s why I never hear from her.’ ”

One of the charities that assist Moldovan orphanages is Children’s Emergency Relief International, an American Baptist organization. Through CERI, I met a group of young women who shared a flat in Chisinau and had all had experience with foster families or orphanages. The oldest was twenty-two. A sixteen-year-old, Valentina, had just left an orphanage. They were all studying and were extremely poor—barely managing to pay the rent, even with CERI stipends, on their tiny two-bedroom place. Leaving Moldova seemed to them to be their only hope of self-improvement.

“There is no future in Moldova,” Olga, who is twenty-one and studies cosmetology, said. “We can never dream to have anything like a house.” Ana, who studies office management, hoping to become a secretary—and who once lived by begging on the streets of Chisinau—seemed to know all about the risks of trafficking. If you used the wrong travel agency, she said, you could end up being tricked into prostitution. Still, she hoped to go abroad someday. “There is nothing here,” she said.

None of the girls had ever been outside Moldova. Three of them had just been to an opera for the first time.

“ ‘Romeo and Juliet.’ ”

“It was great!”

“We cried.”

“They both died.”

“For love!”

I was driving with Rotaru to the treatment center for victims of trafficking in Chisinau. She was still excited about the imminent repatriation of Violeta from Kosovo. Violeta’s husband had been calling twice a day. “I like doing a job where I feel I’m doing some good,” Rotaru said. “These people who have been trafficked, they have been treated so badly, they’re very suspicious. They can’t believe there’s someone who just wants to help them.”

Rotaru has no illusions about her government. And yet she takes pride in working with various ministries; the treatment center, for example, is now run in cooperation with the government. Relations with host governments—“capacity-building”—are a perennial issue for international agencies. The I.O.M. was created, in 1951, by the United States and Western European governments to help settle displaced people from the Second World War. With headquarters in Geneva, it now has more than a hundred and twenty member states and more than four hundred offices worldwide. It is an intergovernmental organization, not an N.G.O., with a mission to promote, according to its charter, “humane and orderly migration.” It has been criticized by human-rights groups in some instances for working too closely with governments in its handling of refugees. But the I.O.M. is the world’s largest and most effective aid group dealing with migration, and holds permanent-observer status at the United Nations.

At the office, Rotaru had received a call from Nomi Levenkorn, a director of a migrant workers’ hot line in Israel, about a presumed trafficking victim from Moldova with H.I.V./AIDS. Would there be treatment available if she were repatriated? Rotaru described the rules for receiving H.I.V. treatment free in Moldova—citizenship, disease stage. But she also had some questions for Levenkorn. And the more she heard about the victim’s family situation in Moldova, the more she thought that she might be better off staying in Israel and being treated there.

This sounded to me like a counter-repatriation. Rotaru threw up her hands. “Whatever is best for the beneficiary,” she said. For the woman to stay in Israel, her status as a V.O.T. would likely have to be confirmed. “You know, I think stranded migrants and women who get in jail also deserve our help. We should not let them rot. But many N.G.O.s get money only for V.O.T.s. The donor wants to fund a certain activity. Some are just for Balkans. Some are just for minors.”

The treatment center is in a modern building in a quiet neighborhood. Twenty-five women and half a dozen children were in residence, and not to be disturbed, but Lilia Gorceag, the center’s psychologist, was willing to talk about her work. Gorceag, a warm, serious woman in her fifties, showed me pictures that beneficiaries had drawn as part of their therapy. Blasted landscapes, parents without hands, daggers plunged through hearts—the expressions of trauma and sorrow were intense, and the stories behind the pictures horrific. An under-sized fourteen-year-old girl trafficked to Moscow and gang-raped at a construction site; a minor sold to a violent Albanian who pimped her from country to country and left her covered with knife scars and cigarette burns. “We still see cases like this—difficult, tragic cases,” Gorceag murmured.

I asked about a pen-and-ink drawing stuck on a bulletin board. It showed a girl sitting astride a globe, one arm raised. She was wearing boots, a bustier, and a studded bikini bottom. An eagle hovered in the background. “Her clothes reveal her experience,” Gorceag said. “There is a lot of aggression. She’s riding the earth. The whole earth is her. I asked her to explain it, and she said, ‘Now I consider myself a winner. I have won everything I have been through.’ It’s an interesting vision of her life. It’s also sad. Everything’s in black. But there’s more bravado in this drawing than in reality.”

Gorceag sees a lot of bravado, and plenty of aggression. Beneficiaries sometimes become abusive with their children. “With children conceived from their trafficking experience, especially, the mothers transfer all their negative feelings toward their pimp and clients to the child, associating it with all their suffering, and then they hate the child. So they need time to gain new strengths and perspectives. Some are ambivalent. They hug and kiss, and then they beat the children terribly.”

She has also seen women who worked as high-end prostitutes in the United Arab Emirates and returned to Moldova with savings. “They say, ‘I don’t need help. I can buy a place to live now.’ But, after a year or two, many of them come back to us, and say they have family problems, problems with their sexual relations. Each of them is marked by her experience.”

I asked about possible prosecutions.

“We never take information to the police,” Gorceag said. “We never ask for names or addresses. It’s frustrating, but such questions cause the women to close up. We will help with a prosecution, but a victim cannot be pushed to go to the police or the courts. I have no professional or moral right to do that.”

Ion Vizdoga takes trafficking cases to court. He was a prosecutor in Chisinau for nine years, and for the past five years has been the director of an N.G.O. there called the Center for the Prevention of Trafficking in Women. He is a tall, youthful-looking thirty-eight-year-old. Since 2003, the center has represented more than a thousand trafficking victims; Vizdoga has personally represented more than two hundred.

A large part of Vizdoga’s work seems to be persuading victims to stick with cases. There are endless frustrations, humiliations, even terrors associated with trials. Most trafficking cases, no matter how simple, drag on for years. The Organization for Security and Coöperation in Europe monitored trials in Chisinau for six months in 2006. Its report makes for hair-raising reading. In one trafficking case, according to the monitors, “The district court judge appeared to fall asleep after resting his head on the Criminal Code lying on his desk. The defendant quickly took advantage of the situation to threaten the victim with non-verbal hand gestures simulating cutting her throat.”

Things were not much better when judges were awake. At another trafficking trial, the judge told the monitors, “These young ladies are prostitutes, they go abroad and prostitute themselves, then they are not happy with the money they get, so upon their return, they complain they were trafficked. But I know their kind, I’ve seen their pictures, they’re all smiling while dancing, and then they say that they were trafficked.”

The police can be even less sympathetic. “The most powerful pimps in Moldova are all former cops,” Vizdoga said. He named several, and their *kryshy*—meaning “roofs,” or protectors—in the higher reaches of the police force and the Ministry of the Interior.

Police are notorious in many places not only for protecting traffickers and pimps but for demanding sexual favors themselves. But even endemic police corruption can exist alongside zealous, if selective, law enforcement. Alina Budeci, the La Strada psychotherapist, who works with the police on how to take victims’ statements, sympathizes with the discouragement of honest cops. “You can have a policeman who spends years trying to catch a local mafioso,” she told me. “And he finally puts all the evidence together, and the guy is convicted and sentenced. And the next day he comes to the police station: ‘Look at me. I am free. I paid forty thousand euros for my freedom.’ The policeman in such a case is heartbroken.”

Since the passage, in 2005, of a strong anti-trafficking law urged on Moldova by the U.S. government, Vizdoga and the center have helped to convict recruiters from Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, Albania, Romania, Israel, and the former Yugoslavia. But nowadays, Vizdoga said, the

recruiters seemed to be Moldovans, who were less conspicuous and better protected. Foreign traffickers could buy a woman from a Moldovan recruiter for five hundred dollars, and sell her for five times that amount in a destination country. Or, in the case of ex-victims doing recruitment in exchange for their freedom, the total investment in air tickets, forged documents, and escorts might be even less.

Recruiters, the smallest fish, are the defendants in the large majority of trafficking cases in Moldova, and most of them are women. A policeman from the anti-trafficking squad explained to me that plea-bargaining and turning low-level suspects into informants—the basic methods for rolling up criminal networks in the United States—were not practiced in Moldova; indeed, he seemed to think that they were unethical. And Moldova has no laws comparable to the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) legislation, which has allowed American federal prosecutors to make serious headway against organized crime.

The one bigger fish to be charged with trafficking was an ex-policeman named Alexander Covali. According to Vizdoga, Covali, whose nickname is Shalun (Joker, in Russian), used to pay his *krysha* a hundred thousand euros a year to be allowed to run his businesses, which included brothels in Moldova and abroad. In the summer of 2006, when that official left his post, Covali was arrested.

Outraged, Covali wrote, by hand, an extraordinary twenty-page statement laying out, in great detail, his relations with the Moldovan police. The police raided Covali's house and seized more evidence. According to Vizdoga, who represents two minors allegedly trafficked by Covali, and who said that he had read the statement, Covali implicated Ion Bejan, the deputy director of a new police unit called the Center for Combatting Trafficking in Persons. The center was launched with a \$1.9-million grant from the U.S. Bejan, who had been popular with the Americans and with the foreign press—the magazine *GQ* called him “one good cop”—was fired. Then Covali, according to Vizdoga, received an important visitor in his cell. Covali retracted his allegations. (A former lawyer for Covali denied that Bejan had been mentioned in the written statement, which has not been made public; however, a State Department report noted that Bejan was dismissed while “under investigation on charges of protecting a major trafficker, Alexander Covali.”)

Viorel Ciobanu, Moldova's chief prosecutor for anti-trafficking, told me that the evidence against Bejan was simply insufficient to pursue charges. When I pressed the question, his face flushed and he said that the decision had not been his: it had been made by the chief prosecutor for anti-corruption. He also disputed the notion that police corruption was extensive.

Two years ago, the American Embassy in Chisinau conducted a study of trafficking trials in Moldova. It found a wholesale failure to protect victims who appeared as witnesses, and a disappointing pattern of downgrading trafficking charges to pimping, thus reducing many sentences to fines. And most defendants were released from jail before their trials were complete. The great majority of cases, furthermore, were for recruiting a single person—another disappointment. Ciobanu blamed the Americans. “The State Department has said that the effectiveness of the Center for Combatting Trafficking in Persons will be judged by the number of prosecutions,” he told me. “So the police bring more cases than the evidence warrants.”

The Americans deny this. “We've thanked them for the stats,” a State Department official told me. “But we've urged them to go beyond the Soviet-style ticking off of lists and look at the larger picture. We want high-level, high-quality cases.”

Ion Bejan sued the government for firing him. The court, moving with unusual alacrity, ruled in his favor, and he was apparently offered a job in a different ministry. (I was unable to reach Bejan.) Covali is still in jail, fighting organized-crime and trafficking charges. (His lawyer declined to

comment on the case.) The Americans are still insisting that Bejan be legally pursued. But, according to Vizdoga, they are the only ones doing so.

The United States has made itself a global policeman concerning human trafficking. A series of alarming reports in the nineties, describing the problem as growing wildly, including inside the U.S., led to the passing, in 2000, of a landmark law, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. The law made trafficking a federal crime and greatly increased prosecutorial resources and, to a lesser extent, victim protections. Five thousand “T-1” visas were set aside annually for victims. But only a few hundred applicants materialized each year. In 1999, a report published by the C.I.A. had estimated that fifty thousand people were trafficked into America each year, but they never emerged. (The State Department’s most recent estimate ranges from fourteen thousand five hundred to seventeen thousand five hundred.) Because trafficking is often transnational, however, the law also mandated annual reports on the anti-trafficking efforts of other countries, with sanctions to be enacted against governments that were deemed uncoöperative.

The United States uses a tier system to rate nations. Tier 1 countries are doing their part. Tier 2 countries need to do more. Tier 3 countries are doing little or nothing and may be punished with sanctions. In 2003, a Tier 2 Watch List was added—a sort of red-flagged status to indicate that a country, despite its efforts to reduce trafficking, has a high or an increasing number of victims, or that those efforts have stalled. As with the State Department’s annual human-rights reports, a great deal of politics is said to go into the rankings. In 2007, after the Bejan debacle, Moldova fell from Tier 2 to the Watch List, where it remains today. Moldova, dependent as it is on aid, regards the threat of a further decline very seriously.

The U.S. has doled out more than half a billion dollars in anti-trafficking aid packages to governments, N.G.O.s, and intergovernmental organizations since 2000, about eleven million of it to Moldova. (The E.U. and the U.N. also give substantial amounts.) Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice chairs an anti-trafficking task force that includes twelve federal agencies, and the F.B.I. has sent agents to dozens of affected countries, including Moldova, to try to improve local anti-trafficking capabilities. Some academics and N.G.O.s criticize the American campaign for what they see as its overemphasis on prosecution, as opposed to the economic factors driving trafficking. Others see an overemphasis on prostitution, as opposed to non-sex trafficking. (The State Department, when asked to comment, said that U.S. funds were allocated to combat both forms of trafficking.)

Anti-trafficking efforts have been caught up in the debate over the meaning and the morality of prostitution. In the West, rescuing prostitutes has historically been a popular philanthropic and religious mission, particularly among middle-class women; two of the constituencies driving American anti-trafficking policy, evangelical Christians and women’s-rights groups, are in that abolitionist tradition. Prostitution abolitionists often conflate trafficking and prostitution, ridiculing the notion of “consent”—no improvement in working conditions, they say, can change prostitution’s essentially dehumanizing nature.

In line with this view, a 2003 reauthorization of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act provided for cutting off aid to N.G.O.s and governments that “promote, support, or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution.” The provision threatens many groups that work with prostitutes on H.I.V./AIDS prevention—in the same way that family-planning clinics throughout the developing world have lost U.S. funding because they continue to offer abortion services.

On the opposing side are advocates of decriminalization, including unionized “sex workers” and other groups, who see a wide range of transactions taking place under the heading of prostitution. Captive trafficking victims—“modern-day slaves”—occupy one end of that spectrum. (In Calcutta, organized sex workers campaign against trafficking, identifying victims, especially minors, and turning them over to rehabilitation centers.) Some of these critics see a self-admiring narrative at

work in the “rescue industry,” one that seeks to turn all prostitutes, but particularly migrants, into victims.

There are, of course, a great many victims, and they need help. But multiple agendas and institutional interests are involved; there is also a fair amount of theatre. In February, the United Nations held a major anti-trafficking conference in Vienna. Ricky Martin, Julia Ormond, and Emma Thompson delivered “celebrity spots” against trafficking. Thompson also offered a wrenching performance called “Trafficking Is Torture,” in which she played an Eastern European woman sold into sex slavery. The event was underwritten, to the tune of fifteen million dollars, by the United Arab Emirates.

Sweden, in 1999, began targeting johns rather than prostitutes, by outlawing the purchase of sexual services but not their sale. (Previously, both had been legal.) The Sex-workers and Allies Network in Sweden, a group that advocates for prostitutes, argues that the new legislation has driven the trade underground, making the work more dangerous. But the law is popular, and has reduced street prostitution—and, according to officials in Stockholm, trafficking. Policymakers in other countries, including, most ironically, former Governor Eliot Spitzer, of New York, have admired the Swedish model and sought to adopt some of its provisions.

Stella Rotaru approves of the Swedish approach to prostitution. “I like that they punish the clients for a change,” she said. She sometimes relies on johns, though, in rescues. Tourists, especially, can be helpful. They realize that something is wrong, and they can inform on a pimp or a brothel, or even take a victim to the police, without fear of repercussions, since they’re on the next plane out. Some johns undoubtedly don’t care whether or not a woman is trafficked—some are even said to find the idea stimulating—but people doing anti-trafficking work hear more often of women who are threatened by their pimps for sullenness. Enthusiasm, smiles, however faked, are thought to be good for business. And then there are the customers who fall in love with trafficked women, and buy or simply take them out of captivity. The couples rarely live happily ever after, though. “The women come home, and dream he will come for them,” Rotaru said. “Then he never does.”

On the outskirts of Odessa, I met a Ukrainian woman named Yana, who, improbably, had been trafficked to Moldova. We rendezvoused in a toy store, where I waited beside a display of Barbie and Bratz dolls. Yana was twenty years old, round-faced, with thin eyebrows, and wore a pale fake-fur coat and a red turtleneck sweater.

Yana came from a village in southern Ukraine, near the Moldovan border. After farming was privatized, the village went bankrupt. Her father, an alcoholic, had deserted the family when she was a baby. Her mother was also an alcoholic, and mentally ill. At sixteen, Yana had never been to Moldova or to Odessa. She had never heard of human trafficking. A former classmate, Angelaica, appeared one day at their vocational school, pregnant. She had been working in Chisinau, she said, at a fancy restaurant, making a good salary. There were more such jobs available. “I had only two more exams to graduate, but I needed money,” Yana said. So she and a friend, Galia, agreed to go with Angelaica.

A stranger drove them. At the border, he made the girls hike across the fields in the dark while he drove through the checkpoint. Later, their car was stopped by armed men in uniform; the driver paid them off. At a bridge, the girls were transferred to another car. The new driver asked Yana and Galia odd questions. Did they have any scars? Were they sick? Would their parents come looking for them?

There was no restaurant, of course. Angelaica, they later learned, had been working as a prostitute in Chisinau and had agreed to settle a “debt” to her pimp by recruiting two new girls. The pimp, Maxim, showed up the next morning. “We started to cry,” Yana said. “He said we had to help him repay the money he had paid for us.” Maxim was Moldovan, in his forties, short but powerfully

built. He shouted at the girls, frightening them into silence. “He told us there was no way back. We could do nothing but obey.” Then they were put to work.

Yana was taken to meet customers in apartments, saunas, hotels. Most of the johns were Moldovan; some were Turks or Romanians. She worked from 4 P.M. till 5 A.M., seven days a week, except when she had her period. Maxim took every cent she made. She and Galia were not allowed to go out alone. If they tried to escape, and went to the police, Maxim said, they would be returned to him—the police in Chisinau were all his friends—and punished. Yana never tried to escape; Galia did. And Maxim was right: Galia was returned to him, and beaten. Undaunted, Galia escaped again, and this time found her way to the Ukrainian Embassy. According to Yana, Maxim got a call, went to the Embassy, and retrieved her. She was severely beaten again.

This went on for half a year. Then Galia sought the protection of another Chisinau pimp, and Maxim did not pursue her. The new pimp, who was “a nicer guy,” Yana said, eventually took Galia, at her request, back to Ukraine.

Unwilling to abandon Yana, Galia went to the Ukrainian police and told them that she was being held captive. Maxim got wind of the investigation, and panicked. He drove Yana across the border, dropped her at a railway station, and gave her ten dollars. She bought a ticket home.

Yana told no one about what had happened to her. Her older sister, who had three children, was also living in the house. There was very little to eat. Then Yana’s mother died. Some time later, her sister hanged herself. When we talked, in February, Yana had not seen her sister’s children since her funeral, in August, 2006. They were living in an orphanage.

Meanwhile, Galia had helped the police find Angelaica, their recruiter. Angelaica led them to one of the drivers. An anti-trafficking N.G.O. in Odessa, called Faith, Hope, Love, took an interest in the case, and Yana ended up moving to the group’s shelter in Odessa. Angelaica and the driver were charged with trafficking minors. They were found guilty, and the driver was fined, though neither served any jail time. Yana, who testified at the trial, was disappointed with the sentences, but the prosecutor told her that, because the driver had children to support, he could not go to jail. Angelaica, Yana told me, was treated at the trial not as a recruiter but as a victim. The prosecutor told Yana not to be angry, and she had, it seemed, taken his advice. “I have a very soft temperament,” she told me. “I cannot be upset with anybody for very long.”

Yana stubbed out a cigarette. She was now working as a cashier at a grocery store. She would be happy to help the Moldovan police bust Maxim, she said. Yet no investigators had showed any interest in that part of her case. Indeed, she had never spoken to anyone in law enforcement in Moldova, and she no longer expected to do so.

When I visited the breakaway region of Transnistria, I got a sense of what the anti-trafficking effort in Moldova had been like five or ten years ago, before the new laws and international attention. Even compared with Moldova, Transnistria is a lawless backwater, and very few international aid groups have a presence there. Viktor Bout, the reputed arms trafficker, who is in jail in Thailand, operated from Transnistria, and mobsters from Russia, Ukraine, and Moldova go there to hide. The local police are so mistrusted that, when families fear that one of their members may have been trafficked, they don’t normally call the authorities, who may be assumed to work with the traffickers, but, instead, a telephone hot line maintained by a small N.G.O. called Interaction.

Oxana Alistratova, the director of Interaction, showed me around the office, in the basement of a decrepit apartment building in the capital, Tiraspol. Volunteers had built the office out of raw space and wreckage. The authorities had been no help—officials wouldn’t even give Interaction their phone numbers. (“Civil society is not well developed in Transnistria,” Alistratova said.) The

Transnistrians were able to advise potential emigrants who called the hot line, but SOS calls, and repatriations, were usually referred to Stella Rotaru—they didn't have her resources.

Local traffickers were luring Transnistrians with the kind of classified ads that no longer worked well in Moldova. Alistratova showed me that week's shopper's paper: ads for strippers and dancers in Cyprus, Lebanon, Syria, Slovenia; for young women "without complexes" to work as au pairs, waitresses, or maids in Ukraine, Russia, and the Czech Republic. One company said that it was looking for surrogate mothers. Interaction had called the contact number, a cell phone in Ukraine, and learned that its real business was in stem-cell-rich spinal fluid and other tissues, which were taken from the fetuses and sold. "We called the police after that conversation. They did nothing." (The ad later stopped appearing.)

Another company had advertised for good-looking young women to work in Dubai. That company had an office in Chisinau. I asked a young Moldovan woman to check it out for me. After talking to the people there, who told her that they were looking for saleswomen, she was half-convinced that it was a legitimate offer; a desperate teen-ager, I thought, would be even less skeptical. It didn't help, in evaluating the pitch, that neither of us had ever been to Dubai. And yet Moldova and the emirate are intimately connected: there wouldn't be source countries without destination countries. I decided to go to Dubai.

At police headquarters in Dubai, an official served me coffee in beautiful china. She wore a black full-length hijab. We talked about the influx of Eastern European prostitutes. "Some men want blond hair, pale skin," she said. "Where there is a market, there is a problem." She had worked with Stella Rotaru on the repatriation of Moldovan detainees. Every case was difficult, she said, because Moldova had no embassy or consulate in the United Arab Emirates.

Dubai, one of the seven United Arab Emirates, is, in the world of human trafficking, the quintessential destination. A city-state boomtown on the southeast coast of the Persian Gulf, it has a population of 1.4 million, nearly eighty-five per cent of whom are foreign-born. There are hundreds of thousands of construction workers, housemaids, waiters, and shop clerks from South Asia alone. For traffickers, it's an almost perfect recipe: mass immigration, mass transience, a tremendous concentration of money and anonymity, and a robust demand for labor. Many migrants arrive on contracts that look a great deal like trafficking: they owe either travel agencies or their employers substantial debts (as much as two years' pay) for their recruitment, are not allowed to change jobs, and, although the practice is illegal, routinely have their passports taken by employers. The prostitution market is huge. Between tourism, naval traffic (the port of Dubai is one of the world's largest), a three-to-one ratio of males to females, and the traditional sequestering of local women, the demand side of Dubai's commercial sex industry never flags.

Prostitution is hardly invisible in Dubai. At an intersection, I saw four Eurasian-looking women solicit customers. In one bar, with an English-pub theme, the prostitutes told me that they were from China, Thailand, Vietnam, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Ghana; in another, from Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, India, Jordan, and Moldova. (The Moldovan was blond and looked hard-used; she wouldn't tell me much.) And a great deal of the local prostitution is "closed site"—in apartments, massage parlors, and brothels.

In 2005, the U.A.E. was dropped into Tier 3 in the State Department's anti-trafficking rankings, down there with Burma. That did not fit the brand being so painstakingly built in Dubai, which has aspirations to become a world business capital and mass tourist destination, with the world's largest snow dome and what will soon be the world's tallest building. In 2006, the emirate passed an anti-trafficking law that helped get it hoisted to the Tier 2 Watch List, where it remains, along with Mexico (and Moldova).

Dubai is an autocracy, ruled by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum. The space for civic institutions is minuscule. Still, a modest private shelter for battered women and children, called City of Hope, has subsisted since 2001 in a beachside suburb. Its founder and director is Sharla Musabih, an American-born Emirati who has been married for twenty-five years to a local businessman. She generates a certain amount of animosity in Dubai. City of Hope takes in victims of domestic violence—housemaids, wives, their children. It also shelters trafficked women.

Musabih, who grew up on Bainbridge Island, Washington, is short and gregarious, and wears a hijab. In City of Hope's airy living room, where we spoke, I studied a framed plaque on the wall, and was startled to see that it had been presented to Musabih by a Moldovan anti-trafficking group. It had been signed by Ion Bejan.

Two Uzbek women appeared. They were both young and shy. One wore bluejeans and a sweatshirt; the other kept a hand to her mouth. They sat with Musabih on a couch, on either side of her. Another Uzbek woman translated for us.

They were cousins, they said, from the same village. One of the women was a widow, the other was divorced and had a child. Life in the village was hard. Then someone they trusted told them about Dubai. The wages, they were told, were good—a thousand dollars a month. One of them was promised a job as a waitress, the other a job in a beauty salon. One sold her wedding gold to pay for their travel documents and air tickets. When they arrived in Dubai, they were taken to an apartment where six other girls were living. Then, with no warning, they were each slapped hard across the face.

The story paused there. "They were given cheap, slinky clothes to wear. Stiletto heels," Musabih said. "These are Muslim village girls. But what traumatized them the most was being held down and having their boss shape and pluck their eyebrows. For them, that's so humiliating. If they go home like this, everyone will know."

The women seemed to know what we were talking about, and looked like they wanted to hide. Their eyebrows had the same high, thin arc I had seen on trafficking victims in Moldova.

"But then they ran away," Musabih went on. "They just held hands and ran straight into the street. That's so rare! The traffickers were afraid to run after them, once they were in public. Then somehow they made their way to the airport—it was the only word they knew in English, 'airport.' They lived in a rest room there for two days, with no food. Finally, somebody who spoke Turkish, which is close enough to their dialect, I guess, took them to the Uzbek consulate, and they brought them to us."

I asked the women to confirm the story, and they did. They had been at City of Hope for a month now, they said, and they wanted to go home.

"We still don't have their passports," Musabih said. "Their boss took them with her. The police were too slow." At the same time, Musabih was urging the women to stay in Dubai long enough to testify against their traffickers.

A few days later, the cousins were gone. According to Sharla Musabih, they received a phone call from an official at the Uzbek consulate, which had somehow been alerted to my interview. He convinced the women that the American reporter they spoke to had paid Musabih four thousand dollars, which she had pocketed. (I had not given Musabih any money.) Musabih tried to reassure the women, but they left late that night. Soon afterward, they were sent back to Uzbekistan. There would be no trial of their traffickers.

The police in Dubai were not especially happy when I turned up in their precinct. Even an Interpol captain with whom Rotaru had conducted, via phone and text, long searches of the rougher souks and sections of Old Dubai for captive women who had called her—with at least one spectacular rescue to their credit—suddenly remembered that he was not authorized to speak to a journalist. But I was able to talk to one of Rotaru’s favorite contacts, Omer, the prison officer.

Warrant Officer Omer Ahmed Ali arranged for me to meet him in an Emirates airline ticket office. He was a huge man in his late forties. He wore a floor-length white dishdasha with a full white headdress and had a big, kind, unshaven face. He was picking up tickets for five women in jail. They would be flying back to China, India, and Bangladesh. He called them “the ladies.”

At a nearby café, Omer told me that he was originally from Yemen. He had been a Dubai policeman for thirty years, and had been assigned to the prison system since 2004. Nowadays he specialized in repatriation. “We were getting too many ladies,” he said. “We already had to ask for a bigger women’s jail. We received it—little cells with bunk beds and an intercom, not just one big hall for two hundred, three hundred people. Much cleaner, all computerized, central air-conditioning. Not keys and iron bars and little windows, like the old place. Still, too many ladies were coming.”

The boom in prostitution had created a problem. Even with the protection rackets that surround the sex trade, more and more women were being picked up in raids and, in accordance with Dubai’s laws, given long prison sentences. Some of them had been trafficked. None of them were being treated as victims.

Omer chewed on a Snickers bar and sipped an espresso. “We saw that strict enforcement of the law would make too much,” he said. “We would have many thousands of foreign ladies in our jails. We don’t want that. Sheikh Maktoum doesn’t want that. So we changed the approach. I tell the ladies, ‘We’re here to help you, not to punish you. The court will do that. We’re not happy to have you here. Just give us your correct information, and we’ll try to take you home.’ ”

Repatriations are rarely easy, given that many of the women lack papers. “The Moldovan ladies, their chances are zero for getting the outpass except through Stella,” he told me. “The good and special thing she is doing for Moldovans—maybe they don’t know. Our target for the Moldovan nation is through her.”

He stood up. He had more work to do, more ladies to send home.

After a successful repatriation, Rotaru always sends Omer the same message: “Passenger has arrived.” She made a wry face when she told me that, back in Moldova. “It means ‘Everything under control. Normal.’ ”

The flight from Budapest was the last of the night. Stella Rotaru got to the airport early. This was the repatriation of Violeta, who was trafficked to Kosovo in 2000—the case that, a few days earlier, she had said made her want to jump for happiness. Rotaru found the husband and daughter in an upstairs café.

The daughter was around sixteen. She was wide-faced, a big girl, very pale, with jet-black hair and a lime-green headband. Rotaru asked her if she remembered her mother. “Just a little, like in a dream,” she said. She wore a black fake-fur jacket, a striped miniskirt, black stockings, and high-heeled black leather boots that were aggressive even by local standards. The girl seemed strangely, extravagantly bored. “She’s just nervous,” Rotaru murmured.

The husband was short, with bad teeth and a tight physique. He talked very fast, in Russian, and he smiled a lot, although only with the upper half of his face, giving him a monkeyish look. He wore a black-and-red Puma windbreaker, pointy-toed black cowboy boots, and bluejeans.

After a while, Rotaru said to me, “The situation is worse than I thought.” It seemed that the husband was expecting Violeta to arrive with a lot of money.

Did he not know that Violeta had been living in an I.O.M. shelter in Pristina?

“They don’t necessarily know that she is a V.O.T.,” Rotaru told me quietly. “To them, she went abroad a long time ago and should be rich.”

Rotaru started flipping through Violeta’s file. Violeta’s daughter glimpsed a small, blurry photocopy of a photograph of her mother and, in her first show of emotion, breathed in sharply. She wanted to see it. Rotaru gave her a quick look at it, said that it was a bad picture, which it was, and put it back in the file. The daughter’s gaze followed the page into the file and stayed there for a long time.

Rotaru asked the husband what his plans were. He said that he wanted to go abroad, perhaps to Russia.

Didn’t he want to spend time with his wife?

He had been looking after their daughter, he said. Now it was his wife’s turn.

Rotaru gave me a long look. “He is also stressed,” she said. “Also disappointed.”

While the husband went for a smoke, Rotaru asked the daughter about her studies—her father had told Rotaru that she was living with him, going to school. The daughter didn’t know what she was talking about. “He doesn’t know what I do,” she said, sneering. “I live near Chisinau. I rarely see him.”

The flight from Budapest landed. We made our way to the doors where arriving passengers emerged. One young woman dropped her bags, ran into the arms of her family, and lifted her grandfather off his feet, spinning him around while he roared and their relatives cheered and wept. The flow of arrivals trickled slowly to a halt. Violeta still hadn’t appeared. Rotaru approached a pair of border guards and was soon at the center of a scrum of uniformed personnel. Apparently, there were complications with Violeta’s papers. Rotaru was a vision of patience and calm in the middle of waving arms, softspoken among raised voices. She even smiled and, occasionally, laughed, as if she were inhabiting some alternate universe, and certainly not the grim, harried, midnight airport that the rest of us were in.

Violeta’s husband and daughter hung back, looking enervated, uninvolved. He had brought a friend, a burly fellow, and they went outside regularly for cigarettes. The daughter slouched under an illuminated advertisement for a local Internet service provider. It showed a smiling skydiver falling toward a tropical coast.

After an hour or so, Violeta appeared. She was a big, tough-looking woman in a black leather jacket, with burgundy hair and mirrored sunglasses pushed up on her head. She was walking fast and looked furious. It was not clear whether she saw her family—she stopped and turned her back on them to confer with Rotaru. Her husband said, rather loudly, that he hardly recognized her—she had gained a lot of weight. Rotaru was explaining Violeta’s identity documents to her. Finally, Violeta turned and, after Rotaru pointed her out, looked at her daughter. She let out a little moan.

Then she crossed to her daughter and gave her a quick embrace. She did not acknowledge her husband's presence.

The husband and his friend swooped in and picked up Violeta's large bag, each holding one handle, and headed out the airport door. There was a brief assembly on the sidewalk. Violeta, who still had not spoken to anyone but Rotaru, spat a big wad of gum on the ground. Her daughter was standing to one side, studying the parking lot. Then the group set off toward a small black Lada parked down the hill. I had heard nobody thank Rotaru. We watched them climb into the car, cramming the bag in the back, and then drive off in the direction of Tiraspol.

"There will be a big fight inside that car, or, if not, then later," Rotaru said, wearily. "Some things cannot be fixed." ♦