

Russia's Economic Demise: The Wages of Wasting Women by Karen Pressley

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“We were promised good jobs overseas,” 19-year old Mirislava said. “They held us on a freighter, one of the girls nearly died from sunstroke. Another was raped by a guard—he used a plastic bag instead of a condom. We were treated like meat. One man hit me, but the other guard intervened. They didn’t want their commodity spoiled before it was sold” (“Russian Girls Trapped”). When Mirislava and the other Russian girls arrived at their destination—Israel—local pimps took possession of this new collection of valuables. Their passports were confiscated and the girls were forced into the sex trade. Mirislava escaped, but the others remained enslaved as far as she knew.

Welcome to the world of modern slavery, where Russia plays a prominent role in this booming, multi-billion dollar industry involving twenty-seven million people globally (Bales 21)—more than half women and children—a world Mirislava knew too well.

Even before the dust settled on the Russian Federation’s most recent name change (number four in approximately one century), both Russian and global political leaders were sifting through the cultural and economic rubble following the fall of communism. Once in competition for the position of global superpower, with a growing economy driven by oil and other industries, Russia limps today like a giant with a crippled leg. Staggered by economic instability and a rocketing unemployment rate, Russian women have turned to desperate solutions; organized crime has positioned itself for high profits and dominance for market share:

The Russian Federation has become a global leader as a source, transit, and destination of the sale of women and girls for sexual exploitation and, to a lesser extent, the sale of women and children for forced labor.

Now Russia's third-most profitable, illegal business, sexual slavery follows illegal drug sales and arms trafficking. Within this maelstrom, Russia limps in the global economy because one half of its most precious resources—females—are being wasted or destroyed. With only 3.4 percent of Russian's GDP invested into education (CIA.gov), and with more than half of the females entrapped in sexual slavery under the age of 18, Russia is rapidly losing nearly half its resources they could use to build its future. In a nation where the Russian mafia controls more than forty-five percent of the economy and where widespread government corruption is acknowledged by the Kremlin, is it any wonder, then, that women and girls are imported and exported as commodities to more than fifty countries in the world? That Russia's abortion rate exceeds its birth rate? And, that deaths outnumber births?

With a political and cultural movement to revert their dwindling spiral by investing in girls and women, "womenomics" could be the miracle that Russia needs to keep itself from total demise. While speaking at a women's conference at KSU in 2007, Canadian economist Astrid Pregel referred to "Feminomics," her brand of womenomics, from "A Women's Guide to Womenomics" (*The Economist* 1) designating an overall organized effort of empowering girls and women through academic education, employment training, job placement, and education in health care (Pressley 2). A concept such as this could build a future economy for Russia—by women, for women. Women entering the (legitimate) Russian labor force could become the single greatest engine of economic growth. If females can bring such profitability through

organized crime, imagine what Russia could become if women succeeded to their fullest potential in fields that helped to develop and sustain Russia.

Natashas, Supermodels and Olympic Stars: A Reflection on Russia's Cultural Turmoil

Though the Olympics and international fashion runways are studded with Russian female stars, and Russian women rank number one in the Internet's mail-order brides market, this has a dark side that is painful to discover. Thanks to the accessibility of information through the Internet, including *YouTube* videos, we learn that behind many of those superlative bodies and beautiful, smiling faces are pimps in mafia networks that control the lives of these women, profiting from putting them in the spotlight where they earn high wages and endorsements from international brands ("Russian Mafia on the Catwalk"). But the women entrapped in the Russian sex slave trade have been dubbed "The Natashas" (Malarek 1). The Natashas include females of all ages, like Mirislava in this introduction, who have been lured or deceived by bogus employment ads and kidnapped or sold into slavery, including young girls abducted from schools and the streets. To capture more of the world market in sex slavery and child pornography, the Russian Business Network (RBN) dominates as a multi-faceted cybercrime organization based in St. Petersburg, functioning as a world hub for illegal Web sites (Krebs 1). Called the "baddest of the bad" by VeriSign, RBN earns more than \$150 million annually. By 2007, it developed partner and affiliate marketing techniques in many countries to provide a method for organized crime to target victims internationally. Russia has begun to face up to this crisis, by recently adopting a new law that protects trafficking victims and enforces prison terms for traffickers. But in light of Russia's current deteriorating economic troubles, far more extreme measures need to be taken to

revert deteriorating factors such as pregnancy, childbirth and maternal mortality that raise extreme anxiety about Russia's future and sustainability.

Though Russian females will outlive males with a life expectancy of age 73 versus age 59 respectively (*UNESCO*), pregnancy and childbirth statistics, including maternal mortality, reflect a significant aspect of Russia's future declining economic projection (*CIA.gov*). Russia's fertility rate ranks #194 in the world; deaths outnumber births by a ratio of 14:1 (*Geocities.com*). In Russia, family planning through contraceptives and hormone-containing remedies is relatively expensive, as the monthly average income salary is 1500 rubles (\$54). A condom costs around 9 R (30 cents) and pills between 50 and 300 R (\$1.80 and \$10) (Weir 1). Abortion still remains the main method of birth control. Abortion is legally permitted under the following instances: at a woman's request within the 12th week of pregnancy; within 22 weeks if there are social conditions under which pregnancy, child birth and child rearing would become a heavy burden for a woman; and at any time if it is established that pregnancy could harm the health of the mother or the child. Russia's abortion rate is one of the highest in the world. For every 100 births there are approximately 200 abortions (Weir 1).

For ten years after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, negative public health indicators such as below-replacement fertility and high rates of sexually transmitted diseases, abortions, birth traumas, and maternal mortality has drawn attention to the deep and largely silent struggle for gender and health equity in Russia. One study by Michele Rivkin-Fish could be considered a slice of the "womenomics" movement I suggested earlier. She documents the efforts of global and local experts, and ordinary Russian women in St. Petersburg, to explain Russia's maternal health problems and devise reforms to solve them (Rivkin-Fish). Her study of transforming and

privatizing the Russian health care system and of the promises and perils of prescriptive programs for change, points to the areas that need change in the change-makers themselves. Rivkin-Fish describes this as part of a larger story about the inherent dangers of current neoliberal economic transformations of fragile post-socialist social welfare arrangements.

The factors of health care, women's health, and human rights in Russia all affect the statistics quoted earlier. The rights to privacy, to freedom from discrimination and the right to information are all routinely violated in the name of public health in Russia (Peryshkina 12). Currently, the basis of Russian women's conditions or lack of financial resources may invoke refusal for medical treatment. Peryshkina describes a womenomics-type project that was implemented to increase Russian women's awareness of their health rights. Social research was utilized in order to design, inform and shape a series of activities to inform target groups of their rights and to provide them with the skills and knowledge to fight human rights violations that are occurring in the health system. The target groups included: women seeking birth control, women who use drugs, women with HIV/AIDS, elderly women, women who are victims of rape and domestic violence, teenagers and NGOs and governmental organizations that work with the target group, medical establishments, and policy makers who influence laws. The activities aim to help women from each of the target groups and their advocates promote advocacy and awareness of human rights violations amongst women in the Russian health system. Twenty focus groups and interviews were conducted and then 5,000 women were questioned. Peryshkina states that ten two-day workshops were conducted by the working group's organizations for five hundred target group members. Three thousand fact sheets specifically aimed at each target group were distributed in thirty medical organizations throughout Moscow. Fifteen hundred

women's health advocacy packets were created containing concrete examples of violations of the rights of women in the health system, a review of the existing Russian Laws pertaining to human rights and public health and information about organizations and mechanisms working with the target groups. She describes the lessons learned: "To protect and promote public health involves educating the public about behaviors and situations that pose threats to the health of individuals and ways to avoid these dangers. An essential ingredient in the prevention of human rights violations is an adequate understanding of civil and legal matters by the population."

The results of Peryshkina's project supports the statement made by Kevin Bales, a foremost expert on contemporary global slavery: "One of the best defenses against slavery is education" (27). Of course, education runs the gamut from public awareness on health and cultural issues to personal economics and formal education. According to a 2005 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (*UNESCO*) report on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (*OECD*) website, more than half of the Russian adult population has attained a tertiary education, which is twice as high as the OECD average. In the 2007-2008 academic year, Russia had 8.1 million students enrolled in all forms of tertiary education (including military and police institutions and postgraduate studies). Foreign students accounted for 5.2 percent of enrollment, half of whom were from outside Russia. UNESCO actively participated in the organization of the G8 Ministerial Meeting on Education held in Moscow in 2006. The meeting, prior to the G8 Summit in St Petersburg, adopted the Moscow Declaration focused on the role of education in shaping innovative societies.

Russia's 2002 census reports the literacy rate as 99.4% (99.7% men, 99.2% women) (*CIA.gov*). 16.0% of the population over 15 years of age (17.6 million) has tertiary (undergraduate level or higher) education; 47.7% have completed high school; 26.5% have completed middle school; 8.1% have elementary education (*CIA.gov*). Male and female students have nearly equal shares in all stages of education, except tertiary education where women lead with 57% (*UNESCO* 315). Of those, 24.7% are recorded among women aged 35–39 years (compared to 19.5% for men of the same age bracket).

In 2007, the Russian Parliament made strides in education reform with a new bill introducing a common exam system for high school graduates, authorizing a major shift from Soviet-era to Western-style educational standards (*Rianovosti* 1). The bill outlines provisions for students who would benefit from special consideration, including parentless children, disabled children, children from low-income families, Olympic champions, school contest winners and others. Russia's educational system has remained largely unchanged since Soviet times, when it was free. However, spending on education plummeted following the collapse of the Soviet Union, affecting professors' salaries and fostering corruption. A recent article about teacher pay around the world (Rampell 1) shows Russia's position compared to the U.S. While American teachers spend on average 1,080 hours teaching each year, Russian teachers spend about 850 hours teaching in both lower and higher education, and 650 in secondary. Exact pay rates were not accessible at the time of this report, but a comparative chart shows that the U.S. pays their teachers less than Eastern European countries. This is one significant reason why educating Russian women and children is a crucial step in repairing this country's crippled leg, and an incentive why Russian women should seek education as an area of potential employment

