

At Risk in Central Asia

INSIGHTS INTO THE HORRORS FACED BY MANY LIVING IN THIS PART OF THE WORLD

All I want is a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air—with one enormous chair, oh, wouldn't it be lov-er-ly?" In *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle is a young woman who sells flowers on the dirty streets of early 20th century London to make a few pennies each day. Her face is smudged with dirt and her manners are uncultured, but she longs for a better life. She goes on in her song to wish for food to eat and warmth from the cold, time to rest, and someone to love and take care of her.

Many people in Central Asia are at risk because they lack one or more of these basic things. Some are at risk from society's traditions; others are at risk from nature, and still others from exploitation.

Risk from Traditions

BRIDE KIDNAPPING IN KYRGYZSTAN

"Let me go!" Gulmira* screamed, trying in vain to tear herself away from her captor's vise-like grip. "I don't want to marry you. I don't even know you!" she sobbed in desperation.

Gulmira had been invited to her fiancé's parents' home to meet his family and friends. After a party to introduce her to his buddies, she had gone to bed, looking forward to a peaceful night's sleep. A rough hand over her mouth rudely awakened her. Strong arms forced her to move quickly out of the house. She tried

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to resist, but to no avail. She begged the young man, one of her fiancé's friends, to let her return to the man she loved, but he turned a deaf ear to her pleading.

After traveling for many hours, they reached her captor's home. His female relatives took her to the back room and forced the jooluk, or marriage scarf, on her head. She had no means of escape. To further discourage her, an older aunt lay down at the threshold of the home with a loaf of bread on her chest, warning that if Gulmira ever tried to cross over the threshold and escape, her life would be forever cursed.

Gulmira knew that if she did escape and somehow find her way back to her parents' home, they would not welcome her. In the Kyrgyz language, the worst word used to defame or curse someone is the word that means "one who is stolen and returns." If a kidnapped bride returns home, she brings disgrace on her family, and is a financial burden to them the rest of her life, as no one will marry her.

Kyrgyzstan's practice of bride kidnapping is one that puts many young women at risk. Estimates show that "35-45 percent of married ethnic Kyrgyz women are married against their will as a result of bride-kidnapping."¹ The problem is much more prevalent in villages than in the larger cities, but the Kyrgyz pastor who shared Gulmira's story said that even though his church is in a big city, they still have to be very careful. When they take evangelistic teams into the villages, they have to keep a close watch on the young women with them, so that no one kidnaps them.²

The pastor recounting the story of Gulmira said that, unlike many others, this story has a happy ending. After years of abuse by her alcoholic husband, Gulmira came to the Lord, and later her husband did as well. Today they are happily married and serving God in a local church. For so many other kidnapped brides, however, "happily ever after" is strictly a fairy-tale phenomenon.

Risk from Nature

TAJIKISTAN

"Wake up, children, hurry! It's starting to rain again. We must get up to higher ground!" The frantic mother rushed her sleepy children higher up the steep, shadowy mountainside to a neighbour's home.

In order to understand this scene, we must first look at the ruggedly beautiful country of Tajikistan. For this 90 percent mountainous country, natural disasters such as flash floods, mudslides, avalanches and earthquakes are a constant threat. A Christian worker there was intrigued by the odd occurrence referred to

above. It took place in a mountain village. Each time it rained, day or night, the families living in the lowest part of the valley would quickly leave their homes and hurry to neighbours' places on higher ground.

"Why do you do this?" he asked one of the families.

"Because the next heavy rain storm may cause a flash flood that will sweep all these lower houses away."

"Why don't you just build a new home on higher ground?"

"The reason is," came the sad reply, "we have no money for building materials, and no one cares enough to help another family build. We cannot build a house with no resources and no help."³

Christian humanitarian aid personnel are working with village leaders in Tajikistan to find solutions to the housing crisis due to natural disasters.

Risk of Exploitation

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Roza, a young woman from Turkmenistan, was promised a good job as a nanny in Dubai. When she arrived, she was forced to work in a Russian brothel. "It was horrific," she said with tears of shame and pain in her eyes. "I worked all night, every night, six days a week, and was beaten if I refused to perform." After eight months of this torture, she escaped. But her brokenness remains.⁴

Human Trafficking is the lucrative business of coercing or selling people into slavery. According to the US State Department, of the 2.5 million trafficked slaves around the world, about 80 percent are female, around 50 percent are underage, and most are used for sexual purposes. Most of the victims are from Asia and Eastern Europe.⁵

Central Asia has an increasing number of human trafficking victims.⁶ Many are girls in their teens or twenties who are sent to the Gulf States in the Middle East. With stellar promises of well-paying jobs as waitresses, nannies, or models, for example, they are tricked into leaving all that is familiar and are forced into prostitution.⁷ Most have no hope of escape as their personal ID is taken from them, they are controlled by threats against themselves or their families, and they are paid little or nothing for their work, and are so filled with shame that even if they could break free, they fear rejection from their families.⁸

Two teenage girls from northern Kazakhstan were much more fortunate than Roza. The girls, one in grade 10 and the other in grade 11, were looking for a way to get away from home and have a more exciting life. They jumped at the chance to go abroad and make good money as waitresses. A woman met them in the

country's capital, Astana, and took them to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. There the girls discovered the plan for them to be sent to the United Arab Emirates to work as sex-slaves in nightclubs. They appealed to the Uzbek police and were able to return home unscathed. The woman who had tricked them was heartbroken at the girls' escape. Her plan was to bring these two unsuspecting girls to Dubai to exchange them for her own precious daughter who was enslaved there in the sex trade.⁹

Central Asian girls need to be freed from prostitution, to find healing in Christ and to either be accepted back home or find true jobs to support themselves.

Not every person in Central Asia is directly at risk from bride kidnapping, imminent natural disaster or human trafficking. Many of these beautiful people live their lives in relative security. However, thousands

who are struggling today with these horrors need to know that there is hope and a reason to go on living. In *My Fair Lady*, the hard, self-centered Henry Higgins transformed Eliza Doolittle into an elegant, poised lady of society. The power of our Almighty God and his Gospel of grace and hope is incomparably greater. Through our prayers and personal involvement in his mission, he will transform the lives and circumstances of people like Gulmira, the Tajik family and Roza. How would he have you join him in this ministry of transformation?

The author is an International Worker in Central Asia whose heart is burdened for the difficult issues so many people face in these countries. It is her desire to raise awareness in order to inspire people to pray, give and even become involved in working toward solutions



* Not her real name.

¹ Reconciled to Violence: State Failure to Stop Domestic Abuse and Abduction of Women in Kyrgyzstan. Human Rights Watch Report, Volume 18, No.9 (D). September 2006.

² Report by Kyrgyz pastor (name withheld) in conference session, Social Issues in Central Asia, February 2005.

³ Personal interview with Tajikistan humanitarian aid worker (name withheld), March 2003.

⁴ Central Asia: Special Report on Human Trafficking. IRIN Humanitarian News and Analysis, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Ankara, October 21, 2003. <http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=20782>

⁵ Offman, Craig, MP takes aim at pedophiles with bill, National Post. Monday, October 29, 2007.

⁶ Central Asia: Special Report on Human Trafficking.

⁷ US Department of State Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2007: Kazakhstan. Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. March 11, 2008.

⁸ The Salvation Army Fights Slavery in the Form of Human Trafficking. December 3, 2007. <http://www.salvationarmy.ca/2007/12/03/the-salvation-army-fights-slavery-in-the-form-of-human-trafficking/>

⁹ Fighting Against People Trafficking. Khabar Agency, Kazakhstan. December 1, 2008. <http://www.khabar.kz/index.cfm?id=50747>