



Images lay bare the sordid horror of sex trafficking

PHOTOGRAPHY

Nick Ahad met Dana Popa, photographer behind the harrowing exhibition *Not Natasha*.

AN exhibition opens in Bradford today which you may want to turn away from, but your humanity forces you to look.

Dana Popa is a London-based photo-artist. *Not Natasha* grew out of an MA project while she was studying at the London College of Communication, but became much more.

Popa is a Romanian artist who studied at the University of Bucharest before coming to England.

"Like most people, I had heard a bit about the problem of the sex trade from Eastern Europe, but I was reading a book by Amnesty International and I realised just how big the problem was and how much of it was concentrated on Moldova," says Popa.

"I thought it would make for a good, strong subject."

What Popa hadn't bargained for was that the story of trafficked women would become much more than just an academic study.

In 2006 she travelled to Moldova, having made contacts with an NGO which worked with victims.

"Sometimes, when you first hear the stories, you think the women are maybe exaggerating or maybe they want to make up stories so it can sound more exciting," says Popa. "But then I would

hear the same stories over and over again and realise that they were all true."

The journey into the horrific world of these women had a profound effect on Popa.

"When I first started the research I had a chance to spend some time in a shelter where women who have been rescued are brought and where they can stay for a month. That was the hardest part, hearing their stories."

Popa first travelled to Turkey, but found it difficult to establish links there and travelled back to Moldova.

"I photographed some of the women, but I realised I had to try and focus the idea, so I travelled around the country and visited the families that were left behind, who were still waiting for the women to come back home," says Popa.

"I wanted to photograph the spaces that were left when these women were taken."

She also travelled to Soho, with a woman who had escaped after being trafficked to the UK, and photographed inside some of the flats where she had been kept. Some were still used as brothels.

The name from the exhibition, *Not Natasha*, refers to the nickname often used to advertise women sex slaves from Eastern Europe. Popa says: "They hate to be called that."

The resulting exhibition of work has been shown in Holland, New York and Tokyo and last year won the prestigious Jerwood Prize, leading to a publishing deal.

■ *Not Natasha*, opens today at Impressions Gallery, Bradford. Dana Popa will be at the gallery tomorrow from 2pm to 3pm for a talk on her experiences.



SEX TRADE: Bedroom, *Woman in Corner* from the *Not Natasha* exhibition by Dana Popa in Bradford's Impressions Gallery.