

45 Women Trek to Everest in Human Trafficking Stand

What does Mount Everest have to do with Moldova—a tiny Eastern European country whose highest hill rises about 400 metres above sea level? Well, not much at first sight.

Everest has witnessed many events that make world news, but perhaps few have more true importance than what will occur 9-25 April, when 45 women trek to the base camp of Everest and then summit the Kala Patthar Peak. The trek, named the Freedom Climb, aims to give a voice to the oppressed by raising awareness and funds to address the problem of human trafficking, exploitation, oppression and slavery.

This is where Moldova comes in.

Imagine a country with no stable government or functioning economy for decades. A country in which 80 per cent of the rural population doesn't have a job, and even a doctor might earn as little as 65 euros per month. It is a country where a whole generation is leaving to find work abroad, and thousands of children and old people are left behind without proper care.

Poverty, lack of education and few state social services make migration the primary hope for escape and a future for Moldovans—and leave traffickers with easy prey.

Beginning of Life, an organization working with victims of human trafficking, as well as at-risk women and children in Moldova, states that more than 100,000 Moldovans are victims of human trafficking. More than 30,000 women and girls have simply disappeared without a trace.

In the last 10 years half of the labor force has left the country, many of them illegally, leaving 30 per cent of the

nation's children "social orphans". People from socially vulnerable families are especially in danger. Whether they grow up without parents, or in families marked by violence or alcohol addiction, they often have no choice but to go to the streets or leave Moldova.

Embracing the Victims

Beginning of Life is doing prevention work amongst vulnerable groups of people, as well as running a rehabilitation and reintegration centre for the victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Former victims of trafficking in Moldova are 90 per cent likely to be re-trafficked because issues like poverty and unemployment have not changed. In view of this problem,

Beginning of Life has started several small businesses where trafficking victims can learn a trade and make a living. The funds OM Moldova receives from the Freedom Climb this year will be used to support this initiative. The girls will be trained at OM's business course, and additional money will be invested in their businesses.

Other funds raised by the Freedom Climb initiative in the past have already been used in similar ways to help protect potential victims: several women were enabled to attend OM Moldova's business course and start their own small business. One of them is Cristina.

Cristina is 20, single and lacks higher education. She is the oldest child of a large family with little income, making her a typical candidate for seeking employment abroad. Instead, she had the idea to begin beekeeping and producing honey to increase her family's income.

After attending an OM business course, she received a loan to set up a small honey-making business with 10 families of bees. She had a difficult start because a draught in 2012 meant she collected only 50 kg of honey, but she is not giving up.

OM modified her repayment plan, taking into consideration the drought problems, so she will continue working to succeed in her business. Cristina is starting into the new season with hope and plans to expand, determined to provide enough extra income so no member of her family will need to work abroad.

In many of the cases of human trafficking in Moldova, women are promised a job abroad and are then betrayed and sold—finding themselves in a situation they never imagined, in a foreign place with no connections, and with debts to those who smuggled them out of the country. Enabling women to make a living at home gives them an alternative to seeking work abroad, and immensely reduces the risk of falling victim to traffickers.

Money from the Freedom Climb has also been given to OM Moldova's Day Centre project, which focuses on children from the most difficult backgrounds, helping them to receive an education, learn to receive and show love and to develop a healthy self-image, thus aiding them to be better equipped to make good decisions in the future.

From the Top of the World

This Day Centre project, along with other relief ministries, is coordinated by Becky Johnson, a Freedom Climb participant. She would be the first to admit she's not too excited about climbing a mountain—it's not her idea of fun—but Becky has a huge passion for the oppressed. The problem of human trafficking brought her to Moldova two years ago, where she has been working with OM.

"How can I just live comfortably in Canada or England, while I know what is going on here?" she said. This urgency to help not only brought her to Moldova, but also drove her decision to take part in the Everest Freedom Climb, to speak up for Moldova and give a voice to those who have been silenced.

It might not make world news, but this month, when 45 women

make the climb up the highest mountain on earth—while a seemingly insignificant woman tends her bees in a remote village in Moldova—they will have changed the world, if only for one person.

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