

One Woman's Fight Against the World of Human Trafficking

Larysa Kondracki's *The Whistleblower*

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The Ukraine was in deep economic recession and post-war Bosnia in chaos as the selling of young girls from Kiev to brothels in Sarajevo became business as usual. When Nebraska police investigator, Kathryn Bolkovac, took a job as peacekeeper in Bosnia for a UN-contracted private military company in the late 1990s and learned that her colleagues were participating in the operation, she did what no one else was willing to do — her job. As a human rights investigator who was quickly promoted to head of the gender affairs unit, she uncovered and reported the crimes in progress to her superiors and was met with stonewalling and eventual dismissal. Yet with the help of Madeleine Rees, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bosnia, Bolkovac gathered evidence and won a lawsuit for wrongful termination, which brought the company's involvement in human trafficking to light.

First-time director, Larysa Kondracki, brings Bolkovac's story to the screen with *The Whistleblower*, starring Rachel Weisz, Vanessa Redgrave, and David Strathairn. Raised in a Ukrainian community in Toronto, Kondracki first began researching human trafficking while attending the directing program at Columbia University. She quickly learned about Bolkovac, contacted her via email, gathered 30-thousand dollars in donations from the Ukrainian community, and traveled to Amsterdam to meet with her. The filmmaker and her co-writer, Ellis Kirwan, spent two years in Eastern Europe talking to sources in high places and low. "The woman [in the film] who was hiding those girls, we were in one of those places in Odessa," Kondracki relates. "You come back at the end of the day, like, 'Did we just hear what we thought we heard?'" She tells of a place called the Arizona Market, where "it's like a cattle call. You do this once every month and guys would come in from Amsterdam, from Berlin, from London, to be able to buy these girls." And then there was the big business of "anti-trafficking," Kondracki reveals, where organizations collected large sums of money from the U.S. gov-

ernment to repatriate small numbers of kidnapped girls who were willing to serve as high-profile poster children so that the anti-traffickers could continue to profit.

"This epidemic of sex trafficking in a war or post-war climate is nothing new," says Kondracki, who theorizes that demoralization, impoverishment, and physical decimation of a society can result in moral collapse. "You are coming from a post-communist environment, where suddenly, overnight, inflation rises by 300 percent, the average worker in Ukraine makes 30 dollars a month, and yet it's the number-one purchaser of automobiles. So you've got incredible money and then extreme poverty. And the same thing in the Bosnian War; the atrocities that happened there are unfathomable. You've got a group of people who are sort of deadened to what we consider right versus wrong." She explains that the sex trade situation in Bosnia "wasn't that secretive. For me, the point of the film was to look at a system that allows this. How do you let these huge organizations be so unaccountable? I don't think it's a film bashing the UN; it's a film bashing what the UN has done in this particular mission." Kondracki tells us that Madeleine Rees is now "looking into the legal structures of international immunity," in an effort to create a mechanism by which the offending peacekeepers can be charged.

Kondracki understands that "you can't talk at an audience for two hours. You have to make a movie that's a microcosm of this whole world." Coinciding with the release of Bolkovac's book, *The Whistleblower: Sex Trafficking, Military Contractors, and One Woman's Fight for Justice* (2011), the film tells a story of heroism that brings the entire epidemic into focus. "Kathy is just somebody who goes, 'No!'" the director declares. "She's black and white about it. In this world of grey, she's going, 'There is no grey!' Not many people knew about her, so I like to think that the film is a whistleblower of its own, and that we're continuing her story." ▼

The Whistleblower opens August 5th.

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