

Trafficking in human beings in Estonia

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Dear all, I am glad to be here today, to discuss this very serious issue - trafficking in human beings - with you.

I will start my speech with saying some words about trafficking in human in general. I will describe the causes of trafficking, different forms of it and also, how are victims being recruited. Then I will give very brief overview about the situation in Estonia, and about main problems in the fight against trafficking.

All the questions are most welcome after the presentation.

Trafficking in women is not a new phenomenon, but in Europe it started growing rapidly after big political and economical changes in Eastern Europe. The political changes in former Soviet states in the 1990's opened new possibilities for some people, but many found themselves unemployed with their previous social security structures dismantled. Suddenly, we had poverty, unemployment, capitalism. Values changed quickly as well – dreams of independence and common wellbeing were replaced by dreams of wealthy life and consumerism. I'm being little bit dramatic now, but very shortly, that's what happened.

The United Nations estimates that between one and four million women and children are victims of trafficking every year around the world. Of these, around 500 000 are believed to be trafficked into the EU. From East-Europe, around 120 000 women are trafficked to Western Europe. The number of Eastern European women who are victims of trafficking is increasing and it is estimated that two thirds of the women trafficked into Western Europe come from this region.

Trafficking in women is a complex phenomenon and involves such aspects as human rights violations, fight against organised crime, migration and visa policies, gender inequalities, poverty and socio-economic inequalities within and between countries. It's a problem that needs multidisciplinary approach involving all actors and cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination.

The forms and varieties of trafficking are different. Women and children are used as free labour, beggars, but mostly, trafficked women are sexually exploited through brothel prostitution, in nightclubs, through escort services, for sex tourism and military "rest and recreation", and in pornography.

Recruiters, traffickers and pimps who engage in trafficking in women have developed quit common methods of operation. One method of recruitment is advertisements in newspapers offering job opportunities in foreign countries for low skilled jobs, such as waitresses and nannies. Some advertisements promise good salaries to young women who will work as dancers and hostesses. Another method of recruitment is "marriage agencies," so called mail-order-bride agencies. According to the International Organization for Migration, all mail-order-bride agencies with women from the republics of the former Soviet Union are under the control of organized crime networks. Recruiters use "marriage agencies" as a way to contact women who are eager to travel or emigrate. In Estonia, unclear job offers are put to universities and even high schools information desks.

Many women know that the promised work may be in sex business. But even when knowing the work to be in prostitution, women's expectations are usually far from the reality. The women don't realize the lack of control they will have, the level of violence used against

them, and what small percentage of the money they will receive. Women are especially vulnerable to promises made, because media pictures prostitution as easy work for sexually liberated women. The damage is usually left out from descriptions.

Estonia is mainly country of origin, but also transit country and to a small extent a destination country. There is no documented data about the number of trafficking victims. I have heard estimations from 100 - thousands, but there is no proof. When I meet Nordic social workers or police, they always tell me that they have met many Estonian women (victims of trafficking) in their countries. Danes have said that Estonia is no 1 according to the number of victims, Finns have said Estonia is no1 together with Russia, Norway says that Estonia is no 3. Who knows the truth?

What is more visible is the trafficking inside Estonia, but most of the time, it is not considered trafficking. I will tell you later, why.

The reasons for trafficking are the same as in other developing countries: poverty, unemployment, lack of education and access to resources. Also there is growing demand for sexual services, affected by the active lobby and growth of sex industry.

Women and girls are ready to take the risk of falling into the hands of traffickers in order to improve their living conditions. The research made in spring 2002 and 2003 shows that Estonian youth, both Russian and Estonian speaking, is very much in the risk of becoming trafficking victims. Also, the social-economic situation of women in Estonia is generally worse than this of men; important difference maker is the gender segregation in the labour market. Women are mostly in occupations, which have less prestige and smaller average salary. Unemployment is higher among youth age 15-24. The awareness of trafficking, of the need to have work permit and visa has been little or non-existing; today the situation has improved a little, but there is still huge need for awareness raising.

About other reasons for trafficking in women:

Considering prostitution a normal phenomenon is one of the main reasons for the existence of trafficking in women. It is said that men have certain special needs; also, prostitution is connected to some women's nymphomania and finally, prostitution is considered an easy way of earning lots of money. Unfortunately, prostitution is not related to organised crime, although that is exactly what it is. A prostitute is not considered a victim, but a person who has made a free and conscious choice. Those who wanted to work abroad and fell victim to traffickers are not considered victims either, because people do not believe that usage of force is possible. All these fallacies, however, simplify the operations of traffickers. When I said before that trafficking inside country is not really considered trafficking, that's exactly what I meant. Pimping, buying and selling of women are seen as a business acts and not as a crime. When we speak about prostitution, we think about one thing, when we speak about trafficking, we think about something else. Also, some countries have tried to make clear line here – Netherlands says that prostitution is normal work for every grown-up, but trafficking is bad and should be fought. To my mind, this is contradictory ideology.

Like I said before, Estonia is also a transit country – women from ex-Soviet countries are bought here and then trafficked to Western Europe. Estonia is sometimes also a destination country for poorer states, such as Byelorussia, Russia, Ukraine. The number 1 country to send trafficked women to Estonia is Latvia, and police estimates that most of the women are sent forward to Western Europe.

Trafficking in women is a low risk activity, and extremely profitable for criminals. The growing sex industry creates market for trafficking. Punishments for trafficking are ridiculously small. Also, there is general attitude that women are to be blamed, as they were naïve enough that believed promises made or even knew that the job was in prostitution (which means automatically they deserve whatever happens to them). These women don't dare to go to

the police not only because they are afraid of traffickers who have threatened their lives, but also because there is general despise towards them.

Trafficking in women is dangerous not only in individual level. It is dangerous also to all countries and societies. The profits in the trafficking business are enormous. Europol estimates that 6-9 billion EUR is earned through trafficking each year. It's impossible to say exactly how much criminals earn, but some examples are available. In the UK one criminal group earned 40.3720 EUR per week. In Germany the total profit made from trafficking in connection with 84 investigations was 10,114,000 EUR. Unlike trafficking in drugs or guns, trafficking in women is even more profitable, as women and children can be sold again and again. The money earned by pimps in many cases is laundered. Traffickers buy second-hand cars, real estate, etc. Clean money can be used everywhere, including buying criminals off from jail, or even in politics. It is much safer to trade human than drugs and guns; it is easy to set up an under cover business such as model agency, film agency, marriage bureaux, through which women are traded with. Unfortunately, often there is also corruption among state officials, police officers, migration staff etc who help traffickers. All because of huge profit. Everyone gets good money out of it, except these women.

Trafficking is harmful for society also because women who escape trafficking circle need help, medical and psychological, and the state should provide this help. It means money again. The state will loose lots of money, trying to recover these women, but they really need help. Without outside help they cannot go back to normal life. If there are many women in our society, ill and lack of opportunities, it makes our whole society weaker.

For Estonia (as a small country), prostitution and accompanying trafficking in women pose quite a serious problem, from the aspects of human rights violations, public health, our reputation. As only 1.4 million people live in Estonia, each individual should be valued. Unfortunately, when dealing with trafficking and prostitution issues, there are many problems. I would mention two quite prevalent attitudes: "This will not happen to me" and "This is no concern of mine". Many people have heard that less educated women get caught by criminals. Yet, everyone who is unaware of the procedures connected to working abroad and their rights can find themselves in an unexpected and very unpleasant situation from which it is very difficult to come out. It is truly criminal to say that this is no concern of mine. The knowledge that women and children are bought and sold like any goods should concern everybody, because even if those people are not our relatives or friends, they are certainly relatives of somebody. These women who are sold to prostitution abroad or who are exploited here in Estonia are traumatized perhaps for the rest of their lives, even if they started prostituting voluntarily. Which is usually the case. Mostly, women become prostitutes in a financially hopeless situation and they expect to leave such 'work' behind as soon as possible, but that possibility never comes, because a prostitute is seldom independent and she is simply not allowed to begin a new life as long as she earns money for the owners. Also, there are few measures to help prostitutes to return to normal working life. So it is easier to prevent such things to happen in the first place.

About difficulties, some problems with or for police and prosecutors also appear. I am not going to describe exactly what problems, but they are related to collecting evidence, getting witnesses, doing surveillance, witness protection etc. It is always difficult to prove the trafficking case.

Like I said in the beginning, trafficking in human is very complex issue and needs multidisciplinary approach involving all actors, especially the political will to stop this horrible crime. I will give a very short list of tasks/activities needed to change the situation:

- Fighting gender inequalities through continuous education and awareness rising
- Acknowledging trafficking in human as a human rights violation

- Awareness rising on trafficking and prostitution, their reasons and consequences among public, officials, social workers, teachers, doctors etc
- Involving men in to the campaigns against sexual exploitation of women
- Training of police, border guards
- Research, monitoring the situation
- Effective prosecution of traffickers
- Creating jobs, providing training for unemployed
- Victim protection and support