

**Trafficking in children –  
A criminal act calling for a child protection response**

*Oslo 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2011*

**Intervention by Myria Vassiliadou: Working against child trafficking. The work of the European Union**

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, colleagues

I am really grateful to be amongst you today and be able to discuss children's vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking. I would like first to thank the Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality, and Social Inclusion and the Council of Baltic Sea States.

The fight against trafficking in human beings, especially of women and children, has been named a priority for the EU and in the Member States for some years now. For the Commission, it is clear that we have a **duty to protect children against these crimes, and this means taking action**. These horrible crimes simply cannot be tolerated. And as far as the EU is concerned, we are convinced that everything that can be done must be done. And I am here to tell you what is being done.

But first of all I would like to acknowledge all the very interesting work that the Council of Baltic Sea States has done and still is doing on the fight against human trafficking. Your latest work such as the Handbook on data collection mechanisms and the Handbook for diplomatic and consular personnel are important publications that will contribute to future activities to fight human trafficking by relevant practitioners in the field. You have managed to address areas that have not been explored at EU level so far. (you can find them on the COM website). The tangible initiatives undertaken by the CBSS Task Force on THB are acknowledged in the recent Oslo Declaration.

The most noteworthy contribution of the EU in the recent months has been the new Directive on trafficking in human beings. It is a flagship instrument, the first EU directive in criminal law matters and the most comprehensive piece of EU legislation in this field to date. I am not here to talk about how it will contribute to improve the fight against modern slavery, but I do want to underline two specific aspects which are very topical to child trafficking.

The first one is the specific provisions in the Directive to protect child victims of trafficking from secondary victimisation, in particular in criminal investigations and proceedings. Member States are now under obligation to translate this into their national legislation.

The second, very topical one, is the explicit recognition as trafficking in human beings of new forms of exploitation to which children are being subject. This is the use of children for exploitation in begging and petty crime. Evidence for this is piling up.

In this context, I would like to very much draw your attention to Europol's EU Organised Crime Threat Assessment Report published last January which identifies an increasing trend in the exploitation of children by mobile organised crime groups in the EU. These groups of criminals tend to organise from south east Europe and move around the EU with the trafficked children who they work and trade with other criminal gangs. The trafficked children, aged from 5 years olds, are systematically trained and forced into committing criminal activities such as pick-pocketing, organised begging, shoplifting and distraction burglary, as well as other street crimes like robbery and muggings. The gangs use extreme forms of violence such as sexual abuse and torture. The trafficking and exploitation of these children is a lucrative business, with the children being routinely sold between the different criminal gangs, and the 'price' based on the child's money-earning potential. The average price paid for a trafficked child in the UK, for example, is €20 000 (source: UK Metropolitan Police). With an estimated annual income of up to €160 000 from a single trafficked child, one can see why there are around 1.2 million children being trafficked worldwide for criminal purposes (source: UNICEF). The number of victims being exploited by just one mobile organised crime gang can range from 10 to 100 minors. These gangs tend to have bases on the outskirts of large European cities from where children under their control are dispatched across the city to commit crimes. On arrest, these minors are fully aware that they are under the age of criminal responsibility. In addition, authorities are confronted with victims that are not in possession of identification documents, have a limited understanding of their resident country's language, and refuse to provide information on the criminal group that is exploiting them, out of fear of reprisal. To prevent victims from talking to the authorities, and condition them into returning to the group, they are intimidated with false stories. For example, they are told they will be tortured by police or that social workers will sell their organs. Not surprisingly, the children refuse to provide information on

the organised crime group and frequently return back to the gang within 24 hours of their arrest and placement in a juvenile detention centre. On their return, they will often be transferred to another operating unit or mobile organised crime group based in a different part of the EU.

I would also like to draw your attention to a recent EC funded study on human trafficking within the Romani communities which concludes that Roma, especially women and children, are highly vulnerable to trafficking due to among others ethnic and gender discrimination, poverty and social exclusion and high levels of unemployment. I quote: "Certainly trafficking exists and its impact on Roma is grave. [...]. Although relevant official data does not exist, all law enforcement and anti-trafficking professionals interviewed in this study considered that trafficking is an issue that affects Roma and often in a disproportionate manner. For all countries the estimates provided about the perceived representation of Roma among trafficked persons are several times higher than the proportion of Roma in the general population". (European Roma Centre)

With the new legislation, the EU, through its member states, is sending a clear message that it will not tolerate those engaging in any part of the trafficking process and that it will, at the same time, ensure that victims are fully protected and given the opportunity to recover and be re-integrated into society.

Indeed, the European Commission complements this new EU Directive with other very recent initiatives that point and create coherence with the same objectives. I think we can safely say that the political will is there.

First, it is really less than three months that I have been appointed in my current function and in order to carry out the hopefully not impossible task of improving coordination and coherence between EU institutions, EU agencies, Member States, third countries and international actors in the field of Anti trafficking. I look forward to working with all of you to address this challenge.

Second, the EU Anti-Trafficking Day has been established on 18 October of every year and a clear focus is placed on pertinent issues relating to this modern day slavery.

Third, there is a recently launched an anti-trafficking policy website which should become a one stop shop for practitioners and the public interested in

the problem of trafficking – there is still a lot to do, but we are working hard on it and I invite you all to send us information to enrich what is already there.

Fourth, and as a next step to the Directive, the European Commission is further currently working on a new Integrated Strategy, planned for the first quarter of 2012.<sup>1</sup> In this new Strategy, the European Commission will first of all to complement the Directive, initiate new actions in the areas which are not (or to a very limited extent) covered in the Directive and thus develop a truly integrated strategic approach in tackling human trafficking in as broad a manner as possible. I would like to see this Strategy build further upon issues that are already covered in the Directive, but are in need for further study or in need to create new tools and ways to improve international cooperation. This seems to be the case in the areas of the protection and assistance to victims of human trafficking and also in the areas of partnerships between law enforcement with relevant stakeholders. Your work in that context is very interesting indeed.

An equally challenging job is the collection of statistical data on human trafficking victims, investigations, prosecutions and convictions. Indeed, we do not have any statistical data on human trafficking at EU level. It has become apparent that there is a need to develop better statistical knowledge of human trafficking at national and European level in order to provide a more precise and more reliable diagnosis of this criminal threat. The European Commission, DG Home Affairs together with Eurostat, has started a process to collect comparable data in all EU Member States. Based on information received from previous studies on data collection and also on the experiences of the Council of Baltic Sea States in your handbook, the Commission has selected key indicators. If all goes well, we hope to start the data collection process soon, probably after the summer. It will give us statistical information also on the total number of child victims. ( Identification of victims is of course a huge relating challenge that we all share and I look forward to hearing more about the results of the DEFLECT projects that is being launched here today to learn more about how you will be engaging with trade unions, labour inspectorates, tax authorities, police and employment agencies etc to understand more about both identification and data collection).

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<sup>1</sup> The first EU Action Plan on the fight against trafficking in Human Beings dates from 2005 and as it has been pointed out by various stakeholders, it needs to be updated.

To continue, I am sure most of you are very well aware, and engaged in the current dialogue is the proposal from the Commission for a Directive on sexual abuse, sexual exploitation of children and child pornography. In order to strengthen prosecution, the proposal asks Member States to approximate legislation on a comprehensive list of up to 22 offences and on the levels of penalties for them depending on the gravity of each offence. They cover different forms of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation. This includes, for instance, the organisation of travel arrangements with the purpose of committing sexual abuse, something particularly relevant, but not exclusively, in the context of child sex tourism<sup>2</sup>.

The proposal should facilitate the work of law enforcement authorities investigating these offences. They should have the *possibility* to conduct undercover operations. Initiating and pursuing proceedings should be made easier, in the absence of reporting by child victims – often scared and ashamed – or reporting only years later.

The child sexual exploitation directive will provide a substantial contribution to fighting child trafficking for sexual purposes – allowing especially to effectively prosecute offenders and protect victims without having to prove the existence of trafficking, which we know is a hard task.

The directive is currently under negotiation with the European Parliament and the Council.

Of course we do not have to wait for the implementation of these new Directives. Many actions have already been taken to tackle and address child trafficking. To mention some,

The European Commission recently launched a study on the typology and policy responses to child begging in the EU. We want to find out what is behind this very visible phenomenon, trafficking or survival strategies, and we want to know what works and what does not work when it comes to combating this form of exploitation and giving children a chance to have a better future. I understand that you will here some information on this in a session tomorrow.

The European Commission together with the ILO have developed sets of indicators for human trafficking. These include two lists of indicators specifically targeting child trafficking for the purpose of sexual and labour exploitation. They contain indicators on recruitment, exploitation and abuse of vulnerability of the child in the country of destination.

A project has been funded by the EC to develop a child-rights-based methodology and techniques for correctly interviewing, properly identifying and adequately supporting and assisting child victims of trafficking. It also aims to increase the knowledge and strengthen the professional skills of the practitioners involved. The project aims to help prevent and combat child trafficking by developing a strong private-public partnership. It pays especial attention to the identification of children who are victims or at risk of trafficking, research into the profile of children who are victims or at risk, adapting existing training modules and developing best practices for identification, support and assistance.

I am so proud that the EU can contribute to support national excellence when it comes to provide a vigorous response to child trafficking. I have to mention Operation GOLF, a spectacular crack down on organized crime networks getting substantial earnings from buying, selling and exploiting Romanian Roma children as commodities and using them in begging, petty crime and benefit fraud. The EU supported the UK-Romanian Joint Investigative team through funding and Europol help. This operation is a milestone in the fight against child trafficking for a number of reasons. First and foremost, because it has rescued enslaved children from a life of exploitation and a future of criminality, has put criminals in jail, and has dismantled a network of the worst criminals. Second, because it has provided hard evidence – evidence that only the police had the means to get – that behind children begging or stealing we encounter on our streets we don't have survival strategies by specific children, but sophisticated criminal networks of traffickers. Third, because this operation is a model on how we should tackle transnational crime. By having law and order go transnational too.

I encourage you to seek for more information on all the above on all Commission funded projects, as well as publications on addressing human trafficking can be found on our EC anti-trafficking website mentioned before. The new call for proposals for ISEC program will be launched shortly, with a deadline for applications in September. The call itself will be published on DG Home website.

I am confident that the COM is working in the same direction through the adopted Directive and beyond.

Finally, I really cannot stress enough the importance of partnerships with all actors engaged in the work against human trafficking, and most importantly non governmental organisations and civil society more broadly.<sup>3</sup>

Taking into account these characteristics the key word for our common action should be “partnerships”. Partnerships between public private and nongovernmental actors. Important for example in cases of labour exploitation (work with employers) or protection, support and assistance to victims of trafficking (referral mechanisms). Partnerships between all the actors likely to come in contact with a potential victim: law enforcement, border guards, but also lawyers, consular services, immigration authorities, civil society, health care, labor inspectors etc. (important to identify and help victims of trafficking and to devise multidisciplinary policies to address trafficking and its root causes. Partnerships with other countries and international organizations. In this context, I would like to express my appreciation that the European Commission has been invited to specific CBSS meetings in the past. And I look forward to more collaboration in the future.

We now know that human trafficking is addressed in regional cooperation such as the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region and the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Europol states in its OCTA 2008 report that the Baltic Sea Region presents attractive opportunities to organized crime from the EU but also to groups originating from the neighboring countries. This is mainly because of the Region's position between countries of supply and demand for illicit markets. The results of your transnational cooperation are indeed interesting

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<sup>3</sup> In summary, I will work to ensure that the result is a Strategy with concrete, realistic and feasible actions. Rather than a long list of various possible initiatives, the Commission will identify the most key areas to address. I am already in discussion with Member States, experts, international organizations, non governmental organizations on this and intend to ensure wide and transparent consultation with as many actors as possible. These consultations are vital to ensuring both coherence but also inevitably a strategy that delivers results.

for the EU as a whole and for other regions within the EU including your cooperation with non EU countries. So, we need to focus on partnerships – because anti-trafficking policy is not only the matter of law enforcement but a matter for all of us here today.