

SPRING 2021

Turning a blind eye: the human cost of trafficking

EVENT REPORT



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Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
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Human traffickers run sophisticated operations. Often bypassing border officials, national and local police – and on occasion the judiciary – human trafficking is intimately intertwined with migration. Reports have brought to light how women are taken by trafficking networks during their journey and face widespread sexual exploitation. And the danger does not end at the border – even after arriving at reception centres, shortages of police and guardians for unaccompanied children create hotspots for exploitation and smuggling.

There isn't a major city in Europe that doesn't benefit from human trafficking of women and girls. Furthermore, the proceeds of trafficking underpin illegal arms, drugs and terrorism. This is a sinister and dirty equation, and yet we in Europe largely turn a blind eye to it. Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, recently released its annual risk analysis, claiming to provide a comprehensive picture of the European Union's migratory situation. Yet, missing from the picture – human trafficking and its significant impact on women and girls. As the European Commission looks towards its 2021-2025 Action Plan against migrant smuggling, it will be vital to address protections for those on the move and the relationship between human trafficking and organised crime.

This Policy Insight debate will broach the realities of migrant smuggling and address the steps that must be taken to ensure that people on the move can undertake safe and legal journeys.

Report

Human trafficking is a global criminal enterprise worth over \$150 billion a year, according to some estimates, and snaring up to 40 million people around the world in sexual exploitation, forced labour and other forms of modern slavery.

The Friends of Europe online debate on 18 February explored new ways to tackle this scourge by shifting the focus onto prevention and policies that put survivors at the centre of counter-trafficking efforts.

Speakers urged greater coordination among countries, organisations and agencies and urged a wider recognition of trafficking as a serious crime with penalties that can serve as effective deterrents.

“Our firm objective is to cut off the network of smugglers that exploit the ignorance, the dreams and the needs of people from around the world,” said **Notis Mitarachi**, Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum. “We should not allow smugglers to continue.”

Joining Mitarachi for the hour-long debate were **Ana Cristina Jorge**, Director of the Operational Response Division at Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency; **Monique Pariat**, Director-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME) at the European Commission; and **Malaika Oringo**, Founder and CEO of Footprint to Freedom, an organisation led by trafficking survivors, and Member of the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Board (ISTAC).

The panel faced questions from experts and stakeholders from civil society and international organisations, and heard powerful first-hand testimony from four other women trafficking survivors.

Survivors First

Oringo's organisation believes the only way to eliminate human trafficking is by giving survivors a voice and an opportunity to lead. She outlined her experiences as a teenager trafficked from Africa to Europe and called for anti-trafficking policies to be refocused in order to put survivors at the centre of prevention and eradication efforts.

"A lot of emphasis is being put on the criminal aspect of the problem. This means that the human and the practical aspect of the problem does not receive enough attention," she said.

In most European countries, Oringo added, victims are used to help the prosecution of traffickers without any consideration of the repercussions for their future. "The law does not really protect victims, it just needs to catch smugglers and traffickers," she contended.

In recorded testimony, four other female trafficking survivors called for more supportive policies to help victims rebuild their lives, including through legal, medical, psychological and economic help. One said the lack of support almost drove her to go back to sex work. Such support must be culturally sensitive and aimed at helping survivors find legitimate work and regain economic independence. Healthcare professionals and social workers should be given the training they need to better understand and respond to the trauma suffered by trafficking victims.

"We need really to invest in the recovery of survivors, but also to invest in the aftermath of exploitation," said Oringo. "Recovery does not end when a person is rescued."

Although it is 17 years since her rescue, Oringo explained that she still needs long-term psychological support.

"There's no streamlined support that is ready to put there for long-term survivorship or survivors ... to give them a stage that is supportive enough for them to be able to be heard, to be listened to."

Pariat, from the European Commission, agreed on the need for a 'comprehensive response' that addresses victims' needs for psychological and social support. She said the Commission's proposed new migration strategy would address those issues with specific policies focused on women and children.

"It will address all forms of exploitation, with a strong focus on sexual exploitation, because it's a large part of the reason for trafficking," she said.

The Commission's proposed Pact on Migration and Asylum also addresses measures to help rescued trafficking survivors – including the most vulnerable – integrate into European society, Pariat explained.

Participants urged measures to allow survivors to use their experience help support other victims and tackle traffickers.

"We would have to widen the focus ... on the issue of protection, and our experience is that this issue of protection becomes really tangible when we involve survivors or victims of trafficking in the creation of structures or services that can then help

people along the road,” said **Sabine Wenz**, Programme Director Better Migration Management at the German development agency GIZ.

Oringo also underlined the importance of bringing survivors into the fight against trafficking.

“We should also look at engaging survivors in implementing research and coming up with policies, because the survivor narrative is very significant in coming up with the best strategies and combating human trafficking,” she said. “They have lived the experience and without their narrative, we do not know if our programmes or our policies are trauma-informed or if they are culture-informed.”

Pathways to Prevention

There was broad agreement among speakers on the need to treat the root causes that leave people vulnerable to human traffickers. “When people are vulnerable because they are poor, because they are subject to violence, because of many reasons, because they have to be displaced, then obviously they are very prone to become the prey of traffickers,” cautioned Pariat.

Alternative opportunities are needed to counter the desperation that pushes people into the arms of traffickers. Oringo called for institutions to partner with local organisations and governments to promote ‘pre-migration intervention’ for vulnerable people seeking to migrate.

Information is one key weapon in the battle to protect people from traffickers, to counter trafficker messages that lure vulnerable people into trusting them and keep them from seeking help from authorities once they are in their grip. Education and economic opportunities are also crucial.

“Prevention passes through two important ways,” said **Maria Laura Conte**, Communications Director at the Italian NGO Fondazione AVSI. “The first is information, of course, but the other is alternatives, building alternatives of job creation, of education.”

Adam Elsod, founder of The Young Republic, which works to foster democratic participation among young refugees in Europe, was among several speakers who called for the development of legal asylum and migration pathways to counteract the power of traffickers.

“As long as root causes are not addressed and safe, effective alternative pathways to seek asylum are not guaranteed, smuggling will simply go on,” he wrote on the debate’s chat line.

Mitarachi and Pariat agreed on the need for legal migration pathways.

“Europe should ... do more on legal migration, offering paths for people to come,” the Greek minister said. “We don’t want a closed Europe. We want people to be able to come here, but to come in a legal way.”

Pariat pointed out that legal migration paths are included in the Commission’s migration pact proposal.

As well as tackling the supply side, prevention strategies should also look at controlling demand in Europe for trafficked people, particularly women and children trafficked for sex work.

“We need also to tackle the demand of Europe ... the demand for exploitive services,” said Oringo. “I became a victim of human trafficking because of the gender-based, gender-specific demand of sexual exploitation, so if we do not tackle the demand and legalisation of prostitution in Europe, a lot of vulnerable migrants are going to end up falling in this cycle.”

Sanctions on employers who knowingly engage trafficked individuals are one way to tackle demand said Pariat. She said a new European Union directive would oblige member countries to apply criminal penalties in such cases.

The Commission is also looking to address digital challenges, given how the pandemic has encouraged online sexual abuse. “We need also to address that and to see that this new online world we are working in is not facilitating and promoting and widening this crime.”

A silo-busting approach

Collaboration among national authorities, international organisations and agencies is vital to combat the often complex, cross-border trafficking networks.

“International cooperation, is extremely important. A lot of trafficking is cross-border, it is fused with migrant smuggling, with migration or refugee flows, and this needs also be addressed,” said **Ilias Chatzis**, Head of the Anti-Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling Section at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

Mitarachi outlined the work Greece is doing with its EU partners and agencies such as Europol and Frontex, as well as with neighbouring countries. “We keep on emphasising the need for collective action against this increasing phenomenon,” he said.

The importance of a multidisciplinary approach was also underscored by Ana Cristina Jorge, of Frontex, who explained how the agency cooperates with third countries in areas like training and information exchange.

“We cooperate in different projects that are in place, also with non-EU countries, in this area of fighting the trafficking in human beings,” she said. “We have different projects in the area of capacity building where we work closely together with different agencies in order to create synergies and exchange better information and raise awareness”

However, **Melita Gruevska-Graham**, Head of the Anti-Trafficking Programme at ICMPD (the International Centre for Migration Policy Development) cautioned that insufficient cooperation often led to vulnerable people falling between agencies’ areas of competence.

“In order to avoid a situation where such girls and boys, women and men fall through the cracks of state policy and legislative frameworks, just because they do not fit into one specific category, the anti-trafficking stakeholders must collaborate closely with the stakeholders working on internal displacements, on international protection, on child protection and also on migrant smuggling,” she said.

One specific area where a multi-agency approach can have a major impact is in screening procedures to identify trafficking victims at entry points, said Pariat and Jorge. The Frontex official said such work is particularly difficult when children are involved and needs cooperation from a number of players.

“This is an area where we have invested very much,” she said. “These are the most difficult victims to detect at the border, especially the small children. You really need to ... raise awareness of the border guards, of the police officers, but not only, because we have actions also with airport authorities and airlines.”

Punishments that fit the Crime

Several contributors called for a greater emphasis on the criminal nature of human trafficking to ensure judicial sanctions can have a deterrent effect that counterbalances the huge profits that can be made.

“This crime ... needs to be really seen as what it is, which is exploitation of humans by other humans,” said Chatzis. “It’s a very serious crime (but) we see very low levels of conviction; traffickers basically walk or get a fine.”

Crime-fighting efforts need to focus on ways to end impunity and break the traffickers’ business model.

“It’s a crime and it’s a very profitable crime. It creates a lot of money and that’s why it’s flourishing,” said Pariat. “We need to break this business model and also to allow (for) fighting the impunity of the perpetrators because there is ... impunity for those who traffic human beings.”

Mitarachi insisted Greece treats trafficking as ‘a very serious crime’. Identifying trafficked people at the borders, offering them advice, alternatives and asylum can help break the business model, he said.

“We offer them legitimate ways and support through a legal framework to get legal residence and access to employment and support,” the minister explained. “That is something that fundamentally kills the business model of those that are trying to use other people for profit.”

