

Event report of the debate:

Fighting trafficking in human beings: a joint effort

which took place at the COMECE, Brussels, on 24th November 2014

Summary

The topic of trafficking in human beings is increasingly challenging global and in particular European policy. More than 880,000 persons are victims of trafficking in human beings in the European Union. These human tragedies, often invisible to us, are not sufficiently in the focus of political life. Experience shows that without public awareness nobody can expect efficient and sustainable changes. Three guests with different backgrounds working in the field of anti-trafficking provided an insight into their work while identifying concrete options for action.

Report

Fr. Patrick H. Daly, General Secretary of COMECE, opened the debate with a short introduction to the topic and introduced the guest speakers. He reminded us of the Pope's speeches the previous day to the European Parliament and to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, in which Pope Francis underlined his preference for practical solutions rather than to nicely formulated ideas. The topic of trafficking in human beings is an issue to which Pope Francis regularly devotes his attention.

Sr. Eugenia Bonetti MC, an Italian nun, gave a very passionate insight into her work and into the story of her personal vocation for working directly in the field of fighting against trafficking in human beings. The encounter with Maria, at that time a 30-year-old Nigerian woman, in the early 1990s changed Sr. Eugenia's life as she tells it today. Maria, a mother of a child, was a victim of trafficking in human beings who ended up without any social insurance and without any legal status in the streets of Turin. Sr. Eugenia was so touched by Maria's story that fighting against trafficking in human beings became a kind of a new life purpose for her.

Like Maria, about half a million people living in the European Union share a similar fate. In most of the cases the victims are women. A fifth of them minors. These victims, in our European case, come from all the poorest parts of the world, especially from Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia. The mass media show pictures of a glorified Europe to which young people from other parts of the world are attracted by hopes or promises of a better life there. Their hope makes an attractive business for human traffickers. It often starts with local people smugglers on the African continent and frequently ends in forced prostitution in "Western countries".

Without legal status and economic independence, living often in fear of the police and their traffickers, they become vulnerable slaves. Slaves in the middle of our so-called modern “civilized society.” Sr. Eugenia stated how she was ashamed of this “civilized society”, as she emphasised several times during the debate.

Sr. Eugenia diagnosed three main causes for the increasing growth of trafficking in human beings which today makes for a global turnover of over \$150,000,000,000: poverty, corruption and ignorance. In her view, there cannot be a sustainable solution without fighting against those three causes. She founded the office against human trafficking run by the Italian Conference of religious women (USMI). Today 250 religious sisters from over 70 congregations work in more than 220 projects dealing with trafficking in human beings in Italy.

An important part of Sr. Eugenia’s activities is education and advocacy work. She regularly speaks with civil and ecclesiastical authorities and informs them of the extent of contemporary trafficking in human beings. A special field of education is the contact with religious sisters in the home countries of the victims. They often cannot imagine what’s happening in Europe to their fellow citizens.

In the spirit of the Gospel of St. Luke, she encourages people to “go and do the same!”

Aidan McQuade, Director of Anti-Slavery International, provided a critical input regarding the lack of knowledge about the real extent of contemporary slavery in the world. Mr McQuade argued that there was insufficient sensitivity about contemporary slavery in the human mindset. People mostly believe that there is a big distance between them and the reality of slavery so that the imagination of slavery becomes abstract and anonymous. To show the impacts of slavery on our lives, it suffices to point out that the origin of many of our products in daily use. For example coltan, which comprises part of nearly all mobile phones, comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo where child labour is a crucial element in its mining. The same applies to the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan or the textile industry in Asia.

From his experience, even self-declared competent people do not know a lot about what is expressly qualified as slavery. It seems as if the content of the relevant treaties and conventions is still not sufficiently known (e.g. Child Abduction Convention Regulations 1986; Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography 2000, etc.). If the competent authorities have this poor knowledge, we may imagine how unaware ordinary people are of this phenomenon.

Mr McQuade also pointed out three main causes of contemporary slavery: poverty, social exclusion and the lack of rule of law in several parts of the world. Consequently it’s obvious that victims are primarily children, persons of physical weakness, migrants, ethnic and religious minorities.

The causes of contemporary slavery are not abstract. They are easily explicable. It is important to understand, that policy usually does not change without civic pressure. The problems cannot be solved by charity, but only through political changes. Therefore citizens are obligated to put pressure on politicians and to keep this topic fresh in the public political discourse.

“We must recognize this as a political issue. We must respond to this as citizens and demand a change of political structures, which facilitated the world of today. Because there is one other truth that we should not forget: whenever we act together, respecting our differences and diverse backgrounds, when we act with common purpose, we can still overcome,” is how Mr McQuade ended.

Annie Morris, representing the Counter Trafficking and Training Focal Point (London office) for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), gave an insight into their daily advising work. They provide assistance to governments and direct assistance to migrants on a global level. Using its extensive global network IOM can provide medical and legal assistance and whatever else the situation requires.

Providing counter-trafficking training to countless professionals who may undertake to come into contact with potential victims has proactive and a reactive impacts. Their training, from which also a large number of Catholic professionals benefit, has a preventive element. On the one hand, it may protect people from themselves being trafficked. On the other hand, future victims can be protected, if it succeeds in identifying traffickers for example. Being aware of indicators allows professionals to have a more efficient overview.

The cooperation between IOM and the Catholic Church makes a large contribution to the prevention work. Last year alone 100 professionals of the Catholic Church in the UK have been trained. Beside clergy and even bishops, the participants are those who have responsibility in the field of social, legal and medical work. A specially-tailored manual for a Catholic audience contains three modules: understanding human trafficking; the policy context for victims’ support and protection in the UK; and referral, return and reintegration. This manual allows those who have completed the training to train others.

Maria Hildingsson, Secretary General of the European Federation of Catholic Family Associations (FAFCE), highlighted the link between family values and prevention of becoming victims of trafficking. She stated that the social strengthening of families would be beneficial for the protection - in particular of young girls - against being trafficked victims for sexual exploitation, as happens for example in Romania.

In his closing remarks **José Luis Bazán**, legal advisor for migration and asylum at COMECE, drew special attention to the current statistics on trafficking in human beings. According to Eurostat, the number of victims of trafficking in the EU is only around 30,000. But other international organisations such as ILO or IOM claim a bigger number of approximately 880,000 victims. This gap exists because Eurostat considers only those cases which were officially registered. To have a true picture of

the phenomenon, it was argued by Mr Bazán, there is a need to publish estimated figures, to avoid the high number of unreported cases of males and children who are victims of trafficking. Males are frequently treated as irregular migrants and deported (with any kind of identification as victims of trafficking) and children are mostly unable to contact the authorities.