Human trafficking, the slavery of our times

By Myria Vassiliadou

Traffic in human beings is the slavery of our times. Its patterns evolve along with the changing socioeconomic circumstances, while people are being forced into servitude, especially, in times of economic and financial turbulence, traffickers continue targeting the most vulnerable of our societies, rendering them into slaves for forced labour, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, organ removals, illegal activities, such as drug trafficking. These people are building our homes, cleaning our houses, picking our fruits or tailoring our clothes. And the responsibility for addressing this heinous violation of everything humanity stands for is upon society as a whole.

In general, it is difficult to gauge the full extent of trafficking in human beings due to its criminal aspect. While women do represent a majority of the victims, traffickers do not discriminate; men are forced into hard labour, children are coerced into begging and stealing, girls and boys are forced into sexual exploitation. According to preliminary data of the European Commission, most of the registered victims in Member States are used for sexual exploitation (76% in 2010). The remaining force is into labour (14% in 2010), begging (3%) and domestic servitude (1%). In terms of gender, preliminary data available shows that 79% of female victims were women and men for 21% (of which 3% were boys) of victims between 2008-2010. Victims come from countries within and outside of the EU. More and more we see victims that are trafficked in their own countries.

It is now even more pertinent to have a harmonised EU approach to trafficking in human beings. The Commission’s policy and legislative framework is characterized by a comprehensive approach in addressing trafficking in human beings. The focus is on human rights, victims are central and policy should be gender-specific. This is reflected in Directive 2011/36, which is going to stop the tide of people trafficking. In this Directive, the Commission intends to work together with the Coalition to develop models and guidelines on reducing the demand for services provided by victims of trafficking in human beings, in particular, the sex industry, agriculture, construction and tourism. In this respect, I am extending an invitation to all stakeholders who are committed to the purpose of eradicating trafficking to join the Commission and strategically contribute.

Demand for services by victims of trafficking plays a strong role as a root cause as one of the pull factors. In fact, the Directive 2011/36 sets the frame by obliging member states to take effective and practical measures to curb demand and raise awareness on the phenomenon. It further urges member states to consider measures for criminalizing the use of services with the knowledge that the person is a victim of trafficking. To this end, the Commission is mandated by the Directive to submit a report to the European Parliament and the Council, assessing the impact of existing national law, accompanied by adequate proposals. This will be a crucial development and a momentum in further forming relevant policies, and a demanding task I am committed to.

Working in partnership towards the eradication of trafficking in human beings is our joint goal, and the private sector has a crucial role to play. I look forward to continuing working on this issue and to increase cooperation with COBCOE and all those interested in addressing this phenomenon.

Myria Vassiliadou was appointed EU Anti-Trafficking Coordinator in March 2011.

Myria has worked in the European Commission as a Detached National Expert in the Directorate General for Research. She has served as a member of various Advisory Boards, Expert Groups and acted as a consultant at the national and international level. She has worked extensively in the area of fundamental rights related to areas of trafficking in human beings, gender, migration, ethnopolitical conflict, and the media.

Parliamentarians Against Human Trafficking project

- Human trafficking is one of the most lucrative illicit businesses in Europe, with criminal groups making about $3bn from it per year.
- In Europe, over 140,000 victims are trapped in a situation of violence and degradation.
- Up to 1 in 7 sex workers in Europe may have been enslaved into prostitution through trafficking.


Parliamentarians Against Human Trafficking project is trying to do something about this by bringing parliamentarians together in their own EU national parliaments to speak with one united voice. In Wilberforce’s times, the problem was transparent; today it is hidden and difficult to detect.

Together with COBCOE, this important project, funded by the European Commission, has persuaded 19 EU country parliaments to develop a proper strategy.

On 16th and 17th October 2012 some 100 parliamentarians will be meeting in London to review the 1st year of operations and to consider what new initiatives are needed to maintain momentum.

The Speaker of the House of Commons is organising an evening reception to give credence to the conference and to mark Anti-Slavery Day which is on 18th October. Amongst many, the project would aim to work with businesses through COBCOE during the coming year; small or large firms could offer opportunities to help trafficked people, both men and women, with training, internships and work experience, to help them by way of a transition experience. We already benefit from support from V4ECO (VIAT), Siemens, Virgin Atlantic and a number of smaller companies who are considering how they can play a part. Only a total commitment and awareness by the public is going to stop the tide of people trafficking.