



OSCE 17th Alliance Against Trafficking in Persons Conference
Trafficking in Children and the Best Interests of the Child

Vienna, Hofburg, 3rd April 2017

16:00 – 18:00: Panel 1 – Human Trafficking Threats for Children in Crisis

Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's presentation

There can be no doubt that tackling the exploitation of children on the move affected by the migration and refugee crisis is one of the major challenges current facing OSCE Participating States.

In 2015, 96,465 unaccompanied children applied for international protection in the EU, which represented a tenfold increase compared to 2010.

UNICEF have reported that of the 181,436 arrivals in Italy in 2016 via the Central Mediterranean Route, over twenty-eight thousand were children.

Nine out of ten children who crossed the Mediterranean in 2016 were unaccompanied and therefore especially vulnerable.

As the United Kingdom's first appointed Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, my role is to spearhead the UK's response to slavery and trafficking, domestically and internationally.

Last year, Prime Minister Theresa May asked me to make a number of visits to relevant locations in order to make an assessment of the trafficking risks to children and to provide advice on what more the UK Government could do to protect children from traffickers.

Over the past 12 months I have met child migrants, frontline staff and government officials across a number of important locations, including in

Calais, Sicily and Lampedusa, Athens, Lesvos and northern Greece, and southern Nigeria.

These visits made it very clear that large numbers of children were at risk of both exploitation by serious and organised criminals, as well as by opportunistic abusers.

Conflict and crisis situations in Africa and the Middle East have produced an environment that has enabled modern slavery to flourish.

And long-established transnational organised crime groups are now using power vacuums caused by conflict to increase their trafficking operations.

Dramatic increase in trafficking of Nigerian women and girls

An example of this is one of the most urgent trafficking flows currently taking place across the globe.

For decades, transnational traffickers have operated from southern Nigeria, deceiving victims with false promises of better lives in Europe.

But these criminals are now taking advantage of conflict and instability in the Lake Chad Basin and in Libya and have massively scaled up their trafficking operations by utilising these now ungoverned routes.

In 2016 just over 11,000 Nigerian women arrived in Italy from Libya. This is an eightfold increase from the numbers arriving in 2014.

The IOM, which has counter-trafficking experts based at disembarkation points in Italy, believes that 80% are trafficking victims, destined for exploitation in brothels across Europe, including the UK.

In addition, 3,000 unaccompanied Nigerian children arrived in Italy by sea last year.

In reality, many of the Nigerian females registering as adults are in fact girls. Agencies confirm they deny being children even when clearly underage, because they have been instructed by those exploiting them to avoid the child protection and support agencies.

If they are placed in an adult centre, it is much easier for them to leave to meet with their traffickers, who at that point they are still likely to trust.

Indeed, a very high proportion immediately go missing from reception centres.

Nigerian girls who arrive in Italy by sea are mostly aged 15 to 17 years, though agencies have recently noted an increasing proportion of even younger girls arriving, aged just 13.

To avoid violence and extortion towards themselves or their families in Nigeria, the girls are forced to carry out sex work under conditions of slavery, for periods typically ranging from 3 to 7 years.

As many of you will know, Nigerian victims who are trafficked to Europe for the purpose of sexual exploitation disproportionately originate from just one area: Edo State, in the south of the country.

I have visited Edo on several occasions. Vulnerable children and young women are ruthlessly targeted by traffickers.

This is also one of the most brutal forms of trafficking that I have encountered.

The exploitation begins far in advance of reaching Europe's shores. During the journey over land, the girls suffer abuse and violence at the hands of their traffickers or other people they meet.

The exploitation suffered in Libya is often especially shocking.

Those who insist they will not work as prostitutes are tied up in a position called "the crocodile": their hands are tied to their feet and they are left for days without food or water. Some are left to die as an example to others.

Modern slavery in Libya

A modern-day slave trade is now booming in Libya. Current political, military and social conditions have created an environment where traffickers have thrived.

Militias are rounding up migrants en masse, placing them in detention facilities, where they are beaten and subjected to forced labour or sexual exploitation until their families pay a ransom to allow passage to Europe.

These detention centres are forced labour camps, set up specifically to profit from the organised exploitation of migrants.

In October last year the IOM reported that over 70% of migrants taking the Central Mediterranean routes connecting North Africa to Europe had experienced exploitation and practices which may amount to human trafficking, based on anonymous surveys taking place at arrival locations in Southern Italy. Libya is the location where the vast majority of abuses are reported.

Of the 256,000 migrants estimated to be in Libya, 23,000 are children – though a number of agencies believe the actual number to be up to three times higher.

I met Sarah, an extremely vulnerable 15 year old Eritrean girl, at a reception camp in Lampedusa last year. Sarah had been kidnapped and held for 3 months in Libya in a so-called “connection house”, where she was sexually exploited multiple times every day.

The situation upon reaching Europe

Because of the intense traumas that children – whether they be from Nigeria, Eritrea, Egypt or elsewhere – are suffering en-route to Europe, they are even more vulnerable to trafficking and related exploitation once they arrive here.

And there are a number of factors that further increase this vulnerability and which allow traffickers to act with levels of impunity that would not be possible were they engaging in other forms of serious and organised crime.

So what are these factors, and what can be done to mitigate against them?

The importance of trust

One of the most important factors is trust.

Due to experiences in their home countries or along the migration route, unaccompanied migrant children are less likely to trust authorities and access protection systems once in the EU.

This is a huge cultural challenge. Trust is essential to gain important information for identification and family tracing, and to be able to provide information and safeguarding support to the child.

In my view, the time of initial reception is particularly crucial. Children need a place where they are cared for and feel they can be children again.

This first point of contact – the so called ‘golden hour’ period - is also vitally important in framing children’s future interactions with authorities and NGOs. It represents a brief window of opportunity before children move on, and unfortunately often disappear.

I believe there is a clear need to work together to ensure improved provision of suitable children friendly spaces at reception points.

We should also look to ensure that there is adequate deployments of cultural mediators from the major countries of origin of children arriving in Europe. Mediators can play an absolutely vital role in building trusting relationships.

Frustration with asylum processes

Closely linked to trust, frustration with asylum processes is resulting in increased vulnerability. Children simply have very little confidence in the Dublin III procedure.

Processes are taking far too long, and there is a lack of child-accessible information being provided about how the processes work and specific updates to children about their particular situation.

Children are not waiting. Discouraged by long delays, they are leaving the safety of support centres. They are tempted to try their luck with smugglers and traffickers, who promise to take them to their destinations within a few days or weeks.

A more efficient process, with regular provision of information, will be crucial in building children's confidence in the system.

Following effective transfers of a large number of children from Calais to the UK last year under Dublin III, I am pleased that the UK Government has now committed to working to ensure a more efficient process for transfers to the UK from Italy and Greece.

Embedding protections against slavery and trafficking in the global protection cluster

More broadly, vulnerabilities to trafficking and slavery, of both children and adults, is exacerbated by the fact that to date there has been an ongoing failure to see that responding to trafficking and slavery is in fact lifesaving emergency aid.

As a result, responses to slavery and trafficking in crises are not systematically integrated into humanitarian responses.

This refers to the absence of proactive identification, lack of training for frontline responders and the need for effective debriefing and information sharing.

On visits to reception centres and refugee camps I have witnessed first-hand how the absence of policy guidance on trafficking and slavery protections is resulting in potential victims not being identified and protected.

I have also seen the positive impact that deployments of dedicated experts can have, but unfortunately at present, this is the exception rather than the norm.

However, following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals, there is now a positive opportunity here. I am delighted that the IOM and UNHCR,

together with other key agencies, have begun working to develop a trafficking task team within the global protection cluster, through the Alliance 8.7 initiative.

This is crucial work, and many in this room will have an important part to play in ensuring effective guidance and policy is drafted and agreed, which then quickly translates into improved protections on the ground.

Debriefing and information sharing

Improved protections must go hand in hand with greater prioritisation of tackling the traffickers themselves.

One of the most practical steps that I would recommend is for us to get smarter at debriefing victims and sensitively sharing this information with law enforcement agencies, as well as victim support organisations, to inform both disruption and protection efforts.

Going forward, it would be positive to see appropriate information sharing agreements between organisations that are supporting potential victims and collating their accounts, and the authorities responsible for disrupting the traffickers. Of course this must be sensitively done, and the well-being of migrants should always come first.

All of the Nigerian survivors I met wanted to tell me about routes, exploitation and the identities and tactics of traffickers. Unfortunately this information is not being routinely shared, analysed or acted on.

Prevention at source

In tandem with action to improve measures in Europe, we should devote increased impetus to tackle the root causes of trafficking, where this is possible.

Last summer I put forward a case for action for UK-supported strategic prevention in Edo State. The Prime Minister has since announced that at least £5 million will be spent in Nigeria to tackle trafficking, particularly in Edo. I

hope other destination countries will work with the UK, Nigeria, and local groups in Edo to develop solutions at source to prevent exploitation from occurring in the first place. This work should focus on criminal justice capacity building, community mobilisation activity to tackle cultural enablers, and sustainable development and education opportunities.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, we should be in no doubt about the scale of the issue. The exploitation of children on the move is undoubtedly getting worse, organised criminals have been able to act with impunity, and initial protections in Europe have been inadequate.

But there are a number of practical opportunities that offer solutions.

Improving immediate protections for children once they reach Europe, together with much higher prioritisation of both disruption of traffickers and working with source and transit countries to develop sustainable solutions, must be the first steps in what is a complex but incredibly urgent challenge.

All of us here today have a key role in rising to it.