

Human Trafficking

Regional Seminar for the 12+ Group

London, 22 - 23 February 2010.

The seminar was hosted by the British House of Commons and brought together members of Parliament from 20 European countries. A number of NGOs working to combat human trafficking also attended. The seminar acquainted participants with the current state of human trafficking in the world and in Europe in particular. It offered an opportunity for them to discuss ways in which parliamentarians can play a more robust role in ensuring the implementation of existing legislation to stamp out human trafficking. Following is a summary of the main conclusions of the discussions.

Setting the context

Human trafficking takes many forms; be it sex trafficking, labour exploitation, child trafficking or domestic servitude. Delegates also identified developing trends in persons being trafficked to engage in forced begging, forced marriage, to work as drug mules and to work in cannabis cultivation factories.

Young women were identified as those most likely to be trafficked, although increasingly children were falling victim to this crime.

Bulgaria and Romania were identified as source country hotspots within Europe. However, a worrying trend of developing trafficking routes has emerged from countries such as China, Paraguay, Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Uzbekistan.

Existing anti trafficking schemes

The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings was identified as a key development in the fight against trafficking. The Convention outlines principles such as ensuring that criminal charges cannot be brought against the victims of trafficking and providing residence permits for victims in their destination country. The Convention also establishes a monitoring mechanism to ensure its enforcement. Delegates encouraged all states to ratify this Convention that have not already done so. The Convention is supported by a handbook which provides a practical toolkit for parliamentarians in their work against trafficking. The Handbook produced by the IPU and the UN for parliamentarian on combating trafficking in persons is also a very useful tool.

The UK All Party Group on Trafficking and the Nordic Council are particularly good examples of parliamentarians working together with colleagues across Europe to fight human trafficking. Increased co-operation between states will improve the efficacy of existing anti trafficking legislation. European parliaments were encouraged to establish similar cross party mechanisms over and above the formal committees of parliament.

Law enforcement and human trafficking

The conviction of traffickers is an area that requires much improvement. Prosecutions for the specific crime of trafficking are extremely low. In many cases the crime of trafficking is rejected and the trafficked convicted instead for a lesser offence (i.e. soliciting for prostitution). Often a conviction in a trafficking case is only successful at all when there is clear physical injury to the victim.

Obtaining evidence from victims of trafficking is a very sensitive task and is not always being handled appropriately. Consequently, many cases collapse due to fear from the victim of reprisal from their trafficker. This is especially complicated in cases of child trafficking.

The seminar was briefed by representatives from the UK Metropolitan Police on a project of co-operation between the UK and Romanian authorities which resulted in breaking a human trafficking ring worth £100 million. The ring sent thousands of Roma children from Romania to the UK to commit various crimes, such as shoplifting, ATM skimming and forgery. Through close co-operation between both police forces the traffickers were brought to justice. This project has been acknowledged by Europol as an example of good practice.

How can parliamentarians combat trafficking?

Prevention is the best protection that can be offered to victims of trafficking. Trafficking can only truly be eradicated by identifying and tackling the factors that make people vulnerable to it, such as the lack of opportunity available in an impoverished area.

Social initiatives and media campaigns can be particularly effective in warning of the dangers of trafficking to people in poor areas. The Nordic Council works on projects to empower girls in the Baltic States and Northwest Russia to counteract trafficking from these areas to Scandinavia. It is also important to target campaigns at potential abusers – such as clients of girls that have been trafficked for sex – so they are aware of the nature of the crime.

Parliamentarians must utilise their unique roles to fight against human trafficking. Firstly, by raising the issue in both their legislature and speaking to their constituents, parliamentarians can increase general awareness of the issue. Secondly, parliamentarians can work to ensure that projects working to combat trafficking receive appropriate financial assistance. Thirdly, parliamentarians can ensure that legislation in their own parliament is appropriate and consistent with the problem. Fourthly, parliamentarians can exchange information and best practice with parliamentarians in other countries.

At the end of the seminar, the participants adopted a declaration which:

- Urges parliamentarians throughout Europe to develop a better understanding of the nature and extent of human trafficking; to join forces to stamp out this modern form of slavery by ensuring anti-trafficking legislation is effective; by increasing their efforts in sharing information and communicating more effectively with their colleagues;
- Encourages governments to coordinate and redouble their efforts, in co-operation with international institutions, law enforcement agencies and other bodies to combat this evil crime, to create a hostile environment for traffickers in all countries, to assist the rehabilitation of victims and if they have not yet done so, to ratify without delay the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings;
- Calls for more international co-operation to tackle this problem in other parts of the world.