

Statement by the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children on the occasion of EU Anti-Trafficking Day 2015

I have come to understand trafficking as systematic exploitation of vulnerabilities. However, these vulnerabilities create an arena that makes exploitation possible, and one that traffickers can manipulate to keep their victims in a situation where continued exploitation is possible.

Tyldum

Henriette Siliadin came to Paris from Togo when she was 15 years old. For years she was exploited by a family with four small children. She worked twenty hours a day, seven days a week and was barely fed on a monthly ration of a chicken and a packet of cornflakes. The family's leftovers were thrown away rather than being shared with her. Fear and threats held her captive. It was her story that resulted in the first judgment of the European Court of Human Rights on human trafficking and changed the way people think about the protection of human dignity.

You don't need to be in chains to be a victim of modern slavery.

Human dignity should be self-evident, for everyone. A society where the dignity of some of the people, from the Netherlands or from other countries, is systematically abused is not my society. Exploitation, the outcome of human trafficking, is humiliating for the victims who are often vulnerable, but also humiliating for *us*, as a society. On 18 October we pause to think about this.

Human trafficking comes in various guises and is pervasive. Nevertheless it comes down to a single concept: vulnerability. All human beings are entitled to their vulnerabilities without fear of being abused by others. However, not every person is vulnerable to becoming a victim. Discovering the factors that make some individuals more vulnerable than others has become more urgent than ever. Human trafficking not only damages the victims themselves but also affects their children, parents and loved ones. How many people are actually caught in this web?

And we are not only talking about individual vulnerability, for certain sectors may be vulnerable as well. The most obvious one is prostitution. Mapping the specific weaknesses in this sector remains a complex exercise involving fine distinctions, moral issues and regard for individual circumstances. Such complexity obliges us to take measures for the sector as a whole and to protect specifically the men and women who work in the sex industry.

But society as a whole is also vulnerable. Human traffickers take advantage of the trust offered by our open society. They abuse local authority services, profit from the freedom to rent premises and use banks to launder criminal gains. By doing so they undermine all the hard-won assets of our society, values that are worth protecting.

Society is at its most vulnerable when it is incapable of recognising cases of human trafficking. That applies to prostitution, labour exploitation but also to new forms of human trafficking. In recent years we have seen parents inducing their children to perform criminal acts like stealing and burglary. Are these children criminals? Or is more going on here? If we turn a blind eye to what we plainly see, we are failing these children. Instead of offering protection, we sometimes prosecute and punish and this conveys the wrong message.

Global is local. What happens elsewhere has a direct impact here in the Netherlands and confronts us with new challenges. The numerous areas of conflict in the world are forcing millions to flee. Adults and children are seeking refuge in our country in great numbers.

Among them are child brides from Syria who I see from the perspective of human trafficking. And that gives me cause for concern. These young girls like all children in our country must be able to feel the liberating force of our values. They must not disappear behind closed doors but must be allowed to grow up in the heart of our society.

Human trafficking has no frontiers. Exploitation elsewhere manifests itself in the products we can buy here. Clothing made by children's hands in India, chocolate from the cocoa plucked by children in Cameroon. By taking responsibility for what happens in the entire production chain we can help combat exploitation beyond our own borders.

Human trafficking permeates the fabric of our society. Often unnoticed. It's in the food we eat, the clothes we wear, in the products we consume. Every act of human trafficking taints our society's underlying values of freedom, self-determination and justice. Resisting that

assault by eliminating modern slavery requires an unflagging effort on the part of the Dutch government but also on the part of society as a whole. And for that we need a society that is increasingly more aware of human trafficking and as a result more resilient to it.

The right to human dignity is not self-evident. It has to be repeatedly fought for. The battle against human trafficking is an important part of that fight. Obviously, taking on this challenge will be fraught with difficulties but they have to be faced and the struggle is worthwhile. We have to stand up for our values and demonstrate what our dignity is worth.

The steps that are now being taken have broad support and offer hope. This is apparent in the many and growing initiatives and projects designed to make human trafficking visible and to protect victims. The Netherlands is placing labour exploitation high on the European agenda during its coming presidency of the European Union, the Lenferink Commission is defining local authority tasks in combating human trafficking and the Azough Commission is working on action to offer greater protection within Youth Care to victims of domestic human trafficking. National government and numerous organisations in the community have joined forces to create a national referral system which gives priority to victims. Businesses, too, are beginning to realise that they can no longer stand by and watch.

I was very touched by Henriette's story. Despite the inhumane way in which she was treated it was her deep human feeling that kept her going and made her resilient. "The love from and for the children I was looking after." That came very close. Almost tangible.

Henriette's story demonstrates that chains need not be made of steel but can also be created by fear and threats. The ignorance and indifference of bystanders keep these chains intact. It is up to us to break them.