



Combating Human Trafficking The Swedish Experience

by Cemal Özkan

Human trafficking implies transnational transportation of people for purposes such as prostitution, slavery, begging or committing crimes on behalf of others. In Europe, trafficking has become an increasing problem over the last two decades because of ever more porous borders and the European integration, which has created a flexible milieu for organized criminals seeking to capitalize on the demand for purchasing sex.

In a recent lecture at the Institute for Security and Development Policy, Ms. Kajsa Wahlberg, Detective Inspector of the Department for Police Affairs, National Police Board in Sweden, discussed Swedish experiences of combating human trafficking. The following is a summary of her lecture.

In Europe, trafficking in human beings (THB), as well as other commodities such as drugs and weapons, involves a multilayered and highly sophisticated network of organized criminals. Specifically, THB implies the organized transportation of human beings with the intent of exploiting them for prostitution, slavery, organ harvesting, and other purposes. The networks are difficult to map out as they are built around decentralized cell-structures with units functioning independently. Often, units engaged in recruitment, transportation and harboring only interact with cells that are close to them in the supply chain. This makes it nearly impossible, even for the criminals, to know how their own networks are organized. In a European context, Sweden has had a very specific experience of dealing with THB due to its unconventional legislative acts on buying sexual services and trafficking.

Trafficking and Vice Crimes in Sweden

Sweden is not only a final destination for THB but also a transit state for other European countries such as Germany and Norway. The victims are predominantly from Eastern European countries, in particular the Baltic States and Romania. In most cases they belong to disadvantaged minority groups, e.g. Russians and Romanians. There is a

strong correlation between the victims' ethnicity and those of the traffickers, whom enjoy the advantage of being able to communicate in the language of the trafficked victims.

Traffickers usually employ informal recruitment techniques, and in most cases, relatives and friends function as recruiters. One of the most frequently utilized methods to lure victims is through fake job ads for manual labor in Western countries. Most organized traffickers recruit directly from brothels, use agents and coordinate their activities through the internet, enabling them to not be physically present in the country where the crime is being conducted. Trafficking for sexual purposes is seldom noted in Swedish street prostitution since it is usually conducted privately.

The level of organization in trafficking can be roughly categorized into three scales: small, medium and large scale. The small scale level, involving one trafficker, is the hardest for law enforcement agencies to detect since it attracts little attention. The relation between the victim and perpetrator can sometimes be through marriage or another form of partnership, but sales of sexual services can also be conducted on an ad hoc basis. Medium-scale trafficking is most prevalent and implies less spontaneity as in small scale prostitution. Large scale trafficking includes numerous stakeholders operating in many countries. However, it is rare due to the risks involved for the perpetrators, apparent by the fact that, to date, only one large scale operating network has been detected in Sweden.

The criminal networks engaging in THB are very flexible and quick to adapt to new circumstances. Today, the nature of recruitment is different from the 1990s. Less violence is used against trafficked victims who also receive



an increased share of the profits in return for their loyalty. According to research, the buyers of sexual services have a set of common denominators. The standard sex buyers are middle age family men with a steady income, who feel shame and guilt for their actions. To some extent they pursue sex workers in order to have new sexual experiences or to feel excitement over the fact that they are approaching a prostitute. Many sex buyers indicate that they tend to view sex as a product; one interviewee described it as “having a McSex.” The perception of the buyers of ethnically Swedish sex workers is that they are working voluntarily, whereas they are aware that foreign prostitutes are entrapped in their profession. THB is mostly associated with vice-related crime. However, it is important to not neglect other forms of THB for purposes such as slavery and begging, which have been seen also in Sweden with many beggars from Eastern Europe spotted in urban areas.

The Swedish Model

The Swedish model against prostitution and trafficking is guided by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children (usually referred to as the UN Anti-Trafficking Protocol) and functions as the government’s main weapon against these social ills. Today the Swedish laws against the purchases of sexual services and trafficking in human beings are being viewed as an ideal model in many countries. In fact, many European countries have been inspired by Sweden to take similar counter measures, such as Norway and the UK. The rationale of the laws is built upon 30 years of solid multidisciplinary research that has shown that prostitutes are a vulnerable group in society, and in need of both legal and social measures. For example, approximately 80% of sex workers have been subject to sexual abuse prior to becoming prostitutes. This abuse severely affects the psychological state of this victimized group which calls for counter measures. Statistics show that during the last ten years ca 1800 individuals have been reported for being in violation of the law; 800 have been convicted and received fine sentences but no one, so far, has been imprisoned. The verdicts leading to no imprisonment will most likely change soon as the government has appointed a review committee that is expected to recommend harsher penalties.

The law against purchases of sexual services came into

effect in 1999 and was amended in 2005. Today, a person who pays for a sexual relation can be fined or punished with a custodial sentence up to six months. This has resulted in less street prostitution and fewer victims trafficked from Eastern Europe to Sweden. The reasons behind the decrease are complicated working conditions for traffickers who have to rent multiple apartments and move around more frequently in order to remain undetected. They also have to advertise on the internet which increases the risk of detection. The laws obstructing operations of major trafficking gangs in Sweden have made traffickers move their activities to countries where street prostitution is not illegal, and, as information acquired from wiretapping in Sweden shows, individuals involved in the procuring sector prefer to operate in Denmark or Germany. Consequently, law enforcement officers and politicians in neighboring countries have raised concerns against Sweden for “exporting” problems to their countries. However, concerns for causing criticism in neighboring states ought not to restrain countries from the criminalization of wrong behavior.

When buying sexual services is criminalized, it is the action of the buyer, as opposed to that of the seller, that is targeted. The intention of the law would not be met if social services were unable to reach out to sex workers, trying to motivate them to leave this business, and supporting them during rehabilitation. In Sweden, social workers are actively searching and contacting sex workers on the internet. Cooperation with law enforcement agencies in the home countries of trafficked victims is paramount if THB is to be combated effectively. For example, Sweden recently established cooperation with Nigerian law enforcement agencies after experiencing a large influx of Nigerian sex workers from Norway. Cooperation between national law enforcement agencies in Europe, but also with Thai and Nigerian police, have become stronger due to the common interest of many governments to obstruct international THB. Overall, this cooperation is functioning very well. Since international THB fosters other sorts of crimes, detection from country to country can only become easier if governments are willing to facilitate information exchange between their law enforcement agencies. Therefore, western governments should continue to seek new ways of cooperation with countries that are being dragged into the web of international THB.



Prospects for Combating THB in Sweden

Today, the Swedish government is working against THB according to an action plan that was enacted in 2008. The action plan has five prioritized areas: (1) Increased support and protection of victims; (2) Strengthened preventative work; (3) Improved quality and effectiveness within the judicial system; (4) Increased national and international cooperation; and (5) Raised knowledge and awareness. Furthermore, the government has allocated an additional €19 million for preventing THB for 2010. This includes extra resources to the Swedish Institute for promoting the Swedish model abroad as well as increasing the number of foreign law enforcement officers, politicians and journalists visiting Sweden. However, many challenges lie ahead as criminal networks are constantly adjusting to new laws and regulations. The axiom of law enforcement agencies being one step behind criminals will probably never be eradicated. Furthermore, one of the major obstacles can be found within the enforcement agencies itself. Today, there is a widely held notion among law enforcement officers that the priority given to work against THB and prostitution is not on a par with its actual threat assessment on society. Specifically, this notion is nurtured by an idea that the threat is not assessed objectively but rather driven by populist politicians. These negative attitudes to the work against THB and prostitution are further enhanced by the fact that the investigation of trafficking is expensive compared to other police tasks. Therefore, one has to raise awareness among law enforcement officers of the importance of this work by pointing to the fact that THB is not a phenomena isolated from other forms of organized crime. Today, transnational organized criminal networks engage in

a host of activities other than THB, including trafficking in drugs and weapons. Furthermore, it should be made clear that THB is equal to enslavement, and governments ought to recognize the seriousness of permitting slavery in their own domain in the 21st century and act accordingly to prevent the situation from further deterioration.

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