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<https://www.rbb24.de/content/rbb/r24/politik/beitrag/2022/03/kriegsfluechtlinge-menschenhandel-ukraine-kinderrechte.html>

There’s a Real Danger of Children and Women being Trafficked

For several days now there have been signs that criminals are targeting the fleeing women and children from Ukraine. There is a real danger that they will become victims of human trafficking across Europe, warns child rights activist Eirliani Abdul Rahman.

rbb|24: Ms Rahman, you work with many colleagues across the world, including in Europe, in the fight against human trafficking. What’s the picture arising from the huge numbers of people fleeing the war in Ukraine?

Eirliani Abdul Rahman: Since the start of the war, I have been speaking to my colleagues and friends who are active in the fight against human trafficking. We fear that trafficking is a huge danger because so many women and children are among the refugees. A few days ago, on 8 March, the international charity “World Vision” publicized a survey that they had conducted on human trafficking in Romania, near the border with Ukraine. I was disheartened by the results: 97% of respondents had heard of instances of human trafficking. When these respondents were asked, what does trafficking mean to them, more than 70 percent said it comprised prostitution, followed by being kidnapped, and being bought or sold.

rbb|24: Can you or your colleagues cite concrete cases that refugees are being exploited by traffickers?

Eirliani Abdul Rahman: Not yet; we can only assume up to now. However, we have all heard stories about suspicious men who are holding up placards at Berlin’s main railway station. We also know that plain clothed police officers in Poland are patrolling the reception facilities and speaking with volunteers there in order to suss out whether they actually have good intentions. The World Vision study is the most concrete information that we have yet to date, and that is disturbing enough.

rbb|24: What is generally known about human trafficking from Ukraine? Is this something new or is there established infrastructure that criminals could build upon?

Eirliani Abdul Rahman: Even before the war, Ukraine has been a source of human trafficking victims. More than 260,000 Ukrainians became victims of human trafficking victims over the last 30 years, according to the UN. Just in the past 20 years alone, the International Organization for Migration, through its counter trafficking program, have assisted approximately 16,000 victims. The phenomenon has been here for some time

with the corresponding structures that enable this to happen. The war is now allowing traffickers to have access to many more potential victims. Already, 2.8 million Ukrainians have left the country, among whom are 1 million children.

rbb|24: What are the possible dangers for these fleeing women and children when they arrive at their destination countries?

Eirliani Abdul Rahman: Because men between the ages of 18 to 60 years are not allowed to travel, the bulk of those arriving are women and children travelling alone. They often do not understand the local languages, and have neither friends nor family here. Many of them are traumatized by the brutalities of war: the destroyed infrastructure, the destroyed orphanages, the bombed out hospitals and schools. And on top of that, the challenges of being a refugee. It may lead some to quickly take up offers from those who are standing somewhere with a placard offering a free overnight stay. However, among these volunteers, traffickers can slip easily into their midst.

A lot hangs on the currently poor coordination vis-a-help help available. All the governments in Europe must take the effort to have better information for the refugees. The coordination will get better with time but it was initially very chaotic at the beginning. The traffickers can simply appear among helpful people when there are no registration and vetting processes for volunteers.

rbb|24: What happens to the refugees when they fall into the hands of human traffickers?

Eirliani Abdul Rahman: Usually for the women, they are forced into commercial sex. Past events have demonstrated this quite clearly. Sometimes, they may end up in forced labor and have to work for low pay against their will. We, of course, do not know what will happen to this mass exodus of people of Ukraine. However, there is a real danger that these women and children will become trapped in sex trafficking.

rbb|24: In Berlin, the police are warning the refugees via social media about suspicious offers of accommodation in both the Ukrainian and Russian languages. What else can and should governments and authorities do to prevent refugees from becoming victims of human trafficking?

Eirliani Abdul Rahman: What is needed, as far as possible, are strong processes for registration and vetting processes for the refugees, and definitely for the volunteers. That is not always easy but it must be done: the national identification numbers, the license plates of the vehicles of those who are coming to volunteer so that there is a tracking process. In this way, you can automatically stop the bad actors.

Governments in Europe must also strengthen their existing anti-trafficking programs and protocols for emergency situations. What is important are more punitive measures against traffickers. The government in Poland has responded to the rising concerns on trafficking. On March 8, 2022, they raised the minimum sentence for human trafficking from three to

10 years, and the maximum sentence for the sex trafficking of children from 10 to 25 years. This will certainly deter some traffickers.

rbb|24: Once someone is in the hands of human traffickers, how can he or she get out? And how can bystanders help?

Eirliani Abdul Rahman: It is extremely difficult. Normally, how traffickers operate is to take away the victim's passport or any identification papers, and also their phone. However, there are certain characteristics that may mark one as a trafficking victim: they are often nervous, do not know where they are, and without any form of identification. When someone poses them a question, they answer back in scripted fashion, what the trafficker has told them to say. And most of the time, they are watched by someone, someone in the corner, for example. When someone fits such characteristics, the best thing to do is to inform the police.

rbb|24: Dear Ms. Rahman, thank you for the conversation!

Textbox: UNICEF Recommendations for Volunteers:

<https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/guidance-protecting-displaced-children-ukraine#4>

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