



COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Why is trafficking thriving in Lithuania?

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I am Kristina Misiniene and I work for the NGO Caritas Lithuania. For ten years I have lead Caritas Lithuania's trafficking and prostitution victims support services.

Every year we help around 100 people - 40% of whom are under 18. The youngest girl we provided help for was only 11-years-old. In general we offer the standard package of support: safe shelter, psychosocial consultations, job skills training, legal advice for those who are witnesses against the pimps and traffickers and a follow-up program for those who live in the community on their own.

Lithuanian traffickers and smugglers aren't numerous but they take stable positions in the world of international organised crime. The routes of their criminal activities can even reach Japan.

Stealing, drug dealing, selling sex

The stories of our trafficked children and women do not start the day they step into Western Europe and do not end when they leave your countries. Most of them come from remote, under-developed regions in Lithuania. In some sense these children and women are nobody's children and women – though almost of them have families or at least a single parent.

When we visited the families we saw alcohol abuse, child neglect and hopelessness in the eyes of the adults. Nothing much changes when these victims come back from Italy, France, Germany, United Kingdom.

Hoping to make the local Lithuanian authorities reflect on these cases and to take some responsibility, we regularly organise roundtable discussions and seminars in local municipalities, various institutions and in our Parliament where we invite representatives from the Prosecutor's office, police, Social Services and NGOs. The result is sometimes shocking – the officials state almost unanimously that the situation is under control and that nobody can stop the migration. If the criminals use these vulnerable children or women, that's an international problem.

What are the biggest driving forces of trafficking? Why, for decades, have states been unable to cope with it despite having all the law enforcement agencies at their disposal? What is beneath the surface of these bad guys exploiting vulnerable people? I'm sure we'll find poverty in all its forms. And poverty for many parts of the world is too big a challenge. Sure, you don't have to go that deep. You can call it, for example, "culture". But I don't believe it will explain much.

Looking from the other side...

For years we, as the victims' countries of origin, try to understand why developed Western countries have this constant demand for fresh bodies for their brothels and streets. Is it culture? Or crime? Citizens of developed countries like cheap workers in their households, farms and factories. Is it culture? Or maybe crime?

If we can find the answers, maybe we can understand why Lithuanian, Romanian, Polish children, women and men steal and prostitute themselves in Italy, Germany and the United Kingdom.