



MEPs raise spectre of people trafficking: Europe's modern slavery

In modern Europe there exists a new type of slavery that involves the trafficking of people for sexual and labour slavery. Europol have said the problem did not decrease last year and that 80% of its victims are women. This Tuesday (19 January), Swedish Socialist MEP Anna Hedh and Conservative MEP Edit Bauer from Slovakia will raise the issue in Parliament. They will ask questions to the Council of Ministers and the European Commission to try and get anti-trafficking high on Europe's agenda.

Why are you raising this issue now?

Trafficking is constantly increasing. Slavery was abolished over 200 years ago in Europe but thousands of people are being sold today. Trafficking includes sexual and labour exploitation, forced labour, domestic servitude and other forms of exploitation including the removal of organs. It is considered to be one of the most serious crimes worldwide. More than 80% of the victims are women.

Last year the Commission suggested a framework for legislation against trafficking in human beings. But since the Lisbon Treaty was ratified, Parliament now has an equal say with ministers over this issue and we want the Commission to use a different legal framework. And this is why we are asking a question and handing in a resolution.

What has to be done to deal with the problem?

The Commission likes to talk about a different penalty rate but we also need a holistic approach in all policy making. For example, it involves migration. There must be harsh penalties. But we also need prevention and to get all EU members to deal with the question of demand. If there was no demand there would be no problem.

I would like to sell the Swedish model on the purchase of sexual services (under which the purchaser gets punished). It is sensitive but Sweden has fewer problems with trafficking than the rest of the EU.

What sanctions do you want for those involved in human trafficking?

There must be harsh penalties in order for it to work. The Commission has suggested three different levels and I think that the highest level they propose (12 years) should be the lowest. I think there must be a penalty of at least 10 years in prison. We are talking about a person who has bought and sold a human being.

Trafficking is one of the priorities of the EU Spanish presidency...

Yes, and this makes me happy. I hope that they will succeed with the discussions in the council because previously there have been different views, amongst other things about the levels of penalties. I hope the Spanish presidency will unite the council so that we get good legislation.

While we are talking people are being exploited and people are exploiting. Is there a risk that this will be only another directive and that nothing will change?

Yes. This is a big problem and it is very important to make sure that this is legislation that will allow us to put pressure on the member states.

We also need to educate the police and court personnel across the EU. In addition, victims must know that they are entitled to support when they have been exploited, so that they ask for help from the national authorities. Legal texts are often difficult to read and therefore it is important that the member states produce information campaigns to disseminate information for all citizens and victims.