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Session IV: Anti-trafficking messages and standards for media professionals

Panel Presentation:

Trafficking of women and girls — the role of the media in prevention

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The combating of the violence against girls and women, against their trafficking—a form of extreme violence—and against any violations of civil right is one of the greatest challenges of the century. The role that the media can play in relation to that challenge is very important. Even though information should go round an essential axis of prevention and denouncement policy, too often the media do the contrary: they embark on a search for sensational news, which, they think, will sell their newspapers or increase audiences.

Indeed, the manner we treat the issue, the way we present pieces of information and draw our conclusions, due to either ignorance or deformation for sensational purposes, does nothing but justifies and supports violence. This manner of writing, on one hand, legitimizes or depicts as normal certain behaviors, which, since they are not treated as violations of human rights, convey false messages—instead of helping victims—impeding them from speaking up, reporting or denouncing their victimizers to the justice.

One of the aims of a journalist, besides information, is to raise public awareness of this phenomenon. I am mainly talking about the printed media, where, in many cases, this mission has not been fulfilled. That is bad! Not rarely, in the press we see that victims are penalized, while traffickers are taken under protection. Such penalization starts when victims are labeled as prostitutes. The moment a victim is labeled as a prostitute, her trafficker has been taken under protection. And this has happened before. In March 2003, Rome Court was obliged to free a person from the charges of trafficking—for lack of evidence, too—because he presented to the tribunal an Albanian daily newspaper, where the girl that had denounced him was depicted as a prostitute.

A prostitute is not a violated and trafficked girl; prostitution is a profession done on one's free will. This is how that young man in Rome defended himself. The young man was not punished. The young woman was fined. And she was left with the mark of a prostitute. The Italian Police repatriated her, sending her back to Albania. Her family—in a remote village in Librazhdi—did not accept her, although they knew that she had undergone extreme violence. The girl did not have a way out, but to return to Italy. It took her a year to convince the Italian justice that the young Albanian was a trafficker, and that she had not done the “profession” willingly.

A violated young woman is not a prostitute. She is a victim, who should be taken under protection by the society and the justice, which should find and punish the culprits. In the battle of words, the press cannot be indifferent to violence. The press can be equal to the justice, if one considers the weight of its words. Unfortunately, this is not how things are. Most of articles cast prejudices upon, and discriminates, victims of trafficking. While the press should provide support for the victims, by raising public opinion awareness and ringing the bells for the justice system, it uses victims as objects of pervert entertainment.

Such prejudice can be seen, first of all in:

- Journalists' vocabulary,
- The point of view taken,
- Description of information.

Whatever course things have taken, a young woman involved in trafficking is generally prejudiced by the Albanian society, and it is here where the journalist becomes prey of the everyday opinion.

There is hardly any difference between a layman's vocabulary and a journalist's, when talking about such young women. I would like to quote a headline, for the sake of illustration: "Love Ferry Boat Arrives, With 130 Prostitutes On Board". The irony and ridicule lies in the taste the article leaves one with. The only information one gets from the article is that the 130 young women have been caught by the police in Italian streets, and have been returned to Albania.

There is nothing about the fact whether the young women were trafficked, where they are going, where they are working, what their future will be. It is difficult for a closed society—like the Albanian one—to accept a woman prostitute easily. Can a rural family—and not only rural ones—accept its children as prostitutes. For them there is nothing but to be recycled, hopelessly, in order to get out of the violence cycle, and this time willingly.

How can we use our influence in such conditions, and talk about their reintegration into the society. This is the contribution of speech to trafficking and traffickers; a contribution to their interests. The inappropriate vocabulary, labeling young women as prostitutes, or depicting traffickers as pimps, really affects the content of news.

Confused definitions do not clearly state whether young women have been trafficked or work as prostitutes willingly—which is an important statement for addressing the issue). Even for the traffickers the labeling is incorrect. Usually the word "pimp" is used for them, but this does not explain the essence of the issue.

According to all the information, data and reports, the best definition would be that of the "trafficker": somebody who exploits, sells and recruits. And, if we are dealing with traffickers, those young women can never be called prostitutes, but victims of prostitution. Even the phrase "trade of white meat" is considered as offending words by many international conventions.

Abuse of the identity is another problem. Journalists think it is a big deal to disclose a young woman's name, age, birthplace, father's name and mother's name, while giving a news story. The disclosure a juvenile girl's name is recurrent precedent in the Albanian press. Also, the detailed depiction of an act of rape, as if the journalist has assisted the rapist—thus violates the victim for a second time.

Information about trafficking is often considered as a show. This is also due to the fact that journalists lack complete information and contacts with people that can help them address the phenomenon properly. With regard to this, international organizations that are present in the country, instead of providing help, close their doors, making communication even more difficult.