

Stockholm Congress: OPENING STATEMENT

Anita Gradin, European Commissioner

Chairperson, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

In September 1995, a staff member of Romania's *Save the Children* met with nine year-old Marinela outside Bucharest's railway station. As it turned out, this little girl was forced to sell sexual services for one dollar a time in the bushes behind the station. The pimp was a young girl, only 18 years old. This compelling story is not an isolated tragedy. According to estimates by ECPAT, there are about two thousand children living permanently on the streets in that country's larger cities.

Sexual exploitation of children is a rapidly growing problem that contaminates most parts of our world. Europe is no exception. We are receiving an increasing number of reports about children, boys as well as girls, from Eastern Europe that are involved in prostitution, pornography and trafficking in the larger cities of Europe.

We all have an urgent and important task in front of us. To this end, I wish to thank the Swedish Government, as well as ECPAT, UNICEF and the NGOs for their initiative in organizing this World Congress. Being the first global meeting on these problems, it represents a historic chance to make significant progress in our efforts to eradicate sexual exploitation of children. I wish to thank the organizers for inviting the European Commission.

It is an important step forward that there is now a growing international concern for the violation of children, both physically and mentally. Important initiatives have been taken during recent years to highlight these serious problems. But, in my view, it has taken far too long to realize the extent to which children are exposed to sexual abuse in our society. Our work has only started.

It is only eight years ago that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted. And it is only six years ago that the Heads of Government from over 150 nations got together for the first time to discuss the problems and prospects of the children in our world. But it is largely due to the endless work by voluntary organizations and NGOs that politicians can no longer turn a blind eye to sex trade in children. This issue is now firmly on the political agenda and that is where it must remain.

This World Congress emphasizes that child abuse can no longer be looked upon as someone else's problem in another country. It is all our concern, no matter where we live or work. It also underscores that child violations are on the increase. So are the profits of the international sex trade. It has become a multi-billion dollar industry. These profits will be used to stretch the tentacles of this dirty industry even further into our societies. This is facilitated by the fact that the risks for a trafficker to sell children or women for sexual purposes are lower than for smuggling drugs. To put it very crudely, in the eyes of the trafficker, it is a matter of commodities for money and of calculated risks.

These criminal activities transcend national borders. Unless it is stopped, it will affect not only our children but also future generations. We are faced with a tragedy on an international scale that must be met with a global strategy and a clear and effective action plan. We deal with a complex problem that will need coordinated efforts in many different areas and at different levels.

The sale and trafficking of children and women is also linked to other criminal activities. These include bribery and abduction, false identification and documentation, false marriages and adoptions, illegal immigration, violence and bonded labour. Linked to this are other severe problems, such as drugs, extortion and even homicide.

Commercial sexual exploitation of children must be analyzed and confronted in the social context in which it occurs. It may be tempting to put the entire blame on the criminals that are involved. But

this is not enough. No one, no Government, no politician can escape the responsibility to come to terms with the commercial and sexual abuse of children.

In our analysis we must also be aware of the wider dimensions of this problem. I am thinking of economic and political factors that may result in increasing disparities between rich and poor. I am also thinking of discrimination against minorities, migration, urbanization and family disintegration. We must also be aware that the role and views on girls and women differ between societies due to historic and cultural values and traditions.

As for the children themselves, their ordeal is often aggravated by the fact that they are sometimes trafficked to unfamiliar areas. They are often isolated by language and culture, and they hold no identity papers. When trying to escape from their exploiters, they are sometimes treated as criminals, vulnerable to exposure and are arrested as promiscuous or as illegal immigrants.

The UN Convention has provided for a set of international, legal norms related to sexual exploitation and abuse of children. 190 governments have ratified the Convention to date. This is not enough. The Convention needs to be fully implemented by the ratifying states. Governments may have to initiate new legislation or revise existing ones in order to achieve the goals set out in the Convention.

But legislation is not enough as a measure to combat this problem. The laws must be enforced. Police and custom officials will have to work closely with judicial and social welfare authorities. Adequate resources will have to be made available. The results will also depend on the extent to which society regards the protection of children as important.

What I wish to underline by this is that the legal environment reflects the political environment. Unless a state and its society give priority to its children, the laws will not protect them. The will to protect children must come first hand. Only then can we achieve the results we are aiming at. In doing that we must not only concentrate on judicial procedures and law enforcement. There is an obvious need for preventive action, focusing on the victims of this dreadful trade. Sexually abused children need assistance in the form of health care, rehabilitation and education.

Turning to the international dimension, trans-frontier cooperation is a highly important aspect. Bilateral contacts between police and custom officials have already proved effective in identifying pedophile networks with world-wide connections. Apart from contacts between national law enforcement agencies, I believe that cooperation through inter-governmental police agencies will be increasingly important. I am thinking both of EUROPOL and INTERPOL.

Since the mandate of EUROPOL was extended last year, trafficking in human beings is now within its remit. I believe that there is a clear link between the trafficking in human beings and the sexual exploitation of children. To the extent that this holds true, the problem of sexual trade in children will clearly fall under the mandate of EUROPOL (EDU).

The European Union in general, and the Commission in particular, has taken a firm stand against all forms of child exploitation. The European Parliament has raised the issue of action against sexual child exploitation. It has called on Member States to organize campaigns aimed at denouncing agencies and enterprises which act as fronts for prostitution and trafficking in persons.

In the European Commission we are presently working on a number of different fronts.

Soon after I assumed my duties as a European Commissioner, I launched an initiative concerning the sexual exploitation of women. To this end, I organized a Conference on trafficking in women in Vienna in June this year. The focus was not only on women, but also on teenagers and children. I was particularly pleased to see the attention that this Conference has drawn to this problem.

There are many conclusions to be drawn from this Conference. I wish to point to a particular one, namely the need for a broad and multi-disciplinary approach to this issue as well as the need to join

forces with NGOs. These organizations have done an excellent job in this field. I have every reason to believe that they will continue to do so.

On the basis of the recommendations of the Vienna Conference, I intend to present a Communication from the European Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament on the issue of trafficking in women for sexual exploitation.

The approach will be a broad one. It will include migration, judicial, police, and social aspects as well as the need for preventive measures and support for victims.

Another proposal from the Commission this Autumn will aim at special measures against the so-called sex tourism. During the last decades, the world has become smaller in terms of better and cheaper means of communication, as well as the development of modern technologies. But as is often the case with development, there is a drawback to it. It has been exploited for various kinds of sexual purposes. One of these problems is the so-called international sex tourism.

Prosecuting cases of international sex tourism is often linked to difficulties. Differences in language, legal systems, procedural requirements and the expense of bringing witnesses from abroad, could be mentioned. However, some governments have responded in a creative way by using modern technology. Video links are already used for presenting evidence and statements by witnesses. Other means that could be explored are more extensive use of extra-territorial legislation. For instance, countries like Norway and Sweden have laws that allow for the prosecution of nationals who sexually offend children abroad.

I find it particularly encouraging that there are already several cases that prove that international sex tourists can be successfully prosecuted. Last Summer a Swedish man was sentenced to prison for three months for having had sex with a boy in Thailand. Already in 1990, Norway had three men prosecuted and convicted for having sexually abused children in the Philippines.

With regard to the evolution of the information society and technology, the Commission has been in the forefront to promote research and development as well as action programmes. This modern revolution will provide for many new and interesting possibilities, and will hopefully improve the quality of life.

But also here there is a darker side to development which we have to be aware of and deal with. Child pornography and networks between paedophiles are but some of numerous problems we will encounter as we enter the information society. The European Commission is already looking into this problem. It will in the near future propose action to various kinds of offending use of information networks, such as Internet. This is a difficult area, especially in an international context since it may touch upon various national constitutional aspects. The freedom of publicly expressing one's ideas and opinions is a fundamental human right, and it must remain so. However, I am certain that we shall be able to deal also with this problem. A child pornographer or a pedophile can have no freedom to hide behind.

As governments and parliaments pursue their work to adjust legislation to new media techniques, such as video, television and computerized networks, they must safeguard the freedom of expression. But it is equally important that our children are protected against abuse of modern technology.

Chairperson,

It is hard to witness the growing problem of sexual abuse of children in our world. It is certainly more difficult for those who are today doing a heroic job in working directly with these children, helping them out in their pain. Let us seek strength from the picture of little nine year-old Marinella on that railway station in getting on with our urgent task.

Thank you.

