

*Speech by the  
National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings  
and Sexual Violence against Children in The Netherlands  
Ms. Corinne DETTMEIJER-VERMEULEN*

*At the occasion of the press conference on the project  
“Improvement of National Anti-Traffic Policy through Transfer of Know-How,  
Experience and Good Practices”  
13 August 2012 in Sofia, Bulgaria*

Your Excellency,  
Deputy Prime Minister Tsvetanov,

Your Excellency,  
Ambassador Van Kesteren

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is an honour for me to speak to you today. I remember the last time I was here, in December 2010, for the closing conference of a successful Dutch-Bulgarian project on combating trafficking in human beings. Many of the people present then are here again today, which in my view bears witness of Bulgarian determination to fight trafficking in human beings. What has stuck with me very vividly is the account of Olga, a victim of trafficking who had been forced to work as a prostitute in the city of Groningen in The Netherlands. She showed courage by sharing with us her traumatic experiences and her disappointment about how she had been deceived by her trafficker. I was impressed by her strength and moved by her story. I think all of us were.

I was pleased to hear about Olga’s positive experiences with cross-border cooperation between Dutch and Bulgarian police. Cooperation is key to combating trafficking in human beings. Not only *between*, but also *within* countries. That is one of the things that will become clear from this cross-border cooperation between the National Commission and my office, this project on data sharing and analysis within a single country.

As the Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings my task is to monitor the effectiveness of the counter-trafficking policy pursued by the Dutch government. Monitoring the effectiveness of this fight is a way of holding up a mirror. I do so by collecting information and reporting to the Dutch government. Making recommendations based on scientific research is an important part of that, and allows for the development of research-based policy.

One of the key elements in a successful counter-trafficking strategy is knowledge. Knowledge is power. Power as a dynamic concept to approach and tackle the problem efficiently, to improve the fight against it, in policy making and in the application of the law (or other regulations) in practice. Without knowledge on the scale and nature of THB, how do we know what our policy should be targeting? It is widely recognised that knowledge about THB is a precondition for addressing the phenomenon in an adequate manner.

Knowledge on THB should be a combination of qualitative and quantitative information. After all, statistics are worth little if you do not understand what is behind them. Statistics need to be interpreted. Similarly, qualitative information may be perceived as assumptions if not supported by data. The first aspect of my work is to gather both types of information, from all possible individuals and organisations that deal with the trafficking issue – both state and non-governmental. This regards information on the nature and the scale, on perpetrators, on modus operandi, on victims, but also on more general themes like prevention, legislation, governmental policy and important developments in these fields, on the national and international level.

It is clear that it is very difficult to collect reliable information. There are various reasons which complicate the gathering of data: Firstly, exploitation partly occurs in hidden sectors such as the (unlicensed) sex industry, the informal economy and behind closed doors in private households, making it difficult to detect; Secondly, not all victims are like Olga. Many victims, including victims of exploitation in other sectors than the sex industry, are reluctant to tell of their experiences. For these reasons, and also because exploitation does not, generally speaking, cause any visible disturbance of public order, cases remain undiscovered. It is unknown how large this ‘dark number’ is – but it is likely to be considerable.

A significant question is what *type* of research is needed. It is often said that studies in relation to a single country provide too limited a picture. This is true in relation to specific aspects of what is frequently a cross-border offence, such as human trafficking routes or obtaining a picture of the situation for victims who have returned to their countries of origin. However, for (national) policy purposes, it is valuable and even essential to collect information specific to a particular country. This type of information is also indispensable for clarifying the meaning of the results from large-scale international comparative studies.

My position is an *independent* one.  
That makes all the difference.

It makes a difference in terms of access to information and data. In fact, to some organizations that independent position is the decisive factor for agreeing to share information with my Bureau – and sometimes *exclusively* with my Bureau. Partners include the public prosecution service, the immigration service and organizations responsible for the shelter of victims, NGO's.

What does “access to data” mean? Ideally, it would mean that perfectly organized, digital data sets are shared *confidentially* through a securitized transfer, after which we can start analyzing the data using a statistical analysis programme. Confidentiality is of paramount importance, as data sets contain many personal details. My researchers often travel to organizations to collect the data sets and store them on securitized data carriers. Those data sets are not perfectly organized. In reality they are often cluttered, and contain duplications and errors. The

information has to be organized, anonymized and refined – a labour intensive job that is partly done by hand. It takes various rounds of adjusting before data is ready to be analyzed, and subsequently, interpreted. Often, “access to data” means gaining access to stacks of paper files from which information has to be selected, processed and analyzed – an equally labour intensive job. The National and Local Commissions for Trafficking in Human Beings will learn all about this process from our data specialist Ieke de Vries, who is excited to share her knowledge and experiences on data analysis.

The data of stakeholders has allowed me to publish reports containing facts and figures on many aspects of trafficking. They include not only victim and perpetrator characteristics, but also prosecution and conviction ratios, trends in the duration of prison sentences and the amount of compensation paid to victims of trafficking. In the Netherlands, my data is regularly the subject of Parliamentary debates. It serves to improve counter-trafficking policies. The power of data demonstrated once more recently, when one of my studies forced the Dutch Minister of Immigration, Integration and Asylum to reconsider his intended policy, which lacked data supporting his assumptions about the expected results. His intended policy would, in my view, have impacted on the protection of foreign victims of trafficking to such an extent that it would have been in breach of European legislation.

Knowledge and data are powerful. We are looking forward to sharing our good practices, know-how, and experiences on developing and using this powerful tool.