

*Speech of the Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and
Sexual Violence against Children*

mr. C.E. Dettmeijer-Vermeulen

At the occasion of ABN AMRO's Human Rights Conference

Amsterdam, 9 December 2015.

- Concept -

(may diverge from the spoken text)

Human trafficking: the art of seeing

Flight 2271 to Eindhoven. Magic numbers for Agnieta. The flight is taking her to Holland. To John. She will be meeting him at last, in real life. Up to now contact had been confined to endless chat sessions, but despite this their relationship has become increasingly serious. Finally, the prospect of a future. Something different to her poverty stricken existence in Pécs.

But things turned out differently. No going college, no step-up to a job. Just work in a brothel. And a relationship based on dependency that served as a cover for violence. If Agnieta did not want to work, only one thing was certain: she'd be beaten by John.

Uncle Ahmed. A magical man for Mohammed. He was going to take him from Turkey to Holland, the country he had heard so much about. And about his uncle's thriving business on a well-known busy street in Amsterdam. About the money that flowed like water and about the secondary schools where you would be educated in next to no time to go to university. Of course he wanted to go along. To Holland!

But things turned out differently. Mohammed got to Holland but once there he was set to work. Seven years long, up before daybreak. Six days a week. Without pay. Mohammed was 14 years old.

Holland, a magical name for Romanu. Because although he is born here and lives here nothing seems further away than Holland. His parents call it 'abroad' as if it is something foreign, and though they allow Romanu to go to school, they want him to have the least

possible contact with 'abroad'. Romanu really wants to be part of 'abroad', but when he goes off with his father it is to steal! His father says: 'Romanu show what you are worth!' He does not even think to refuse.

So Romanu has already been up in court a few times. He has a criminal record two pages long. For Romanu Holland remains unattainably close.

Ladies and gentlemen, human trafficking happens here. In The Hague and Amsterdam, but also in the smaller local communities in our country. It is happening around the corner and it takes on a myriad of forms.

Agnieta, Mohammed and Romanu, and the many others who annually fall prey to human traffickers, are reduced to commodities with only one aim in mind: money. Human traffickers are estimated to earn an annual income of 25 billion euro from exploiting other people. A stock valuation that a big bank would not be unhappy with.

For nine years now I have been the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings. I am independent and make recommendations to the government about the scale and nature of human trafficking and the effectiveness of the Dutch policy.

Nine years in which I have seen a lot of change for the better. The tackling of human trafficking has highest priority in many European countries. Within the EU the focus has been primarily on exploitation in prostitution. The Netherlands has made labour exploitation top priority and a major theme in the upcoming EU presidency.

Yet there is no room for complacency. It is precisely the growing attention for human trafficking that has demonstrated how pervasive the phenomenon really is. It is to be found in a variety of sectors and the means that human traffickers use to coerce people and ensure dependency may be equally varied. John used violence. But Mohammed's uncle did not need to, nor did Romanu's father. Increasingly we are seeing these subtle forms of human trafficking. The dependency that arises as a result of the unequal relationship between the one and the other is just a fact of life. This diversity leads me to believe that our approach must focus on one very elementary aspect: our capacity to see what's happening.

Fighting human trafficking is all about *seeing what's happening*.

About *being able* to see what's happening.

And a bout *being willing* to see what's going on and calling it by its true name.

Sometimes it takes a huge effort to see the signs. Who sees Agnieta? Hidden behind a curtain in the window of a dark street in The Hague. Who knows her, besides John? At what stage can we see that she is not working in the sex industry of her own free will, but is being coerced by her boyfriend? These are difficult questions and giving an unambiguous answer is fraught with problems. Certainly in the Netherlands, it is legal to work in the sex industry. But we cannot close our eyes to the horrors that are happening in this sector. We have a responsibility to protect the vulnerable people who are working in the sex industry. It is a responsibility of government, but also of those running such enterprises, and of customers.

Human trafficking is not always difficult to see, the question is also whether we are capable of seeing it. Take Mohammed. He worked for seven years on the market in Amsterdam, serving customers, but nobody reported it. An under-aged boy working for years at a stretch, every day, shouldn't that trigger a warning light? Are we capable of spotting or recognising human trafficking?

To see and be capable of seeing, these are the elementary conditions for an effective approach to human trafficking. Sadly, sometimes, we have to wonder whether we are really *willing* to see human trafficking. Take the community where Romanu lives. Research has shown that the authorities are reluctant to tackle cases of exploitation in closed cultural communities. It is called 'action hesitancy'. People feel troubled about tackling others about their behaviour. 'It's their culture, that's how they do things', they say. In Romanu's case, I say, it is not about their culture, it is about exploitation, child exploitation. And Romanu is not one of them, he is one of us. A Dutch child, growing up in the Dutch community. There is no question of treating him differently than his peers.

Ladies and gentlemen, human trafficking comes in many forms and is all around us. To recognise and act on this recognition needs knowledge, training and a political will. Human trafficking dehumanises the victims and tears at the social fabric of our society. There is a role for all of us if we want to eradicate modern slavery.

For a long time fighting human trafficking has mainly been a matter for the public sector. States have great obligations. Treaties, guidelines, verdicts of various European courts speak a clear message. And they should take the lead. Governments need to roll up their sleeves!

But in recent years the corporate world has increasingly invested in corporate social responsibility. The climate, the environment and working conditions. Child labour, often thought to happen only far away. But as I have illustrated human trafficking makes victims everywhere, no less in our, rich, western country. If only we want to see it.

Why do I stress that it happens here? Because when people acknowledge the problem on their very doorstep, they will feel more responsible towards solving it than when it does not directly affect their life sphere.

The fight against human trafficking is often defined by four P's: prevention, protection, prosecution and partnership.

The role of banks can be consolidating and meaningful and extend to all these four Ps.

Banks can investigate and report suspect transactions. The Dutch strawberry grower whose business seems to be booming , but hardly pays any wages? A glance at his accounts could sound a warning, which in turn could be an indication human trafficking. It needs training to see human trafficking. The financial investigation could be the start of a successful prosecution.

But the bank can also play a protective role. Take the prostitute in the Netherlands who wants to open a bank account. Can she do so and does that mean she is capable of disposing of her own income? And who is accompanying her if she has contact with bank's staff? Bank staff can be trained to recognise signs of human trafficking so that dependencies can be detected.

And what about the company that is planning to conquer emerging markets? Of course such markets are huge and challenging and our economy stands to gain from adventurous entrepreneurs. But does the company pause to think about the risks and is it aware of its supply chain and the circumstances in which people work there? A bank has this information and it can enter into a dialogue. A difficult interview perhaps. But one that has to be conducted. Here the Bank can help prevent making use of exploitative situations.

The fourth P is for partnership. I believe that human trafficking, modern slavery, can only be ended when governments and private sector partner up and roll up their sleeves together.

Only then will we be able and willing to see what is happening in our world and fight human trafficking effectively.