

*Speech by Corinne Dettmeijer,
Dutch National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings
and Sexual Violence against Children*

*On the occasion of the panel Missing Children: Disappearances, Abductions &
Exploitation. Global Analysis for Post-2015.*

18 March 2016, New York

Ladies and gentlemen,

First of all I would like to express my thanks to the organisation for allowing me to speak to you today about the important subject of *missing children*. It is a subject that I am confronted with all too often in my work as the Dutch Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings and Sexual Violence against Children.

In the Netherlands for instance in 2014 a girl aged 16 went missing. Her family was extremely concerned. The police launched a search after a private detective gave them information about the possible whereabouts of the girl. It still took some time before she was found in a hotel. The police took action, stormed the hotel room and found a man with his trousers round his ankles, the girl on the bed and the pimp hiding in the bathroom. It later emerged from the police investigation that potential clients had phoned 250 times, that the girl had received more than 80 clients in a fortnight and that the money had gone to the 21 year old human trafficker.

This is what I want to talk about today, about girls and boys who go missing because they are abducted, misled or abused by human traffickers. The problem arises more often than one might think. If you look at the 2015 figures from the National Center of Missing and Exploited Children, one in five of the reported children gone missing concern children who are victims from sexual exploitation. Human traffickers who have removed the child from parental supervision are prepared to cause injury to a child's sexual, psychological and

physical integrity, to take away their youth and deploy them as tools purely for financial gain.

The problem extends to girls *and* boys, respects no frontiers and affects children of all ages. For instance, Europe is being confronted

- with Nigerian girls and women who have gone missing and who are being sexually exploited under the coercion of a voodoo spell,
- with Vietnamese children who run away from reception centres and are subsequently forced to work as ‘gardeners’ within houses to produce cannabis, and
- with Roma children who are bought by gangs with the aim of having them to steal and beg.

These are just a few examples that demonstrate how widespread the problem of human trafficking in combination with missing children really is.

The question that must arise in everyone’s thoughts as soon as a child disappears is:

‘What are they running from, where are they running to and who is making them run’?

The actual fact of them being missing can equally well be a symptom that points to the real problem: *Human trafficking. The exploitation of children.*

To prevent children going missing as much as possible the underlying problem has to be addressed. There are three steps needed:

- Step one: *Prevent and anticipate children going missing*
- Step two: *Find the children as soon as possible.*
- Step three: *Prevent children going missing again*

It sounds logical and simple, doesn’t it? Even so the first and the third steps are often disregarded while it is precisely here that a distinction has to be made. It is only then that the child is still in sight, which gives the opportunity for concrete measures.

Step 1

Preventing children going missing. The first step. Most children run away from youth care and foster care institutions. Figures in the United States show that three-quarters of the children who are possible victims of human trafficking and who have been reported missing disappear from youth and foster care. In the Netherlands approximately ninety children annually disappear from youth care institutions and are seriously suspected of being victims of a human trafficker. Half of them disappear for a long time. *That is almost one child a week.*

To prevent this happening we must do everything we can to spot the signs beforehand. To train youth care workers and foster care staff to see the signs of human trafficking. They are the First Responders and those who work with this vulnerable group. The protection of the group of children who are captured or 'captivated' by a human trafficker entirely depends on recognising the signs and acting upon them.

If a child in youth care is spotted who could be a potential victim of human trafficking a possible disappearance must be anticipated immediately. The key lies in building up a relationship of trust and covering the risks. A feature of young victims is that they can completely come under the spell of a human trafficker. To break this spell a safe situation has to be created.

It is the job of the social workers to make children realise that they have fallen into the hands of a trafficker and not in the hands of a loving friend offering the promise of a wonderful future. This is not always easy or successful. It is a well-known fact that the victims of human trafficking and notably young girls who are in love with their human trafficker could run away several times before they actually realise what is happening. The same is true for Vietnamese and Roma children who fall prey to traffickers in the Netherlands. They do everything they can to disappear to their human trafficker. They lie, they threaten and use all kinds of tricks. These groups have often been brainwashed or they have been put under heavy pressure and threatened. This is why it is crucial that besides prevention other measures are taken as well to anticipate on these children disappearing. Therefore a risk and safety analysis must be made.

Risk analysis serves to ascertain what protection the victim needs to prevent him or her disappearing and falling again into the hands of the trafficker. Here the

police play a crucial role. The police have the expertise for estimating the threat of human traffickers. To protect children in the Netherlands the most vulnerable girls are sometimes placed in secure youth care institutions under the authority of the courts and with the aim of protecting them against their traffickers. It is a drastic precaution but necessary if nothing else helps.

Alongside the risk analysis, a safety analysis is also needed. An analysis with the aim of mapping the victim's network. Who is that 'friend' for instance, who does she mix with and where does she stay? Ask about the use of social media, screen visitors and above all take a photograph that can be used in the event of any search. This information has to be stored in a central location and shared as much as possible with the police if the victim disappears. This is the information that can make all the difference between protection or exploitation.

Step 2

Step two is to find the under-age victim as fast as possible. To prevent various bodies waiting to see who will act first it is important to reach agreements on who will take the lead and in what instances, if a child disappears. A multi-agency protocol. It must be clear beforehand what resources can be deployed by the various bodies. If these things are only thought about once a child has gone missing, it is too late. In emergency cases where there are clear signs that the victim has gone to a human trafficker time is the most crucial factor. In particular children who are being used for sexual exploitation are regularly transported from town to town to be exploited in the illegal circuit which seriously complicates the search. One must consequently start at once using the right means and methods.

An appeal to the public is one of the possibilities. This encourages the public at large to keep an eye out for younger children. If need be the whole country can be transformed into a huge 'gone missing' poster. Advertising hoardings, highway signs, apps, text messages and email can be used to find the child. Targeted searches can be carried out in certain regions or specific institutions can be activated. Even so we must scrupulously ascertain how opportune it is to deploy these methods. It depends very much on the urgency of the matter. My fear is that by being publicly labelled a victim of human trafficking the child may be stigmatised for life with all the ensuing consequences.

And then there are possibilities of using technological means to find children. In the United States, for research purposes, the database of missing children was linked to websites where people were offering paid sex. It turned out that several children who were missing could be found in this way. The technology, PhotoDNA, that can be used for this purpose, with Google and Microsoft leading the way, is becoming increasingly more adept at linking photos. Even if these photos are taken in different spaces and if the child for example has a different colour of hair and is wearing different clothes.

Step 3

The third and last step begins when the child has been found. Then we have to ask ourselves who should collect the child. *A person close to the victim, the police or a social worker?* To a large extent this depends on the situation in which the child is found.

In the case of the girl being sexually exploited in a hotel I mentioned earlier, the situation determines that the police must take action. At the same time arrangements have to be made for the immediate care of the girl and the initial medical and psychological needs ascertained straight away. These steps are crucial for building up a relationship of trust with the victim with the aim of extricating the child from her human trafficker. If that tie is not broken protection is at risk of failing.

Once the victim has returned to a safe situation, the time has come to ask what happened. From research follows that an interview of this kind does not always take place with unaccompanied children that were found again. The same applies to missing children in the Netherlands while in fact it is precisely these interviews that are indispensable in gathering investigative information and gaining insight as to why the victim disappeared in the first place. The interview also forms the basis for establishing the risk of a new chance of going missing.

The crucial element in these interviews is to find out what power the human trafficker has over the child. Are family or friends being threatened? Is the child in love with the perpetrator? Or does the perpetrator possess sexually explicit material of the child? Has the child been made an accessory to a criminal offence by the human trafficker?

All very dreadful things but tried and tested methods that are deployed by human traffickers.

In the Netherlands for instance a boy went missing who was forced by human traffickers to have sex with men and to film this. After the sex the victim had to blackmail the men into paying money by threatening to put the pictures on line. When the victim was found the boy was afraid to tell his story. He was afraid that he would be punished. This is why it is crucial to explain the non-punishment principle to the victims. That there is the possibility that they will not be prosecuted or will be not given a sentence if they have been forced to commit a criminal offence by the human trafficker. This example demonstrates that chains need not be of iron but can also be created by fear and threats. Knowledge and trust can break these chains and free these children from their human traffickers.

Closing words

That brings me to my closing words. The protection of women *and* men and in particular our children against exploitation is one of the greatest challenges we are facing as a society. Children who go missing are additionally vulnerable to seeing their youth and the sense of their own worth being sacrificed to the inhuman impulses of a human trafficker. It is up to us to stop that from happening.

It must be a fundamental right of every child to be protected from harm.

I have made a first move in that direction by describing these three steps. I close my contribution with repeating the question that should be engraved in everyone's mind whenever a child goes missing:

'What are they running from, where are they running to and who is making them run'?