

European Economic and Social Committee

Europe protecting children from sex tourism – main conclusions of the public hearing at the EESC

On 6 May 2009, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) held a public hearing to identify the best ways of fighting the sexual exploitation of children through tourism.

As **Ms Madi Sharma** (EESC member and rapporteur of the own-initiative opinion on the subject) put it, ***"this is about children, and children are children wherever they are in the world. To sexually abuse a child is totally unacceptable, wherever in the world"***.

The main objective of this hearing, supported and opened by **Ms Leila Kurki, President of the Social Section of the EESC**, was to collect highly knowledgeable participants' views on this issue to feed them into the own-initiative opinion currently in preparation. Next to the European Commission's representatives, the panellists included speakers from the UN World Tourism Organisation and from a number of organisations determined to fight this problem. ECTAA, CEEP and ITUC represented the European social partners and ECPAT, Terre des Hommes and Save the Children the most active NGOs in this field. The Council of Europe also gave a valuable contribution to the debate.

The discussion focused mainly on the so-called "5 Ps": **Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, Partnerships and Participation.**

With the aim of moving from a "culture of silence" to a "culture of awareness", **"Prevention"** was pinpointed as the most important area for action by authorities, social partners and civil society organisations, by means of law enforcement, monitoring and awareness raising through targeted campaigning, as the entire problem could be solved only by stopping demand! Specific studies and measures will also be needed to understand and fight at the source the motivation for such criminal acts.

On the chapter **"Protecting"** participants agreed that the existing conventions (namely the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe's Convention Against Child Exploitation) are the key documents giving the mandate for protecting, recovering and reintegrating exploited children, since the main cause for this phenomenon is their poverty and, as a consequence, the vicious circle of their social exclusion.

As for **"Prosecution"**, the new Framework Decision now proposed by the European Commission to be adopted by the EU Council was generally seen as a powerful tool for detecting offenders wherever they are and applying effective and dissuasive sanctions to them. The international and national investigation and police forces will be asked to play a more effective role in this respect through a series of new instruments.

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Increasing public awareness, strengthening law enforcement and supporting children protection cannot be achieved without "**Partnerships**" involving international, national regional and local authorities, professional bodies, service providers, corporations, trade unions and civil society organisations experienced in this area. Attention was specially drawn to the social responsibility of corporations and to an approach by sectors of activity.

Finally, it was admitted that the "**Participation**" of children and young people in any further action is a crucial factor to build up their resistance to threats and their general self-empowerment. Children who are unaware of their rights are the best preys of exploitation. Indeed, only they can give the real measure of achievement of all the efforts made to fight this abuse of human rights.

Again in the words of **Ms Sharma**, the rapporteur of this EESC own-initiative opinion and of its charter "Europe Against the Sexual Exploitation of Children", "***it is time to get results!***".

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