

OSCE Seminar on Co-operation to Prevent Trafficking in Human Beings in the Mediterranean Region, Rome, 8 February 2013

Trafficking in the Mediterranean: an overview of recent trends

Before introducing the main trends on trafficking in the Mediterranean area, I would like to spend a few words on trafficked people and the trafficking process itself, so as to provide an overview of the drivers behind the phenomenon.

The main strength of trafficking is that it reproduces itself silently, it is hidden, it is socially invisible.

We know that trafficking deprives victims of their physical and psychic health, human dignity and self-respect, and that trafficked victims are exploited for the benefit of different kinds of people, but mainly:

First, for traffickers of all kind, who are looking for a maximum profit from the activity;

Second, for employers, who are in need for low-cost workers;

We should not forget that trafficking for labour exploitation is also – often unconsciously - supported by consumers - who may buy, for example, tomatoes, strawberries, flowers or furniture, or even a renovated house at low prices using people who have been trafficked for their labour, without caring about the provenance of what they pay for. The same may happen for services such as domestic work or prostitution.

However, trafficking is hidden, and my guess is that a small minority of the public at large knows that it is now the third illegal market globally, after the illicit markets of drugs and arms.

We can see a couple of slides that throw up some interesting findings with from the EU.

SLIDE 1 – estimates in the EU

In 1999 UNDP estimated that at least five hundred thousand women yearly left the former countries of the Soviet Union to end up in high-exploitation labour markets, and forced prostitution.

And, according to current estimates by ILO, in 2012, in the EU alone, eight hundred and eighty thousand people are exploited in forced labour: 30% of them are victims of forced sexual exploitation, and 70% are victims of forced labour exploitation.

In the last decade, the European Union has enlarged, and the process of finance-driven globalisation has gone ahead all over the world. It is based on a paradox: the free circulation of goods and financial assets is not matched by a liberalization of the movement of people.

More and more, everywhere in the world, immigrants are in irregular situations tend to form a

special category of people at high risk of extreme exploitation, since they do not enjoy the same rights as the citizens of the host country and are often obliged to live in social exclusion.

And what about the Mediterranean area? It fully participates in these dynamics.

In the past two decades, in all the main Mediterranean countries international migration has grown even if new requirements to enter and live in such countries, and stricter border controls, have been introduced.

Spain, Italy and Greece became destination countries for relevant migration flows since the 90s, with a relevant stock of irregular migrants.

Also the Arab Mediterranean countries such as Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya have increased - especially in the new millennium – their role as destination areas, with arrivals from different regions of the world.

SLIDE 2 – Migration flows in the Mediterranean

In 2011 around 4.5 million migrants coming from the Middle East or Sub Saharan Africa were settled in the Mediterranean Arab countries: around two-thirds of them in irregular situations regarding their stay or work.

Meanwhile, in 2011 almost 5 million migrants from Arab Mediterranean countries living in the EU, were mainly settled in Spain, France and Italy.

After 2011, and except some twenty five thousands young Tunisian nationals who arrived in Italy by sea in winter 2011, according to the analysts, the effects of the Arab Spring have not affected in a relevant way the magnitude of migration trends directed to Europe.

On the contrary, recently, the war in Libya and the crises in Syria and in Mali, have fuelled infra-regional migration trends. The slide 3 shows the numbers regarding Libya.

Slide 3 – Migrants fleeing Libya

As you can see, only a small proportion of these flows have been directed to Europe.

One of the features of the migration flows in the Mediterranean region, and especially of transit migration, in fact, is that these flows are mainly “mixed” migration flows. It means that a varying but relevant percentage of migrants is made up of asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants, such as refugees and victims of trafficking.

As regards trafficking, according to the recent Global Report on Trafficking (*UNODC*), data on victims who originate in Africa and the Middle East are few. For example, we know that “Moroccan victims were detected in nine countries in West and Central Europe, including Belgium,

France, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. Algerian victims were found in France and Norway. (...) North African victims were also detected in the Middle East between 2007 and 2010”¹.

Precise data are lacking, BUT an overlook of the evolution of mixed migration flows in the Mediterranean area show three main trends.

First trend: for both migrants crossing the sea to get the European borders (through Spain, Italy, Malta and Greece) and for migrants crossing the Sahara Desert in last decade the routes have become much longer, more difficult, expensive and risky.

Slide 4 - deaths at sea in the Mediterranean

We can have an idea, looking at this slide, of the high number of migrants and asylum seekers who died or were lost at sea in recent years.

Slide 5 – I-MAP

In next slide, we can see the land routes, the I-Map is an updated map of all the main routes crossing the Mediterranean region and beyond. It illustrates how land routes, which have enlarged in the ten years, now cover large geographical areas, including desert towns, and small seaside towns.

Second trend: together with this increasingly complex system of migration routes, a wide business based on the exploitation of migrants has emerged within the region. We can say that the changing geography of migration has brought with it – correspondingly - a changing geography of social problems associated with it, such as poverty, exploitation, trafficking, segregation and abuse. Part of the migrants on the move are trapped in these dynamics.

Third trend: as regards the specific features of trafficking in the Mediterranean region, research shows that often trafficking victims are not controlled by traffickers from the first stages (of recruitment and travel) to the last stage (of exploitation). This may happen, as it is in the case of trafficking of Nigerian women, BUT usually victims are not “subjugated” by a criminal gang with international ramifications or networks.

More often in this region they pass from one controller to another, from one stage to another, in many cases voluntarily. For example, the shift from a situation of smuggling to a situation of trafficking, for them, may be easy.

Why? On a practical level, journeys have become more difficult for migrants because of the very stringent migration controls. Most migrants initially underestimate the cost of their journey: prices of smugglers are higher than expected, and routes are longer. Having exhausted their resources during the travel, they become “stranded”, and are recruited by “middlemen” – often of their own nationality or ethnic group - for forced labour activities, usually for the benefit of local employers.

Migrants or asylum seekers who are living or travelling in, to or through the Mediterranean area, in North Africa, Greece or Italy, for example, may live in complete social exclusion and often they are

¹ UNODC Global Report on Trafficking 2012: 11, 82.

pressured by intermediaries who “assist and protect them”, because they live with the permanent fear of being arrested and deported by the authorities. In countries like Italy or Greece, in fact, the immigration laws have recently been tightened. Due to the financial and economic crisis, and to the deficiencies of their asylum systems, countries, like Spain, are becoming less attractive for migrants.

To conclude, we have seen that some of the Arab countries in the Mediterranean area, can be origin countries of trafficking flows, BUT, at the same time, ALL the Mediterranean countries are also destination countries for trafficking flows: nowadays ALL the Mediterranean countries, as well as the EU countries, experience the exploitation and forced labour of migrants.

However, in all countries, both in the EU and in the Arab Mediterranean region, as things stand today, social exclusion and lack of protection of the rights of migrants seem to be the main cause of their vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation. In many countries a migrant whose papers are not in order often does not have the option to report his/her exploiter without being deported, either at once or at the end of the trial, and this is a cause of great vulnerability.

At the end, in this historical moment, the main key for reducing the strength of trafficking and forced labour, its social invisibility and its silent expansion, can be a common, international action to promote, with all legal means, the rights of the migrants.

Dr. Paola Monzini, International Consultant
p.monzini@gmail.com