

How far would you go to support your family?



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TRAVELLING BACK AND FORTH

between homes in two countries is much less romantic than it might sound. Living abroad is exciting and mind-opening, but inevitably homesickness strikes at times – especially when I'm visiting our home in Helsinki. Since our family lives in several places, I'm fortunate to be able to shuttle between them often. I think of all those who are forced to leave their children in their home country for a long time as they head faraway to earn a living. What anxiety they must suffer over their children's welfare!

Immigration and emigration are dominant phenomena of the day in Europe. Millions of people without proper permits and documents live in the European Union, hoping for an opportunity for decent work and an income so they can send money to support their families in other areas. First, though, they must pay off debts to those who arrange their trips, counterfeit immigration papers, arrange work, a place to sleep, and those who demand protection money – anyone who realises the irregular immigrant's vulnerability.

Criminal profits from international forced labour are many times higher than previously thought, according to a report soon to be published by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The previous estimate of 25 billion euros a year has been revised upward to some 60 to 80 billion euros annually. These funds are raised through abuse of immigrants, including debt bondage and sex slavery. Whatever is left over is what an undocumented migrant may be able to send home so that his or her children can go to school or even eat. Therefore, it's not so surprising that studies suggest that remittances sent home by emigrants often have quite minimal social development impact. Even in their home

countries, there seem to be many middlemen trying to take a cut of these payments, so that the amount remaining to support families and improve social conditions is quite minimal.

On a visit to Kenya in October, I saw the conditions described in a recent UNICEF report, according to which sex tourism along the coast – though flourishing – actually has negligible economic impact on the region's development.

It is shocking to read that as many as one third of girls aged 12 to 18 are exploited in the sex business. Selling a girl can earn the trafficker ten

times more money than he could earn by doing ordinary work. At the same time, as it traumatises the girl, it rips her irreparably away from any kind of normal childhood. Nonetheless, the surrounding community tolerates this phenomenon for the expected profits.

We humans have an amazing ability to cast our own behaviour in the best possible light. Thus we absolve ourselves of responsibility or a guilty conscience despite violating our own social or ethical principles.

The brutal abuse of modern-day slavery would be impossible unless some so-called "decent citizens" give themselves the right to use other humans as commercial goods – sometimes with the rationale that the victim's background and alternatives would be at least as bad. As if there are people who have less of the basic human needs for security and a good life. As if there are people whose freedom is less valuable than ours. As if there are children who are destined to suffer sexual violence in order to support their families.

Human trafficking and abuse take place in all of our own countries. Indifference is the greatest danger of all. ■

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