

The media's treatment of human trafficking in 2013 – a critical interjection

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KOK e.V. is a national group which coordinates efforts combating trafficking in and violence against women during migration, and advocates for women who have been trafficked and victims of violence. KOK is the sole coordination point, not only in Germany, but across Europe, with this specific focus and has successfully brought together all German NGOs working in this area.

Established by social workers in 1987 to support victims of trafficking, the NGO became an official organization in 1999. Today KOK supports 37 member organizations. KOK works alongside experts who specialize in the area of human trafficking and other organizations that work in this field, including counseling centers for victims of trafficking and for prostitutes, migration projects, women's shelters, and charities. The overarching goal of the organization is to advocate effective, progressive measures to tackle human rights violations against women.

Mapping media interest

The respect and consideration that people who have fallen victim to human trafficking receive from the public and authorities is not unrelated to how the press and media handle the topic. Human trafficking and exploitation were, for a long time, not a topic of particular interest for the media. As Hestermann noted in 2009, human trafficking was happening in the very shadow of media attention. (2009, p. 52)¹ Only major events, such as the soccer World Cup 2006 would bring the issue to light for a short period of time. However after the media purposely switched its attention to another threat², which focused primarily on the danger to Germany's national security in the face of illegal immigration, the issue of human trafficking largely disappeared from the press. What remained were images, spread widely by the media and other social channels, of "forced prostitutes", which the KOK e.V., as a professional association, would like to comment upon critically.

In recent months, there has been no lack of media attention on the topic of human trafficking, a trend confirmed by media analysis company Mediatenor in 2013. From January 2012-2013, an increase of the reports on this topic was observed worldwide; further, it is Germany, along with China and Canada, which most often reported on the problem, in print media as well as radio, and especially on TV.³

¹ Hestermann, T. (2009): Das Ideale Opfer: jung, weiblich, deutsch. Wie das Fernsehen Gewaltkriminalität darstellt und warum es kaum über Menschenhandel berichtet. In: Politische Studien Nr. 427, Sept/Okt 2009, Jahrgang 60, Hrsg. Hanns Seidel Stiftung, S. 47-53.

² Cf. Handelsblatt, 10.11.2005

³ Cf. <http://investigativ.welt.de/2013/04/08/menschenhandel-wird-schlusselthema-im-fernsehen/> [01.08.2013]

Indeed, ARD took the lead and aired eight television programs that either directly or indirectly dealt with human trafficking in the past nine months. This began in December 2012, with the airing of a “Tatort” (a well-known German crime show) double episode – titled “The Disposable Girls (Part 1)” and “The Golden Band (Part 2)” – that sought to address the ongoing, heated debate on attempted trafficking and sexual exploitation, especially of minors. Following this, KOK received numerous press inquiries, requesting background information and connections to victims of human trafficking for possible interviews. The sudden escalation in media interest was not only subjectively noticeable, but clear in the increase of day-to-day work at KOK e.V. KOK therefore decided to work more intensely with the media on the topic. The aim was also to help lead the discussion and to collaborate in examining how the topic can be dealt with professionally and seriously.

• **The EU Commission’s Eurostat Report**

• Media coverage increased once again between April and June 2013, along with increased requests for information on the topic to KOK and specialized counseling centers. This was mainly due to a study released by the European Commission, which presented statistics on the subject for the first time and discussed an increase in human trafficking in Europe⁴. In Germany, there has been no increase in the number of victims, according to the yearly report on Human Trafficking by the Federal Police⁵ (Bundeskriminalamt). However, most other reports ignored these statistics and projected generalized conclusions (an increase in victims) from elsewhere onto Germany⁶. Simultaneously, it was reported that general prostitution had increased in Germany, suggesting an implicit link between prostitution and human trafficking. Aside from the fact that reliable figures do not exist, neither in Germany⁷ nor in Europe, that are able to conclude accurately how many people are actively involved in prostitution, prostitution was not the main focus of the Eurostat report; rather, it was human trafficking in all forms.

The EU Directive on Combating Human Trafficking

Media, in April 2013, picked up the non-implementation by the German government of an EU Directive 2011/36/EU on combating human trafficking, putting forth unanimous criticisms on the shortcomings of Germany’s policy.

Although the EU Directive 2011/36/EU contains no direct legislation with respect to the regulation of prostitution areas or other topics relative to prostitution, press reports in the following weeks and months discussed the “prostitution law” that had entered into effect in the year 2002, going on in particular about the extent to which it drove an increase in human trafficking in Germany⁸. The discussion over the failed implementation of the EU Directive merged into a debate over the legalization of prostitution, suggesting a causal link between

⁴ Cf. http://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/entity.action?path=EU+Policy%2FReport_DGHome_Eurostat [14.08.2013]

⁵ Cf. www.bka.de [14.08.2013]

⁶ Cf. „Verkaufte Kinderseelen – Zwangsprostitution in unserer Nachbarschaft“, ARD, 22.07.2013

⁷ Cf. Bundestags-Drucksache 17/14467, S.2

⁸ Cf. Spiegel, 27.05.2013; Documentation “Sex - Made in Germany”, ARD, 10.06.2013; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 10.06.2013

prostitution and human trafficking. Each topic area should in reality have its own, differentiated and serious, discussion.

A short bill submitted in June 2013 (Bundestag paper 17/13706), which placed an article on the regulation of prostitution alongside policy implementation steps, strengthened this argument, as it dealt with both issues at once. Considering regulation or requiring permits for prostitution areas can certainly be a significant measure to better protect persons engaged in prostitution from violence. Despite these considerations, however, the EU Directive did not further discuss improvements in victim protection or the rights of victims of human trafficking.

The perfect victim: a mixture of migration, prostitution and human trafficking

For press and media it is popular to show images of human trafficking victims as forced prostitutes⁹, especially young southeast European and Nigerian women. This furthers two familiar stereotypes:

- 1) All migrants are in Germany for the purpose of forced prostitution;
- 2) All foreign prostitutes are victims of trafficking.

At this point, it must be clearly emphasized that although there is labor migration into prostitution, prostitution is not an inevitable consequence of female migration. A distinction between migration into prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation must be distinguished. Equating prostitution with human trafficking would mean unduly declaring that all are victims.

Media like to purport the stereotype of young foreign women as weak and naïve, who fail to recognize the crime in advance; media tend to ignore the fact that labor migration is often a result of many complex decisions. The line between supposedly consensual migration and deception, coercion, and exploitation of working conditions may be blurred.

What is also neglected in such a stereotype is, firstly, that human trafficking does not require the crossing of national borders, and accordingly there are also trafficked persons who are of German nationality¹⁰. Victims can also be men, transsexuals, and minors. Self-actualized or older women, as well as people with higher education, do not fit the media's portrayal of the 'common victim.'

The numbers problem

Media like to use unsustainable or sensational numbers or estimates to illustrate a 'dramatic increase' in trafficked persons¹¹. It is, of course, important to educate and direct attention from the public, political realm, and funders to controversial issues such as human

⁹ Cf. „Tatort“-Doppelfolge, 09./16.12.2012; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 23.12.2012; BILD, 07.03.2013; Spiegel, 27.05.2013

¹⁰ Cf. Bundeskriminalamt: Bundeslagebild Menschenhandel 2011

¹¹ Cf. BILD, 14.04.2013; Spiegel, 27.05.2013

trafficking. The larger the problem, the more widely information may be (sometimes recklessly) disseminated by the press, media, and academia. Many are tempted to refer to the highest absolute numbers, without regard for the quality and relevance of the source.

On the other hand, missing data on the extent of human trafficking means that a problem can seem less important than it is. The reason behind low reliable figures are rarely discussed: there is a fear of stigmatization and too little support, which often lead to deportation, which deter victims in Germany from seeking help. The linkage of certain legal regulations with the testimony of the victim prevents the identification of human trafficking victims – e.g. in Germany, victims are allowed to stay in the country for the duration of the proceeding investigation if they are willing to cooperate with the police and only - and therefore makes it difficult to know the true extent of the problem.

It must always be kept in mind that behind every statistic are real people living in emergency situations, and the need for action must be clear not only because of high, often constructed, numbers, but also due to individual cases. Reliable statistics are important, but are always a challenge to obtain when dealing with criminal offenses such as human trafficking.

Stereotypes vs. the responsibility of the media

Words and images convey messages and certain ideas that are accepted by the public and carried further. The media have a considerable impact on how victims are perceived by society. The media can contribute to combating the problem, protecting the victims, and how affected persons, after being removed from the situation, are handled and reintegrated into society.

On the other hand, reinforcing stereotypical images and descriptions (women as naïve, helpless victims¹² and men as brutal and unscrupulous attackers¹³) is not only a simplified and false picture of the real situation, but also helps perpetuate it. These simplified portrayals of reality are wrong and hinder the identification of trafficked persons. Media reduces trafficked persons to passive victims, meaning that their needs and rights are rarely discussed topics¹⁴. Rather than placing the protection of victims at the heart of discussion, focus is most often placed on the offense and how it is carried out¹⁵. Regardless of the theme, sexualized images of women and minors as “eye catchers” often accompany articles.¹⁶ The social conditions that enable human trafficking and exploitation are, however, scarcely mentioned.

¹² Cf. BILD, 07.03.2013; Spiegel, 27.05.2013

¹³ Cf. Süddeutsche Zeitung, 27.12.2012; BILD, 30.05.2013

¹⁴ Cf. Spiegel, 27.05.2013; BILD, 30.05.2013

¹⁵ Cf. Süddeutsche Zeitung, 23.12.2012; BILD, 07.03.2013

¹⁶ Cf. Das Wochenblatt, 01.08.2013:

<http://mobil.wochenblatt.de/nachrichten/traunstein/regionales/art39,192399> [14.08.2013]

Requirements and recommendations for a journalistic and ethical reporting

The more widespread and utilized a press medium is, the more trust it enjoys from the general population. Most people do not inform themselves by reading reports, meaning that media has a direct contribution on the formation of opinion.

All journalists who adhere to the Press Code of the German Press Council should take this information and investigative mission seriously. KOK finds the following aspects especially important to keep in mind in compiling an article or report on human trafficking, with respect to those affected:

- Calm reporting that avoids hysteria and the undue construction of threatening situations, and that does not criminalize migration
- Avoid clichés
- Sound research¹⁷, which acknowledges there are no precise figures on the number of trafficked persons, and that the lives and situations of those affected are usually highly complex
- Avoidance leading questioning: organizations such as KOK are repeatedly contacted by journalists who merely want confirmations of preconceived hypotheses rather than relying on the expertise of professionals
- Putting forth the whole picture, for example, by focusing on the situation of those affected and the problems that arise in working in counseling¹⁸
- A critical and separate debate on the issue of prostitution, which avoids equating sexual exploitation and human trafficking¹⁹
- Creating new imagery that shows those affected as strong, active subjects with the ability to shape their own lives, avoiding stereotypical depictions of sexualized victims
- Protect the rights and identifies of the people in question; the German Press Council has, to this effect, amend Article 8, “Privacy Protection” of the Press Code in March 2013, particularly recognizing the protection of victims of crime and of minors as centrally important²⁰

The important role of the media in combating of sexual violence and of structural violence, especially to women and girls, is increasingly recognized in international forums. The Agreed Conclusions document from the 57th UN Commission on the Status of Women states the following:

“Recognize the important role the media can play in the elimination of gender stereotypes, including those perpetuated by commercial advertisements, and in promoting non-discriminatory and gender-sensitive reporting, including by preserving the confidentiality of the identity of victims and survivors where appropriate; [...] encourage the media to improve public awareness on violence against women and girls, [...] to promote balanced and non-

¹⁷ A positive example is the ARD documentation „Ware Frau – Als Zwangsprostituierte in Deutschland“?, 25.03.2013

¹⁸ Positive example: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 27.12.2012 und 25.01.2013

¹⁹ Positive example: Süddeutsche Zeitung, 18.04.2013; taz, 25.11.2012; taz, 31.05.2013

²⁰ Vgl. <http://www.presserat.info/inhalt/der-pressekodex/einfuehrung.html> [14.08.2013]

stereotypical portrayals of women, with a view to eliminating discrimination against and the exploitation of women and girls and to refraining from presenting them as inferior beings and to exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities, and instead present women and girls as creative human beings, key actors and contributors to and beneficiaries of the process of development,”

(UN Commission on the Status of Women: Agreed Conclusions, B) Addressing structural and underlying causes and risk factors so as to prevent violence against women and girls, Point vv)

A new culture of debate on the issue of trafficking is necessary to try and involve all views and lead an objective discussion. The KOK appeals to all journalists to commit to these ethical standards and is willing to support journalists in responsible reporting with its expertise on the topic.

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