



My Experience in Combating Child Sex Trafficking in the Irish Hospitality Sector

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Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

Casina Pio IV

Vatican City, 15-16 November 2014

MECPATHS, which stands for Mercy Efforts to Counter Child Prostitution and Trafficking in the Hospitality Sector, is an outreach campaign in Ireland aimed at raising awareness among hotel staff and guests about the issue of child sex trafficking in Irish hotels. The campaign has its origin in the work of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States who have already initiated a similar project with great success. Mercy sisters have a long tradition in working with vulnerable women, including women exploited in prostitution. Human trafficking is a key theme of the Sisters of Mercy's global action, and congregations around the world have taken it up as an area of priority in their work with women and children. The MECPATHS campaign was established with a particular focus on child sex trafficking, which involves anyone under 18.

In January 2014, the first training session for volunteers on the new campaign was held in Dublin. Twelve sisters from around Ireland signed up to carry out the work of the campaign in their provinces. The sisters have a variety of backgrounds and experiences, but they all have spent many years working with women and girls in diverse circumstances, both in Ireland and abroad. This first training session provided a comprehensive introduction to the issue of sex trafficking in Ireland. Speakers were invited from the Garda National Immigration Bureau (a branch of the police), the Children's Rights Alliance, and the Department of Justice to share their expert insights into the nature of human trafficking and the response of the authorities to combat it. Many of the volunteers were already familiar with this issue, but with this training session and their own dedicated research, the team was equipped to begin its work.

The role of this volunteer team is primarily to visit hotels and meet with managers and human resource personnel. They get a sense of the level of awareness of human trafficking among hotel managers and provide them with literature about this issue. Depending on the availability and level of interest of managers, the sisters have time to give a power point presentation, but usually their visits are just an opportunity to talk, and to listen and learn. Has the hotel ever had a case of child sex trafficking? Are they aware of prostitution happening in their hotel? What kind of child safeguarding policies do they have? How far are hotels willing to engage in anti-trafficking efforts? This feedback has been crucial in developing MECPATHS' approach. We recognise the importance of working with hotels as partners, so we need their input into how we can be most effective in preventing child sex trafficking in the hospitality sector.

The reception of the volunteers in hotels has been overwhelmingly positive. The question of sexual exploitation of children evokes universal outrage, and hotels are generally very encouraging of the campaign and keen to get involved. After several months of reaching out to hotels and establishing good relationships between the volunteers and the hotel management, we held a round-table discussion with key stakeholders. The purpose of this was to draw up a protocol of best practice in suspected cases of child sex trafficking in hotels. Participants in this discussion included representatives from the police anti-trafficking team, the Department of Justice Anti-Trafficking Unit, the national Child and Family Agency, the Conference of Religious in Ireland, and the Immigrant Council of Ireland and Ruhama, two of the main anti-trafficking NGOs. The outcome document of the discussion, a protocol of best practice for hotels, was endorsed by the Irish Hotel Federation. The purpose of this protocol is to serve as a basis for a hotel's response to child sex trafficking. It outlines key principles, including the definition of child trafficking, the hotel's commitment to do no harm, the necessity of implementing a comprehensive zero-tolerance policy in relation to child sex trafficking, and the hotel's responsibility to ensure its staff are given anti-trafficking training.

Since the start of the campaign, the MECPATHS team has reached over 100 hotels across the country. Constructive feedback from these hotels, combined with regular communication with the leadership of the Irish

Hotel Federation, has helped to refine the approach of the campaign. It became clear that the biggest priority should be assisting hotels in providing training to their staff. Initially, we considered expanding the MECPATHS team and providing extensive further training to our volunteers so that we could conduct this hotel training ourselves, but this was found to be impractical. Hotels often experience a very high turnover of employees, as staff numbers fluctuate with the seasons. They can also have huge numbers of staff at any one time, meaning that we might have to conduct five or six sessions in a hotel in order to reach everybody. Hotels already have experienced, professional trainers in their human resource personnel. These people already train the staff in a variety of areas, they know the staff, and they are well-versed in all of the policies of the hotel, including its anti-trafficking policy.

It was decided that the best course of action would be for us to develop a toolkit for human resources personnel in order to equip them to deliver awareness-raising sessions in their own hotels. This toolkit is comprised of a power point presentation, a guide for the HR manager running the session, and accompanying literature. It is designed as an introduction to the issue of child sex trafficking in Ireland, including the role that hotels inadvertently play in this crime as traffickers use their facilities to sexually exploit children. A prerequisite for using this resource will be that hotels must adopt a comprehensive anti-child trafficking policy, with very clear reporting procedures for staff. This policy will be incorporated into each individual hotel's awareness-raising session for its staff. MECPATHS aims to distribute this resource to every hotel in the country with a view to it being integrated into the general training that hotels provide for their staff. This toolkit is being developed with the support of key partners, including the Immigrant Council of Ireland, the police, and the Child and Family Agency, and we will very shortly be piloting it in hotels in each of the four provinces across Ireland.

Human trafficking is a relatively new issue in the public discourse in Ireland. Anti-trafficking legislation regarding children was introduced in 1998, but it wasn't until the introduction of a broader anti-trafficking law in 2008 that certain key agencies were set up, like the Department of Justice's Anti-Human Trafficking Unit, and a dedicated human trafficking team within the police force. So far, the conviction rate has been extremely low, and the relatively few reported cases of trafficking give what most civil society organisations and the police believe to be a distorted representation of the real scale of the problem. In 2012, there were 23 reported cases of child trafficking, 19 of whom were Irish, all of whom were trafficked for sexual exploitation.

The prevalence of Irish victims does not conform to the stereotypical victim of child trafficking; many assume victims are most often non-Irish children who show visible signs of abuse or fear. The reality is that online grooming plays a major role in child sex trafficking and traffickers can be members of the child's family, a boyfriend, or a familiar friend or acquaintance. In such cases, the child might seem perfectly at ease in the company of the trafficker because they don't understand that they are being exploited and they don't understand the danger they are in. These sorts of subtle complications make it all the more important that service providers who are most likely to come into contact with a child who has been trafficked, such as hotel staff, are alerted to the existence of this crime and the signs which might indicate to them that they have encountered a victim.

Anti-trafficking training is increasingly acknowledged as a crucial measure in responding to human trafficking in certain sectors in Ireland. Approximately 4,000 members of the police force have received training, and there are other initiatives to reach out to the transport sector, most notably, airlines. The mainstreaming of anti-trafficking training is a growing trend internationally, and MECPATHS wants to see this continue in Ireland. We recommend that anti-trafficking training be provided to people working on the frontlines in other key sectors, including healthcare, education, transport, security, and law enforcement.

Another aspect of the MECPATHS campaign is to raise awareness among hotel guests so that they can be alert to the signs of trafficking, and so they can be discerning about the hotels they choose to patronise. We encourage all the religious communities in Ireland to enquire about a hotel's anti-trafficking policy before they make a booking. To this end, we have circulated a letter template through the Conference of Religious in Ireland which can be sent to hotels to let them know that customers value socially responsible behaviour and if a hotel is not doing its part to combat trafficking, they will take their business elsewhere. This sort of approach incentivises hotels to take action.

In light of that, we recommend that greater resources are channeled into raising awareness among the general public. Child trafficking is still all too often seen in Ireland as a distant problem affecting strangers in foreign countries. It is crucial that we make the general public aware of the fact that it is happening in Ireland, in rural villages and in large cities, and that it can happen to someone you know. It is also essential to promote awareness of how to get help so that victims can reach out. MECPATHS encourages hotels to display posters and leaflets – which are provided free of charge by the Department of Justice – with information about how to contact the police and seek help. Another key group that should be targeted in awareness-raising activities are young men. In our overly sexualised popular culture, commercial sex has become relatively normalised, while awareness of trafficking remains low. This disconnect must be addressed so that men are made aware

of the fact that, while they might think they are engaging in a consensual, innocent transaction between adults, they might in fact be paying to rape a child.

The public discourse on the issue of sex trafficking in Ireland is currently dominated by the question of introducing legislation based on the Nordic Model, which would ban the purchase of sex while decriminalising the seller of sex. Northern Ireland adopted the Nordic Model in October and this has raised concerns that if the Republic of Ireland does not introduce similar legislation, sex trafficking will increase. Criminalising the purchase of sex has been found to be effective in reducing sex trafficking and we recommend that the Irish Government adopts legislation based on the Nordic Model, incorporating strong provisions for the care of victims.

The MECPATHS campaign ultimately seeks to make itself redundant. Our aim is to provide a sustainable template for awareness-raising within hotels, which can be built upon and carried forward into the future by hotels themselves. If this can be achieved, the Irish hospitality sector can become a hostile place for those who would profit from the suffering of children, and their victims restored to the carefree childhood they deserve.