



Launch of the 2nd National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Human Beings

Speech by Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality, Frances Fitzgerald TD, at the launch of the 2nd National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking in Human Beings.

Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you this morning to launch Ireland's Second National Action Plan to Prevent and Combat Trafficking. I'm very glad that so many of you who are here today who will be working with us in implementing it over the coming years.

I want to thank those who have already spoken for outlining their differing roles. It highlights that the fight against human trafficking is one in which we can play a part.

This is very often a hidden crime; affecting hidden victims. People from deprived backgrounds often with histories of abuse. Very often women and girls, but also men and boys. Frightened individuals they aren't sure who they can trust or to whom they can turn for help. They could be forgiven for thinking they were invisible to us. We need to make the invisible visible. We need to shine a light on that.

It happens here.

It happens in our cities and towns, across the country.

And we can all play a role in tackling it.

Knowing the signs of trafficking is an important start:

- Children not attending school, engaged in work not suitable to their age,
- People working in groups in poor conditions, working very long hours,
- People overly dependent on their employer for accommodation or transport,
- Women with obvious signs of neglect or abuse,
- Adverts offering services that might suggest the availability of sexual services.

All these are signs that something may be wrong, that would justify raising concerns with the authorities. It may be innocent; but it may not be. We need to open our eyes to the possibility that it isn't.

Human trafficking is a form of modern day slavery which has no place in a civilised society. And still it persists as a highly profitable and yet largely hidden form of criminality. And it can only be tackled through victim protection at its heart.

I've spoken previously of the 4 P's – Prevention, Protection, Prosecution and Partnership – all of which are necessary elements in tackling this scourge, and all of which find expression in the 65 Actions

What we are launching here today is not just my Department's Plan; it is the Government's Plan. It is a commitment from the whole of Government to work with stakeholders, here and abroad, to end

I know that the fight against this terrible crime remains an important priority for An Garda Síochána and I would like to take this opportunity to recognise their continued work in this area, and particularly forms part of the new National Protective Services Bureau.

As a State I think we have worked well in developing our response to trafficking in all its forms. We are not perfect by any means; our engagement with international monitoring mechanisms and with Ireland is welcome. This National Action Plan owes much to those engagements, and will play a key role in prioritising our work in the years ahead.

I also want to take this opportunity to acknowledge in particular the contributions made by many NGOs in addressing this issue. As a stakeholder, they are not only a strong lobbying voice, but are on a daily basis. Indeed, because of its hidden nature, much of what we know about this crime and its victims is down to the engagement of the very dedicated staff of NGOs and, of course, within our own

It is useful to reflect on some figures to remind ourselves of the persistence of this crime. Between January 1 2009 and December 31 2015, a total of 417 victims of human trafficking were reported to the Garda Síochána. Numbers are probably much greater than that and it is my sincere hope that through greater awareness-raising and detection, that more victims can break the bond and get access to the protection and support

It is always important to remember that behind each one of these statistics is an individual. A vulnerable and frightened human being who has a right to reclaim their lives, who has a right to be supported and to be the centre of everything we do and it is against this, that we must measure our success.

Where human trafficking exists, the public has a vital role in exposing it. I'm thinking particularly of various forms of labour exploitation which law-abiding members of society may unknowingly encourage. Menial work, living in squalid conditions, under an unscrupulous gangmaster who controls their every movement, and their bank balance. This type of abhorrent behaviour has been uncovered around

All of the State and non-state groups here today play some public-awareness role. At the most basic level, the take away message for any of our public engagements is - **don't close your eyes to human trafficking**. This is the only way the perpetrators can be brought to justice.

Tomorrow is EU Anti-Trafficking Day. I'm delighted that as part of our activities to mark that day the Soroptomists Society have offered to work with us, and our counterparts in Northern Ireland, on the island of Ireland.

I have mentioned the importance of providing support to victims, but, of course, prevention is better than cure. Preventing trafficking occurring in the first place is our goal. We have strong legislation in place. If the demand for the services of victims can be reduced, and hopefully eliminated, the business model of traffickers can be dismantled. And be under no illusion, for them this is a business; traffickers purchase the services of these victims fuel this evil trade; they too bear the responsibility for the lives stolen by trafficking.

For that reason, I have brought forward legislation to criminalise the purchase of sexual services. Under the provisions of the new Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Bill, it will be an offence for a person to engage in sexual activity with a prostitute. A direct way of combating this form of exploitation, and reducing the toll of human misery that results from trafficking, is to send the message to those who pay for them, that their behaviour is unacceptable and contributes to the exploitation of other people.

The introduction of this Bill is just one of the 65 actions I mentioned earlier contained in this new Plan. I am pleased to be able to confidently state that the publication of this Plan today is an important step in the fight against human trafficking, a serious abuse of human rights and an affront to the dignity of the human person.

It should never be tolerated.

As I have said this is not a fight that I, or any of us, can win alone. We must continue to work together.

I want to leave you with our core message - Don't close your eyes to human trafficking; know the signs.

Thank you

Frances Fitzgerald TD

Frances Fitzgerald TD is Tánaiste and Minister for Justice and Equality.

Contact

If you have questions, contact us.

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