Changes in the perception of children and adolescents on human trafficking in Serbia

- Comparative analysis of four public opinion polls NGO ASTRA -

Introduction

The issue of keeping the broadest public informed about the concept and the problem of human trafficking has always been the focal point of ASTRA, because it sets the principal guidelines for the development of other activities. In that sense, the children and the young are the most interesting, as a heterogeneous group, being the most common target of human traffickers. In the period March 2002 – 2012, by means of ASTRA SOS Hotline, a total of 395 victims of human trafficking were identified, 140 (37%) of whom were children. Out of the total number of identified female victims of human trafficking, 133 (38.89%) accounted for girls who were underage at the time the exploitation occurred. Over 70% of the children who were involved in the chain of human trafficking were exposed to sexual exploitation, as the most widespread form of exploitation both in Serbia and globally. The child victims of human trafficking are being recruited by persons trusted by the child (62.69%), usually by persons who should be their caretakers (35.23%). Serbia is by far the most frequent country of origin for the child victims of human trafficking, with 91% (131 children) identified victims originating from Serbia. More than a half of the identified children were exploited in Serbia, whereas in 47% of the cases the entire process, from recruiting to exploitation of a minor, took place in Serbia. The average age of the child victims identified over the past ten years is approximately 15 years (14.83%).

For the purpose of this article, the aim is to compare the results of the public opinion polls conducted by ASTRA for a number of years, for various needs and on different samples. The analysis is based on the comparative analysis of four researches,
conducted between 2002 and 2008. The analysis involved researches “Sex trafficking – our reality or a problem of others” from 2002, “Secondary school pupils in Serbia – human trafficking, the internet, specific needs and problems in use” from 2006, the third is an overview of data collected from evaluations of preventive educational workshops during the academic year 2007/2008 and the fourth is the public opinion poll on the problem of human trafficking, from 2008. The data obtained in the latest research refer exclusively to the opinions of the young, aged between 11 and 19, on the understanding of the problem of human trafficking. The aim was to compare the comparable results of the research in order to obtain a comprehensive landscape of the level of information among the young on the problem of human trafficking, and to put emphasis on the most frequent form of human trafficking both in Serbia and worldwide – human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The analysis attempts to find out whether and to what extent the attitudes of the young change over the years.

Comparative analysis

The results of the poll indicate that the young are largely familiar with the problem of human trafficking (according to the research conducted in 2002, 97.8% of the respondents answered positively, and 98.8% respectively, according to the research conducted in 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you heard of human trafficking? 200</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asked whether they believed human trafficking existed in Serbia, a considerable number of young people were not sure (30.8%), which can be accounted for by the fact that the presence of this problem in our country was not as yet much talked about at that time. Intensified activities with the young over the next few years resulted in 97.5% respondents answering the same question affirmatively¹, while in 2007 this figure was 93%, with only 1 percent of those who said they were not sure.

According to the poll results, as of 2007, there has been a downward trend in the levels of information regarding the presence of human trafficking in Serbia (79% affirmative answers and 16% unsure in 2008). However, this outcome can be explained by the fact that the 2007 research contained evaluation data from educational workshops, while the research conducted in 2008 was a public opinion poll.

¹ It must be noted that in the research conducted in 2006, the offered answers to the question "Is there human trafficking in Serbia?" were only yes or no, so that the answer "I am not sure" does not exist.
What young people understand under the term human trafficking can be an indicator of insufficient knowledge about the problem and various forms of human trafficking. They most frequently associated human trafficking to abductions (as many as 30% in the 2008 poll), or exploitation (predominantly sexual) and prostitution, whereas 7, or 6% of adolescents defined human trafficking as a horrible or evil thing, the worst possible thing. A relatively high percentage of responses were vague, such as “crime”, “business” or “trading in people”.

In 2002, when asked whether there is a law banning human trafficking in our country, 18.7% of the respondents answered affirmatively, 8.8% said no, while 70.3% were not sure. In 2008, the percentage of affirmative responses rose to 71%, with 5% negative and 24% of those who were unsure.

It is evident that the number of respondents whose answers were negative did not change considerably (it dropped from 8.8% in 2002 to 5% in 2008). The drastic increase of affirmative responses and the decrease of those who were unsure in 2008 was the result of year-long activities and campaigns directed at informing the young, and also a more marked (though still insufficient) presence of this topic in the media.
Asked who can become a victim of human trafficking, the young readily mentioned the children (42%), then women (26.5%), everybody (15%) and young people (6.5%) (according to the 2006 poll). This research can be complemented with facts from the following years, when the figure referring to the attitude that the victims of human trafficking are usually young women and children (24% in 2007) is particularly prominent. Recognizing sexual exploitation as the dominant form of human trafficking also bears on the perception of the young as to who the victims could be. Namely, a high percentage of respondents said that those were women and children (nearly 2/3 of respondents in 2006), while the low perception of men as potential victims can be accounted for by the general identification of the term human trafficking with sexual exploitation, and also by the traditional views that male persons cannot be victims of sexual violence.

However, asked whether they or people close to them could become victims of human trafficking, nearly one half (47.8%) answered negatively. The fact that the young do not perceive themselves as potential victims can be explained by the fact that opinions are often expressed of the victims being naive and gullible. A research of the above mentioned stereotypes revealed that nearly a half (46.6%) of the respondents agree with this statement. The stereotype on the gullibility and naivety of the victims can be indicative of the reason why the young do not perceive themselves or persons close to them as potential victims. It should be noted that the prejudice is still widespread that the victims are to blame for what happened to them (15.4% in 2002, a percentage which rose to 18.5% in 2007).
By comparing and contrasting these five researches conducted over a nine-year period, it is possible to trace back data on how informed the young were concerning the issue of human trafficking. The results from 2002 are particularly significant, because, regardless of the high percentage of those who were familiar with the issue of human trafficking, many responded with “I don't know” or “I am not sure” to questions about the presence of human trafficking in Serbia and the laws banning it. The results indicate a low level of awareness concerning these problems in Serbia. Compared to 2002, a general improvement in recognizing this problem in Serbia is perceivable. In 2006, nearly 100% of the respondents were informed about the presence of the problem of human trafficking. The percentage of those who are aware of human trafficking in Serbia is markedly high, with 70% of the respondents being informed about the existing law banning human trafficking. Human trafficking is related to exploitation in general, and often to the abduction and trading in people as a commodity.

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of the research into which categories are perceived as the victims of human trafficking shows that these are primarily children, followed by women. Furthermore, it clearly reveals that anybody can become a victim of human trafficking, regardless of their background. However, stereotypes are still present about victims being naive and gullible women and children: a typical victim is a woman or a
girl, who, in an attempt to escape poverty and live better, got trapped into a chain of sexual exploitation by responding to a fake business proposal or advertisement. A far lower percentage of respondents are aware of the possibility of recruiting men, recruiting by persons familiar to the victim or of domestic violence as an important ‘push factor’\(^2\). The lack of understanding of the core of the problem is particularly conspicuous in answers to the questions concerning the issue of culpability of the victims for the situation they are in, and also that of their criminal accountability. On one hand, this is not surprising, bearing in mind that sexual exploitation is recognized as a dominant form of exploitation of victims. Namely, criminal offences with elements of sexual violence are often stigmatized, despite the fact that the responses to the other questions in the poll indicate that the children and the young in Serbia are all the better informed about what human trafficking actually is.

The results of these public polls should be taken into account in creating future strategies, as well as campaigns aimed at informing children and adolescents primarily, and awareness raising about all forms of exploitation that are present in our region, new ways of recruiting, new destinations – human trafficking is a dynamic phenomenon which is constantly changing, so as to ensure high profits. Nurturing stereotypes can by no means contribute to its successful suppression.

---

\(^2\) A ‘push factor’ is every negative condition or circumstance encouraging people to alter their situation, especially in terms of migration.