**Joint meeting – 9th July 2018, 5pm, Committee Room 2**

**Parliamentary Attendees:** Baroness Butler-Sloss, Vernon Coaker MP, Rupa Huq MP, Lord Dholakia, Desmond Swayne MP, Lord McColl, Sarah Champion MP

1. **Introductions**

Baroness Butler-Sloss welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the purpose of the meeting was to discuss children’s pathways into modern slavery with a particular focus on the vulnerability of street children; as well as the key barriers to child victims of trafficking accessing support.

1. **Panel Presentations**

James Simmonds-Read (The Children’s Society) spoke of the importance of not working in silos, and the need to see children as individuals with complex needs. He highlighted a number of trends which the Children’s Society has identified in their work, including Vietnamese boys becoming homeless prior to their exploitation; young people from Albania experiencing domestic abuse which creates vulnerabilities; children from Morocco lacking secure immigration status and being moved from country to country around Europe; and British children (often with learning disabilities) exploited in ‘county lines’ cases suffering physical and sexual abuse.

He spoke of the need to improve the support which is offered to child victims in the UK, and a more comprehensive, trauma- and gender-informed approach with better information sharing between agencies working with the child. He identified several features of what a new, improved system would involve, including properly funded community services; long-term status for those referred into the NRM; involving the young people in developing safety plans; and wider support networks. He also highlighted the need to improve identification of child victims, as well as the need to talk to children about the risks of exploitation and offer real alternatives and long-term prospects.

DS Paul Smith (Met Police, Missing Person Unit, Croydon) said that in Croydon alone there are 4,272 missing people, 70% were children, the majority of whom are in some form of exploitation. He spoke of his experience dealing with cases of child sexual exploitation and county lines. He highlighted 2 cases studies: one involving a young girl groomed by an older man to sell drugs who was then sexually exploited; the other involving a young boy who joined a gang and was faced by extreme violence, was rescued, entered the NRM, but has since returned to selling drugs.

From these case studies he identified several problems with the current support for child victims in the UK. Firstly, the safe accommodation provided to young people by local authorities is expensive but offers little by way of support; more is needed in terms of counselling and therapy for those who have been exploited. Secondly, the NRM fails children and helps neither the child nor the local authority, in particular because it does not facilitate effective intelligence sharing.

Chloe Setter (ECPAT UK) said that ECAPT are currently chairing a Home Office review of the NRM for children, which will look only at the process rather than the support. She explained that the problem with the current NRM is that is bypasses the mainstream child protection system and the two systems do not communicate with each other. The NRM therefore cannot act as a gateway to support.

She highlighted the benefits of referring a child to the NRM: data, legal aid, Independent Child Trafficking Advocates (in certain areas), it can help prevent a child victim from being prosecuted or help build prosecutions against traffickers (though a clear policy to strengthen these functions is not currently in place). However, the impact of a negative decision (and there are problems with decision-making) on the child can be significant – for example, it can cause a child to be prosecuted or refused asylum. No other form of child abuse is determined in this way. After the conclusive grounds decision there is no further support and so little prevention of re-trafficking.

She spoke about the lack of understanding and adequate response from local authorities. According to ECPAT UK’s research many Local Authorities are unaware how many child victims are in their area, and many others said they had no child victims in their area. The necessary data isn’t being accurately recorded.

She provided a case study of a Vietnamese victim of trafficking who was brought to the UK as an orphan aged 10 and exploited in a cannabis farm. When he reached 17½ years he applied for asylum which was refused. The case demonstrated that the battle many victims of trafficking face is with the State. Children need the NRM to lead to specialist support and accommodation and a durable solution in terms of leave to remain, as called for by the EU Directive on trafficking. ECPAT and others are calling for children to be given indefinite leave to remain where that is in their best interests.

Caroline Ford (Consortium for Street Children) spoke of the overlap between issues impacting street children and modern slavery/human trafficking. Street children are the most vulnerable and forgotten children. She highlighted the importance of ensuring that street children are included within the anti-trafficking agenda and the work done internationally to prevent exploitation. There are several factors which lead to children becoming homeless and therefore vulnerable: poverty, weak social protection systems, discrimination and exclusion, broken connections to family/community. It is essential also to consider the vulnerability of children who end up on the street after they escape exploitation.

She highlighted a key problem being a lack of consistent data gathering, meaning that nobody knows how many street children there are. They face discrimination and exclusion on the streets and will often deliberately evade authorities for their own safety. Modern slavery victims are also likely to hide from the authorities for fear of criminal or immigration repercussions. There is a need to find effective counting mechanisms for those children who actively seek to avoid contact with authorities. There is also a need to avoid criminalising children and to recognise their need for support and rehabilitation.

She spoke of the importance of birth registration and legal ID, as well as access to education, to ensure that all children have access to services to reduce their vulnerability to trafficking.

Caroline urged parliamentarians to contact the Consortium for Street Children before any overseas visit so that they can be informed of the key issues in-country and so that they can ask questions of parliamentary colleagues and governments. A briefing paper summarising the issues raised in this presentation was distributed to attendees.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Lynne Morris (Toybox) provided 2 case studies from Toybox’s work in Guatemala and Bolivia which demonstrated the relationship between modern slavery and street connections: the first case study focused on a child who transitioned from the streets into slavery (a street child who was forced into selling glue and commercial sexual exploitation at the age of 10), and the second focused on a child who transitioned from slavery to the streets (a girl who was trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation between the ages of 15 and 17, resulting in pregnancy and movement onto the streets).

She explained that the case studies demonstrated the need for a holistic approach to helping children on the street and modern slavery victims, as the causes and factors that result in children being in these circumstances are often the same. She reiterated the importance of securing legal identity documentation (such as a birth certificates) for street children so that they can escape exploitation and access vital services, such as education, counselling and family support services. Fuller recommendations for policymakers are set out in Toybox’s recent report, ‘Slavery on the Streets’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Peter Fahy (Retrak/Hope For Justice) explained that Retrak have recently merged with Hope for Justice because of the strong link between street children and slavery. He spoke about the factors which lead children to become homeless, including pressure on families to send children into domestic work, poverty, and weak social support structures. He highlighted the strong desire from people to come to the UK for a better life and governments encouraging their citizens to go abroad to send money back home, both of which increase children’s vulnerability to trafficking. Children on the streets are often treated as criminals or vermin and rounded up by the authorities; however, as demonstrated by the high profile child abuse scandals that have occurred in the UK, a key lesson is that a child cannot choose to be exploited— child protection systems must be put in place by the State.

He also underlined that identification documents are essential to allow children to access services and to enable relevant agencies to share information in order to safeguard children. Coordination between State agencies, NGOs, local groups, faith communities and businesses is essential to raise awareness and support communities at risk. There is also a need for more safe places for care, counselling and education; he recommended that States work together to create an international network of safe places offering rehabilitation and reintegration. Economic strengthening at the local level, capacity building and initiatives to disrupt supply chains are extremely important. It is a reality that some children do need to work, but as part of that reality they must have a right to education. Finally, there is a need for better police training to avoid criminalisation and mistreatment of children who have been exploited.

1. **Discussion**

Lord Dholakia asked what can be done to raise the profile of the problem internationally, particularly in light of the upcoming CPA and IPA conferences. He also raised a number of issues including the need to identify examples of good practice in crisis situations and the need to monitor and evaluate progress. Caroline Ford said that the international standards which currently exist are good, they just need to be implemented and adhered to. She also recommended not dividing children into silos as they are each complex individual cases. James Simmonds-Read agreed that the EU Directive has a lot of useful tools in it, for example regarding leave to remain. He underlined the importance of secure immigration status as important to provide a sense of safety and stressed that children should be granted leave when it is in their best interests.

Molly Hodson (International Justice Mission) stressed the importance of ensuring that the rule of law is enforced: when traffickers are successfully prosecuted there is a reduction in the number of people exploited. She spoked of IJM’s work in Cebu in the Philippines which saw a 79% reduction in the number of children in brothels in the space of 4 years.

Lord McColl thanked Chloe Setter for her years of hard work with ECPAT UK and wished her all the best in her new role with Lumos.

**Meeting ends**

1. Consortium for Street Children, ‘Tackling Slavery on the Streets’, available online at: <https://www.streetchildrenresources.org/resources/tackling-modern-slavery-on-the-street-briefing-paper/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Toybox, ‘Slavery on the Streets: Exploring the links between modern slavery and children in street situations’, available online at: <https://toybox.org.uk/assets/downloads/slavery-and-the-streets.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)