

## **Transcript of Speech by Panelist Bernadette Nyamekye, SOLWODI, Germany (Video Statement)**

Hello, good afternoon, my name is Bernadette Nyamekye, I am a social worker working with SOLWODI. Solwodi is an NGO which works with women who are victims of human trafficking and other gender-based violence. Today, I would be presenting human trafficking in the COVID-19 pandemic and I would introduce how we in Solwodi were able to work with that during this period.

Now, the COVID-19 pandemic and human trafficking together has been described as a crisis within a crisis. This is because the pandemic has caused existing structural gaps in the anti-trafficking systems all over the country. Many of our specialized counselling centers were restricted in their ability to provide services to clients. Some of them had to be closed, many were unprepared to move their operations off-site. Many safe houses were closed or they had outbreaks and as a result of that also had to be closed or were not able to take new occupants.

However, we were able to be part of the COVID-19 Project of the Council of Europe, where we worked with clients during this pandemic. The COVID-19 project provided funding for us during this time period and as part of the project we had data collection on gender-specific impacts of COVID-19 on victims of human trafficking, we were able to promote the rights of victims, and prevent further victimization as well as provide public awareness on the COVID-19.

If you need more information, you can visit the link included.

Now, with financial support from the Council of Europe, we were able to provide financial aid to clients. This was in the form of shopping vouchers, we were able to pay for translation costs, legal fees, provision of telecommunication gadgets, because many of the clients did not have smart phones during this time, as well as other sanitation items.

We were able to provide information about the COVID-19 pandemic as well as its prevention.

And in cooperation with other anti-trafficking operators in Germany, we were able to analyze all our findings and put it into a report. I will include a link to the report and you can read it at your convenience.

Now, I would present a case study that I worked on during this pandemic to illustrate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on human trafficking:

Now Mrs. V. is a client and she grew up in Congo. She was orphan at a young age and experienced a lot of gender-based violence. She was a victim to a human trafficking who brought her to Germany and forced her into prostitution. She was able to escape and sought for asylum. Since 2019, sorry end of 2019 she has been in our counseling and we have been able to support her. Now, because of the COVID-19 pandemic she was not able to get any social support in Germany. She only speaks Lingala and some French, she does not speak the German language. We were able to provide psychosocial support for her as well as help her in her dealings with various governmental organizations. She, as a result of her trauma, she needed medical support as well as psychological care. We were able to get her into contact with a psychologist, but also because of the COVID pandemic many psychologists were not taking new clients. So, she was able to have just one appointment to date. Additionally, during this pandemic period, she received a negative decision on her asylum application and is threatened with deportation back to Congo. We were able to help her with funding from the COVID-19 project of the Council of Europe to help her to find legal counsel and to make payments as well. We were able to provide a smart phone for her so that she could contact

us and we were able to have online counselling sessions. We were able to apply for safe accommodation for her from the city of Bonn, and also to help with information about the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now, the questions that we usually get is how we get in touch with our clients. AS a result OF the banning of prostitution, many of our clients had no work, they had no place to live and had no financial support. So many of them were interested in exiting prostitution during this COVID, pandemic time. We also had contacts from the police, because, of course, there was an increase in gender-based violence during this time. We had calls from hospitals as well as other counselling centers. We had contacts through safe houses, as well as self-initiated contacts from clients. Now, we were able to keep in contact with our clients by changing our mode of operation. We had an increase in online counselling sessions, we involved the services of online translation services, so that we could talk to clients who did not speak English or German, there were conference calls, increase in conference calls, the use of WhatsApp, we were able to find safe accommodation for our clients by finding hostels or hotels for them to stay in. There was an increase, of course, in financial aid applications by "Jobcenter" or "Sozialamt". Increase in searches for job trainings, as well as more welfare-checks to find out about clients who we knew were working in the prostitution and if they were ok and if they needed any support from us.

Like I said before, there had been an increase in clients who were exiting prostitution during this time. And this affected them very negatively, because in addition to the COVID pandemic and the fears that it comes with, they also experienced financial hardship. Many of them were living on the premises of brothels and when the brothels were closed, they had to leave. And so we had to had an increase search for accommodation for them.

Now, like I said before, there was a lot of need for application pf financial aid during this time. However, this was sometimes very difficult, because many of our clients were not registered in the cities in which they lived in. They had no documents or they had no registration. Many of them also had little to no formal education and in the job search, for example, it is always very difficult, you cannot put prostitution as a former job that the person has done, so this was a hindrance to us. However, we were able to help our clients find trainings and those who lacked documents applied for documents to embassies as well as liaison with government authorities to help in this regard.

Now we have some recommendations, that will improve work with women trafficking.

There first and most important thing is accommodation. We realized that as a result of the banning of prostitution, especially, many of our victims of human trafficking were without accommodation. Also, it is important when police rescues victims of human trafficking that they get safe places where they don't have to worry and where they can be stabilized.

It is very important that the access to financial aid is made easier for clients, especially those who are non-EU-citizens. Access to social benefits for third nationals should really be facilitated.

There should be better access to health care, especially to psychological care, as well as better legal and residential protection for victims of human trafficking. During the stabilization period, it's important that financial aid is guaranteed.

It's also important that gender-specific work during this time especially with victims of human trafficking is pandemic-tailored.

With more funding for specialized counselling centers and training especially for social workers doing street work or outreach programs.

Thank you very much for your attention, bye bye.

*(Unverified transcript by Caroline Sander (GGMH). Do not quote)*