

Transcript of Speech by Panelist Malaika Oringo, Footsteps to Freedom and Member of the OSCE/ODIHR International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council (Netherlands)

I apologize for my long biography, but as you know as a survivor it's kind of a journey to build up on the efforts that one has contributed towards the fight against human trafficking. I'd like to thank all the former speakers for the good points that they raised, that of course some of them that I was supposed to say that is good they were already highlighted. But before I am going to that, I would like to extend my thanks to the organizers of this conference and also OSZE and ODIHR to give us, we survivors, the agency and the platform to amplify our voices on the issues related to human trafficking. And also, I would like to thank my colleagues, the ISTAC members who are currently watching for standing up on their mission to end human trafficking and those ones who represented us yesterday. Today I am going to bring in or reflect more on the promising practices on the side of the civil society and survivor-led initiatives in addressing all forms of human trafficking and during COVID-19. But before I am going to that I would like to also highlight on what an important role the civil society is doing in regards to preventing human trafficking also especially during the COVID-19. I know, or we all know that from the past speakers that civil society has played a vital role in the fight against human trafficking. They've made *[relentless]* efforts in providing assistance and helping survivors before and during the pandemic. Whether by raising awareness about human trafficking, by empowering survivors who have been *[working]* during the pandemic, by assisting in identifying victims and survivors, by working with the law enforcement in investigating cases, by advocating, but also by participating in research. As, earlier Maximilian has explained, it says that survivors were kind of contributing to the research. Although of their *[lengthy]* support, they have been kind of offering only support on a low budget, or they have not been recognized so much for their effort, but although their little bit of funding, they have been able to provide shelters, legal aid, psychological support. But what I am going to focus on today is one of the best practices that I have seen during the pandemic that is really very significant, that is providing a non-discriminatory reflection shelter or exit program for women who want to exit prostitution. The reflection centers are a short stay with a safe environment for women to kind of have this quest to reflex on their lives or choices they want to make without being coerced by their pimps and also doing this in a place where social workers are invited or to support them in their journey with making a choice. As we know and we all can acknowledge that human trafficking is flourishing in the sex industry. And the trafficking of women into the sex industry is primarily to the countries in which prostitution and the provision of other sexual services are culturally correlated or legal. What I will *[doubt]* is that these services available for the women into the sex industry are kind of encouraging them to stay safe and conformable while working in prostitution. Unfortunately, it's a good gesture, however all these service dimensions we have seen, they have not been kind of all comprehensive. We know that a lot of women in the sex industry are facing a lot of violence. Today, over 73% of women who are working in prostitution are reported for having subjected to physical aggression while working in prostitution. 62% of women in prostitution are reported to have been raped. So, looking at those statistics, you see, there is a need for an alternative. We cannot force women to get out of prostitution, but we can give them, we can make the provision of shelters and other programs accessible for them, to make it easy to make a decision. Here in the Netherlands, the government founded the exit program during the COVID-19, however it was a bit limited and discriminatory. It became clear during the

COVID-19 when the red light district was closed that a lot of women did not fit in these criteria of the government grant. It brought a lot of chaos, that women became homeless with no income. What was kind of the criteria to get the grant for the women was that the women should have been registered as freelancers, sex workers... they should have a social number. Already this categorizing, or putting condition on the support, made it... eliminated a lot of women, especially migrant sex workers, non-documented sex workers, also women who are under control of their pimps. It was very difficult for them to access these services. Hence, the availability of this non-discriminatory reflection was very vital in this point because a lot of women did not fit in the government effort. But then the NGOs came up with these reflection shelters. Unfortunately, they were too crowded, they did not have enough funding to kind of accommodate the number of women that needed this support. I want to reflect on a story of one of the women I have been working with before and during the pandemic. Part of my work is to work as a mentor, be a mentor with women working in the red-light district. With my work I meet a lot of women from different walks of life and we kind of share – since I am a survivor of human trafficking, or sex trafficking – I share my journey with them to give them a glimpse of hope that if they get the right support, if they make the right choice, there is this light at the end of the tunnel. There is this interesting lady, Brazilian lady from Colombia, she went into prostitution when she was 13. And when I met her she was already 45, so you can imagine how many years she was bonded in prostitution. She shared her journey with me on how she has been sold across Europe from one pimp to another, but the minute she got her freedom, she went to register as a freelancer sex worker, because to her that was freedom. Unfortunately, she was too broken to be free. She was already a drug addict and also addicted to alcohol, that it was very difficult for her even to generate income from the sex service. As we know, actually even where I live it's kind of cheaper for a sex worker to pay rent for a window, is between 60 to 80 Euros to some cities where it's 100 or 100+. So, it had to take her to have 4 clients a day just to pay rent. But some seasons were so bad that she ended up to be indebted with the brothel owner. Kind of the brothel owner became the pimp, because she was so indebted that she had to pay the money back. But unfortunately, the things became so bad that she wanted to step out. Why I am reading the story out – she did not fit in the criteria for the government to take her in because she did not pay taxes for the last 5 years and she did not pay insurance. And one of these criteria is, you need to have them in order to come into the government shelters. What I experienced was watching this woman coming into our drop-in center speaking on her terms that: I think, I am tired, I need to step out... She had to sort her thoughts, and there was no kind of in-between support that fits her kind of situation. Of course, after a long time of struggling, the reflection shelters came up and they took her in. But one thing that came apparent to me was that when I was working with these women, I realized that you need to step away from danger for you to understand how dangerous the situation is. It's only that you are not in this small window, that you are in a different environment that you can be able to reflect and make other choices. And if the only provision of government shelters have so many conditions, it limits a lot of women who might use these services. My colleagues have mentioned about second-generation support. One of the reasons why, the lady I was speaking about was really stuck in for a really time although she wanted to step out was that the daughter was in the university. She was almost getting into the university and she really wanted the daughter to graduate. So, she kept in the prostitution because she wanted to see the daughter graduate so that she can step out. Unfortunately, the season got so bad and I realized that the daughter joined her to work in prostitution. When I met her I was so heartbroken because she says "I am here for a

season of work, I am going to work for 6 months and then I am going to be able to raise the money because my mom cannot raise money anymore, to go back to school". Two years later she is still stuck, she never went back. Because once you enter it's very difficult to get out. So, second-generation support is really important. Helping these women who are having children. To help them not only to prevent this intergeneration vulnerability to prostitution, but also to kind of lessen the burden that pushes them into prostitution.

There is another good practice I want to heap on; is to create a safe space for survivors that are undocumented. These are for *[foreign]* victims. When all the efforts came up, they were really focusing on nationals or women who have got social number or for women who have gotten in the system. But then the biggest crisis fell on the many undocumented migrant survivors. All attention was driven to the women who were working in the brothels. Actually, they were exposed to gender-based violence and at the same time they went on the ground and were going to do illegal prostitution. So, creating a safe space where survivors could meet, discuss issues, support themselves, especially mentoring, share coping strategies is very significant.

But before I step out, I want to mention also about one of the stakeholders that needs to be acknowledged that are survivor-led initiatives. Because they are vital in leading solutions, because they know first-hand what survivors need and actually, their passion that led them into being part of the movement is now to make sure that all other survivors have their right services and the resources that they need.

I'll share a proverb that is:

"Until the lions have their own historian, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter."

That is Chinua Achebe, an African poet. That poem resonated with me so much with the idea of survivor-led initiative. If we do not include or work with survivors, their narrative or their needs are misrepresented. So, even in the situation of COVID, it was very imperative to work with survivors, who have not only stepped out of prostitution or different other forms of prostitution to be part of the exit programs because they really understand what other survivors need. And also, without the survivor narrative or input we would not know if our shelters and services are called the standards and *[excellents]* that are culturally-competent and trauma-informed. With this having been said, it's quite clear that survivors are the most significant stakeholders in the fight against human trafficking. They are the engine behind the right intervention, the right policies. I want to highlight a few organizations that are survivor-led, they are doing a great job:

The Survivor Alliance that is uniting and empowering survivors to take the frontline.

The National Survivor Network in Cameroon, they use the empowerment model to break the cycle of human trafficking.

Of course, Footprints to Freedom, the foundation that I lead, they give survivors the agency, the voice and also the skills they need to impact and also make a difference.

As a survivor myself, I think there is nothing that is a greater burden than a victim carrying the untold story inside them. And a lot of survivors don't get the right stage to share that story. So, survivors need not only survivor-led organizations, but they need the stage and inclusion from different organizations to support their voices so that they can amplify their needs. I want to shout out or highlight one of our members from ISTAC; Kendall [Alaimo] started a project to create seats for survivors of human trafficking in the universities.

Because, of course, education is freedom. Most survivors do not get the chance to get to go to school because they are busy surviving. And there are not so many scholarships that support these survivors. And if we want to engage survivors, we want to have the intention,

we need to invest in their personal growth and their intellectuality because we cannot get kind of quality or intellectual input from survivors If we do not invest into their education or their skills. With that I also want to highlight that despite all the efforts that survivors are putting in place, there is still a deficit in survivor engagement as partners, as employees, as consultants, as researchers. We need to shift away from the traditional way of supporting survivors. Anna mentioned something very important: if we only support survivors that they can depend on our services, they remain vulnerable. Empowerment comes with giving them the power and the agency to be part of the solution. And this is a call to action to whoever, all stakeholders around the world who are engaged to end human trafficking, that we can no longer talk about working towards freedom and [...] without walking alongside, *[lived]* experience and giving them the support they need to kind of get involved in the fight against human trafficking. Thank you!

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