

JERICHO sheds light on the sexual exploitation of minors across Europe

Over 100 professionals working with children attended the hybrid conference **"Breaking the Silence: Uniting Efforts to Address the Sexual Exploitation of Minors"** hosted by KMOP in collaboration with Pistes-Solidaires, HOME MEITIS, and CESIE ETS, on January 28 at Mundo Madou in Brussels.

Representatives from European Commission, policymakers and professionals from across Europe took center stage in conversations addressing the pressing issue of the sexual exploitation of minors in prostitution and exploring innovative ways to combat it.

The conversations highlighted key findings from national reports in France, Italy, and Greece, identifying several contributing factors to the exploitation of minors. These findings emphasize critical issues that need to be addressed:

- Socio-economic vulnerabilities: Poverty, unemployment, and unstable living conditions increase the risk of exploitation.
- Lack of awareness: Limited understanding of the dangers and signs of exploitation among both minors and their communities.
- Fear of judgment: Victims are often reluctant to report abuse due to stigma and fear of societal judgment.
- Low literacy levels: Limited education restricts open discussions and hinders access to information on protection measures.
- Stereotypes and systemic barriers: Discrimination and stereotypes contribute to the marginalization of disadvantaged youth, increasing their vulnerability.
- Fragmented policies: Inconsistent or poorly implemented policies at the national and regional levels weaken protective systems.

These findings illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of the issue and emphasize the need for a more coordinated and holistic approach to tackling the sexual exploitation of minors into prostitution.

Among the invited speakers was Ms. Zsuzsanna Felkai Janssen, Team Leader at the **European Commission's EU Anti-Trafficking Coordination Unit**, who provided valuable insights on the European Union's efforts to address this issue. As she pointed out, regarding child trafficking in 2021-2022, 81% of the child victims were EU citizens (2401 children) and 88% of them (2120 children) were exploited in their own Member State. Children in the EU are trafficked for all forms of exploitation, but mainly for sexual exploitation reasons. However, the real number of child victims of exploitation remains unknown and might be underreported.



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Other notable speakers included Pierre Trbovic, Programs Coordinator at Défense des Enfants International – Belgique and ECPAT Belgium, Aziz Essadek, a researcher specialising in the sexual exploitation of minors in France, and Barbara Maculan, President of Equality Cooperativa Sociale in Italy. They discussed the challenges faced by policymakers, social workers, and law enforcement.

A particularly impactful segment of the event was the presentation of results from workshops conducted with teenagers, offering a rare glimpse into their lived experiences and ideas for effective prevention strategies. These youth-centred insights emphasized the importance of including young voices in the design and implementation of preventing measures.

Together, we can continue to break the silence and take collective action to protect the most vulnerable members of our society.

