

The National Herald

AGAPW Forum on Human Trafficking Illuminates a Dark Topic

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Special to The National Herald



NEW YORK – The Association of Greek American Professional Women (AGAPW) and the Center for International Human Rights of John Jay College presented a Forum on Human Trafficking on Monday, February 24.

The forum featured a panel discussion that was preceded by the UNICEF film “Not My Life” which “depicts the scourge of human trafficking on a global scale. Filmed on five continents in a dozen countries, Not My Life takes viewers into a world where millions of children are exploited through practices including forced labor, domestic servitude, begging, sex tourism and child soldiering, according to UNICEF.



George Andreopoulos, Professor of Political Science and Criminal Justice, CUNY; Director, Center for International Human Rights, John Jay College, Jennifer Chan (L), Program Officer for the End Trafficking project of the US Fund for UNICEF, and Dorota Gierycz, Ph.D.(R) Human rights scholar, University of Vienna; Webster University and European Peace University and the Center for International Human Rights, John Jay College.

The purpose of such events is to provide people with information that will enable them to speak out pressure their governments to take action. The spirit of the event was summarized by a young

person in the film who said “I cannot live a good life when other people are living like animals, not because I can a good person but because they are human beings like me. “

One of the stories was that of Grace from Uganda, who told of her horrific experience as a child soldier, saying, “Marching into the Sudan was like marching into a grave.” She said the dehumanization process that facilitates the exploitation of children often began with their being ordered to shoot their own parents.

The conditions compelled some children to kill themselves with the weapons they were give.

She was one of the lucky ones. After being kidnapped from a church school for girls she managed to escape after a year and now devotes herself helping other children escape from their hell and working to stop the evil.



Katerina Stefanatou, UNICEF Global Citizenship fellow at the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, was the moderator.

Katerina Stefanatou, UNICEF Global Citizenship fellow at the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, was the moderator at the New Building of John Jay College and introduced the panelists who included George Andreopoulos, Professor of Political Science and Criminal Justice, CUNY; Director, Center for International Human Rights, John Jay College, Jennifer Chan, Program Officer for the End Trafficking project of the US Fund for UNICEF, and Dorota Gierycz, Ph.D. Human rights scholar, University of Vienna; Webster University and European Peace University and the Center for International Human Rights, John Jay College.

Gierycz began with an overview of Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) and how it differs from other criminal activities, such as smuggling in persons, or illegal migration. She talked about the international legal framework (focusing on the Palermo Protocol) aimed at combating THB and the difficulties in its implementation. She believes a human rights approach, as opposed to a law-enforcement paradigm is the best way to fight THB.

The essence of the crime is that the mistreatment of the victims goes far beyond exploitation as low wage employees under harsh conditions. These people, especially the children, have lost

control of their lives. Because their lives are difficult to distinguish from those of illegal migrants, and live in conditions that fosters behavior like petty crime, local law enforcement lose sight of the fact that evils lurks: the enslavement of human beings.

Jennifer Chan introduced the work of UNICEF which, according to its website “works in 190 countries and territories to save and improve children’s lives by providing health care and immunizations, clean water and sanitation, nutrition, education, emergency relief and more. In partnership with development partners, governments and NGOs, UNICEF also works on all aspects of anti trafficking responses including prevention, protection, and prosecution.”

Chan described the two pillars of efforts to combat THB, first the promotion of birth registration and issuing of identification documents, second the broader efforts that help strengthen families through education and training so that crushing socio-economic circumstances don’t cause relatives to traffic their children.

They also work with local elders and religious leaders to build up respect for childrens rights and fight against traditional prejudices, and to generally raise awareness in at-risk locations, for example, by warning people against believing the promises made by traffickers.

Professor Andreopoulos, focusing on the Balkans, critically examined the different approaches to combating human trafficking such as: law enforcement, human rights, migration and economic.

He stressed the powerful economic forces driving the phenomenon – Interpol estimates its annual worth at \$19 billion but other groups place it as high as \$31 billion and made the point that the victims are typically “people with no options,” and said the challenge is “How do you empower people to have credible options in their lives.”

Andreopoulos, briefly touched upon the situation in Greece and mentioned the importance of the work by groups like Klimaka. He and other speakers spoke of the negative impact of the Greek economic crisis on THB efforts and said that that law enforcement officials in Greece are so hard pressed to maintain basic safety in the streets, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are so stressed in their efforts to fight homelessness that THB cannot be properly addressed.

While Andreopoulos said “there is no magic bullet” for eradicating the scourge of THB, more can be done, for example, airlines can look out for signs of sex tourism and Chan said people can visit www.slaveryfootprint.com to learn about he forced labor and slavery components of the products they buy. People can visit ecpat.net to learn about fighting child trafficking and prostitution.

AGAPW founding president Olga Alexakos concluded the evening by thanking the panelists and the guests, including the consuls general of Greece and Cyprus, George Iliopoulos and Koula Sofianou. The latter announced that her government has announced a program to train its diplomatic corps to combat trafficking.