

Scrapping artiste visas is not enough

By Alexia Saoulli Cyprus Mail 19/9/08

ABOLISHING artiste visas will do little to combat the problem of human trafficking for sexual exploitation, the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) said yesterday.

Although MIGS welcomed the government decision to do away with special visas for cabaret women, it pointed out the decision failed to provide concrete solutions to the problem.

MIGS said the reform merely introduced a more uniform visa policy that effectively involved a change in terminology and the transfer of responsibility from the Interior Ministry to the Labour Ministry.

Under the new policy, visa procedures will be the same for all immigrants, with artistes no exception.

"They will be part of the workforce like all foreign workers, putting an end to their discrimination," the Interior Ministry has said.

But MIGS responded: "If the government's objective is to combat human trafficking effectively, particularly trafficking in women for sexual exploitation, the state must stop issuing visas to individuals – citizens of third countries – under any regime to work in high-risk areas."

According to Cyprus' report to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, centres are high-risk when they involve women's sexual exploitation, pushing them into prostitution and involving abuse of their human rights.

MIGS pointed out that the problem did not lie in the visa procedure, but in the demand for paid sex. The state essentially tolerated women trafficking for sexual exploitation, which in turn increased the demand for sex services, according to the institute's research.

The phenomenon of trafficking for sexual exploitation had taken on enormous proportions and the fact that the government's decision to abolish artiste visas did not combat human trafficking was particularly worrying, MIGS said.

But Interior Minister Neoklis Sylikiotis yesterday reiterated the government's commitment to cracking down on trafficking.

Speaking in Larnaca after the first part of the regional operational congress on combating human trafficking and money laundering in the Mediterranean, Sylikiotis said Cyprus was one of the few countries that had incorporated the Council of Europe Treaty on human trafficking in its legislation.

The minister said a working group was already dealing with the implementation of the treaty and that soon an action plan would be ready, which would include support and preventive measures.

Referring to the September 10 decision to abolish the artiste visa, he said: "I call it an artiste visa, because this phenomenon to have a separate visa for artiste activities occurred only in Cyprus."

He said the system was being exploited in Cyprus so that it appeared it supported human trafficking.

"The main point is that we do not just theoretically deplore this serious crime of contemporary slavery, but we also take measures to combat it," he said

The two-day congress, which began on Thursday, is organised by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, in co-operation with the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Unit for Combating Money Laundering (MOKAS).

Participating in the congress are also experts from 24 countries, mainly from the Mediterranean region.

The opening ceremony was addressed by Sylikiotis, Attorney-general Petros Clerides and OSCE Co-ordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities Bernard Snoy.

Copyright © Cyprus Mail 2008