



LA STRADA CZECH REPUBLIC CELEBRATES 15 YEARS OF SOS AND INFORMATION HOTLINES, LAUNCHES NEW CAMPAIGN „EVERY JOB HAS ITS VALUE“ TO SUPPORT EXPLOITED FOREIGNERS

PRAGUE, 6 October 2011 – 6794: this is the number of calls La Strada's SOS and Info hotlines have received from trafficked and exploited individuals, clients of women forced into prostitution and those wishing to avoid exploitation between 1996 (when the hotlines began) and June 2011. La Strada's clientele may have changed over the 15 years that these hotlines have been in operation, but the fact that people continue to work in slavery-like conditions in the Czech Republic has not. And it is exactly this group of people that La Strada is offering its services to through the campaign launched today.

Human trafficking and serious forms of exploitation in the labour market unfortunately in many cases remain hidden and go unpunished. „*The number of individuals convicted of sex trafficking each year can be counted on one hand; not more than twenty convictions are made per year. The Czech Republic has found itself the object of international criticism as, up until now, no one in this country has been found guilty of trafficking individuals with the purpose of forcing them into labour or other forms of exploitation*“ says Petra Kutálková, La Strada's assistant director. NGOs, however, estimate that hundreds of foreigners are systematically being exploited in the Czech Republic. These individuals, however, have difficulty having their rights upheld and many do not even realise that there are ways for them to seek justice.

It is La Strada's main goal to improve this situation through the campaign launched to celebrate 15 years of its SOS and INFO hotlines. „*La Strada's Info and SOS hotlines, which are both currently toll-free and offer regular consultation in four languages, bring us closer and closer to real people exploited not only in the sex business, but also elsewhere in the service sector and in other forms of employment,*“ says Ina Avramioti, head of the Info and SOS hotlines. „*Most often we receive calls from people who work in construction or cleaning services, but exploitation takes place in other sectors too; for example, in forestry, food production and seasonal work,*“ adds Kutálková.

Through the expanding number of services its Info and SOS hotlines offer, La Strada is reacting to the ever changing needs of trafficked and exploited persons. The human trafficking situation (and therefore the organisation's clientele) has changed a lot over the past 15 years. „*The initial impulse to prevent human trafficking in the Czech Republic began in 1989, when the first cases of Czech women being trafficked to Western countries for the purpose of prostitution emerged,*“ recalls Petra Kutálková when asked about the organization's origins. „*La Strada began in the Czech Republic thanks to the initiative of a number of Dutch women's organisations who, in 1995, reacted to the unexpected influx of Czech women into their country,*“ she adds. Three years later, as its own independent organisation, La Strada unveiled its very first hotline in the Czech Republic, aimed at preventing trafficking of women. The most important element of the hotline was a consultation service for those planning to travel abroad.

It was only later that calls to the SOS hotline began, to a larger extent, to concern cases of foreigners being exploited in the Czech Republic. „*Right now our clientele is made up primarily of foreigners who are being exploited in the Czech Republic, as well as, for example, Czech women who were forced into prostitution here or abroad,*“ says Ina Avramioti, the hotlines' coordinator. „*What we very rarely hear of, however, are cases of Czech men who have been trafficked abroad. This group can, and should, turn to our hotline as well,*“ she adds.



Case study¹

Galina from Belarus came to the Czech Republic due to her family's difficult financial situation. She arrived in the Czech Republic on a tourist visa and an intermediary organised her stay. Shortly after her arrival she began to work in a restaurant where she was told that she would be provided with accommodation nearby. As she soon found out, the „accommodation“ took the form of a very small room in the restaurant itself which was originally intended to be a cleaning cupboard. In practice this meant that she was at her employer's disposal almost 24 hours a day and that he would come to her at any hour with requests that she work overtime or sort something out for him. The employer also expected her to do other jobs for him outside of the restaurant - for example, she ironed his clothes for him at home. In two years of work in such conditions, Mrs. Galina was never able to see the document outlining the terms of her employment. She did not receive payment for her work, instead, she was constantly promised that she would receive the money upon her return home to Belarus. One of the reasons that the employer gave Mrs. Galina for not paying her was that she was saving money by receiving food at the restaurant for free. She attempted to seek asylum in the Czech Republic, but her request was denied, as she came to the country in an irregular capacity.

The turning point in her situation came when one evening, as she returned home to the restaurant, she saw a La Strada sticker on a lamp-post. She called the SOS and Info hotlines and social workers, after an initial consultation, offered her lodgings in sheltered accommodation and other services (a medical check-up, for example, and legal aid).

Theodor, who asked La Strada for help, was part of a group of Bulgarian labourers who, on the basis of an advert in a newspaper, came to the Czech Republic to install solar panels. An intermediary picked the group up at the bus station and subsequently took them to their accommodation. The first unpleasant surprise they had was when, instead of a contract, they received an external contractor's agreement to sign, which provided practically no employee protection. Furthermore, their wages were lower than they had originally been promised and in time they realised that they would not be paid even this lower amount in full. For three months of work they only received a down payment. The situation came to a head when the labourers ended up without a roof over their heads because of unpaid accommodation costs, despite the fact that their employment agent had promised that he would pay for accommodation. Outside it was beginning to freeze.

in this desperate situation, Theodor called the Bulgarian Embassy and they in turn gave him the contact details of La Strada. Because the group's primary request was to return home as soon as possible, the labourers were offered crisis aid (emergency food, short-term accommodation and assistance when organising the journey home).

To find our more „EVERY JOB HAS ITS VALUE“ campaign materials, go to: <http://www.strada.cz/index.php/cz/kdo-jsme/15-let-sos-a-info-linky>
For further information, you can contact Petra Kutálková, La Strada Czech Republic (731 101 293, petrak@strada.cz).

¹ Names and a number of other details were changed with regard to clients' protection.