

151 Billion Dollars.

Every 30 seconds a child disappears into darkness.

A global network fostered on exploiting the most vulnerable point of a human being: Facebook- a facebook founders words, not mine, is todays foremost communication tool for young people: a worrying epidemic.

A world, a country, a city, a street, a house, a bedroom, a child's life is changing forever right now.

What do we do? We, gathered here tonight have the strength of knowledge, a core of commitment and a collective willingness to make an impact. We have a shared skillset to rescue children and to provide a safe, respectable arm of comfort to them. Right now, as we gather here, there are children disappearing to lives unknown, to futures of abuse, to corners of the world where modernity thrives around them, where their fractured lives stand still. And what do we do? We hope for better times.

In recent weeks, MECPATHS had the opportunity to share a stage at The RDS during the world meeting of families with Kevin. Kevin's experience has landed on our doorstep here in Ireland- with every respect and no disrespect intended Kevin- we, Ireland, need to learn, we need to listen. The experience lives around us. Collaboration is a long word, but it's not a frightening one.

During our time at the RDS, we also met with Maya- a survivor of childhood trafficking, of exploitation and of abuse. Her delivery of experience was compelling, her gravitas, her clear and articulate account of her trauma, a learning point for all who were fortunate to be there. But what remained after Maya's flight left Ireland and her focus turned to raise further awareness about modern day slavery and child trafficking in another corner of the world... was her clarity in expression "I am NOT a victim. I am a survivor". Before us sat a young woman. A young woman whose life was damaged by those around us- our fellow global citizens, our fellow human beings- we share their air, we breathe the same, we can tonight, however choose to act so very differently and be on the side that counters trafficking, that counters child exploitation and that sees the innate vulnerability that exists within children- we were all children- we know the vulnerability. It is our role to foster its protection.

So prior to MECPATHS, I worked overseas- I worked in the presence of vulnerable children and adults whose lives were so deeply affected by trauma and abuse that their fragility presented itself before their personalities. They were afraid of other children, they were afraid of adults. And why? Because their vulnerability was identified, their vulnerabilities were exploited and their innocence taken advantage of. Modern day Ireland, with connectivity beyond what our wildest imaginations could have ever comprehended has created an environment of great disconnect- of disenfranchisement, of isolation, of separateness, of loneliness and yet one of global connectivity. The World Wide Web. The home to the connected, the land of the lost. We, as adults, as responsible Irish citizens, educators, parents, care-givers and social activists, re-activists, change-makers, lawmakers, law changers, government representatives, global representatives and private individuals are offering virtual keys to our homes, 24 hours per day, 7 days per week for the 750,000 predators that sit on line at any given time to access our homes- to access our children, our lives, our communities, our vulnerabilities and our safety. We no longer stop to look around- we check-in, we like, we share, we offer up our lives to public discourse- we deliver the vulnerabilities those 750,000 predators seek to identify. We are their facilitators.

Throughout the research phase of this study, I was drawn to learn from those within worlds of the hospitality sector. The Hospitality sector, Mecpaths focus, is just one industry which needs support. It is an area of focus for many of our international neighbours who work to counter human trafficking and modern day slavery. It is again that building on that street which we all walk past, daily, without consideration for what may be happening inside its walls. Vulnerable children sit behind walls of buildings across the world. Our challenge is to bring the walls down and to look more closely at those who cower behind them. Our challenge is to be that nosey neighbour, to be that curtain-twitcher, to be the traffickers nightmare- to be aware, to open our eyes that little wider as if we have just seen the prize we want. It costs nothing to be nosey, to be alert, to be aware- but it can change a life.

Respondents in the study were very honest. They were frank and open, they addressed their experiences and they delivered their realities of working within the hospitality sector. Whilst some of the respondents were critical of the

sectors response, or lack thereof, to potential environments of child trafficking, I understand why. Modern Day slavery, Child Trafficking and Child sexual exploitation are not common-day phrases which rest comfortably on the lips of us Irish. They need to be, but they are not. Our responsibility is to keep talking, to keep learning, to keep shouting and to keep educating. Childrens lives depend on us shouting. As adults in 21st century Ireland- we can do that. If it is all we can offer, we can do that.

As we move quickly through definitions of modern day slavery, of child trafficking, of what is or what isn't child sexual exploitation we need to remember that at the core of our discussion, as the words pass through debate and discourse, all of these redefinable constructs are happening. Around us. Tonight. Tomorrow. Saturday and Sunday. What will we do NOW to respond? We quite simply, HAVE TO RESPOND.

During my time in India, within the first weeks of my arriving, I had two encounters which drive me and drive my work with MECPATHS.... I was new to a city, I went for dinner, I got lost. I was with a colleague from UCC and I stepped into a laneway. As we stepped in, a woman stepped out of a doorway. She presented us with 5 children. Aged 5 or 6 upwards to 11 or 12. She offered me any one of her children for sex. For 50 cent. 50 cent. The fear in the eyes of those children drives me to continue my efforts. The idea of the fear in the eyes of those children is what brings us all here, together tonight. Those children may not be safe tonight. They may not be safe tomorrow but we can, collectively ensure that those eyes are not replicated around the world, are not finding their homes on the streets of Ireland, of Dublin, of Cork, of Limerick, of Galway, on our streets, outside of our houses and inside of our streets. We owe it to the children of Ireland not to allow that to happen. Children are children no matter where they are born. We are their adults, we are their hope.

A second experience which I encountered was again in India- going for dinner, leaving dinner on a rooftop restaurant and sharing a lift with local lads, our own ages. They were celebrating a birthday. We were invited to join them- the girls of the group were not welcome and being young and Irish clearly made known their lack of intention to join the group.... We shared a taxi to the bar where the birthday was being celebrated. It was a brothel. It was an environment of child sexual exploitation where children, toddlers were pushed and cajoled into corridors to meet their visitors. My colleagues and I bolted. We ran with vomitous expressions of anger and rage. But The eyes. Once again, the eyes. This

time glazed, glazed eyes of children who could barely walk, self-medicating with rags infused with chloroform to numb the moments in time that lay ahead. This was their childhood. This was their future. This was a cycle they could not escape. The adults in their lives were not offering that caring arm. I appeal to you this evening, do not, please do not let this land on our doorstep in Ireland. Between 2009 and 2016, 512 victims of human trafficking were identified in Ireland. The number of children was greater than 1, much, much greater than just 1 child- it was hundreds. Do not let our country, our counties, our cities, our towns, our villages, our streets, our neighbourhoods, do not let them facilitate this child exploitation which the world accepts. We are better than that, we are stronger than that, we have more to offer than that- our nations children deserve more than that. Ask yourself tonight- ask yourself now- what can I do. Ask that very question which Maya posed to us all in the RDS at The World Meeting of Families- What are you going to do? We, at MECPATHS, remain fixed in our efforts to reach out to hotels, to reach out to offer supported learning to hoteliers and the hotel industry to make a difference. One person cannot do everything but everyone can do something. It is not up to someone else to react, it is up to us. I believe that the strength for change rests in this room tonight.

If it doesn't it rests nowhere.

Please raise your voice for those who can't.