



COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Facilitating Resettlement in host or country of origin
through Catholic Networks and NGOs

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Introduction and presentation

My sincere greetings and thanks to the Rt. Rev Patrick Lynch and all the staff members of the Office for Migration Policy (OMP) of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales for extending me a second invitation to share about the commitment of women religious that, over the past 20 years, has formed a strong network to combat human trafficking. This network has greatly aided women and children imported and exported like commodities in countries of origin, transit and destination – particularly for sexual exploitation.

In a special way, I am very happy that this time the Conference is taking place in Rome with the involvement of two important Vatican dicasteries: the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerant People, as well as with the cooperation of the UK Embassy to the Holy. See and the Metropolitan Police. A formidable partners for a stronger network.

In order to understand the aim and importance of the reintegration of victims of human trafficking by facilitating their resettlement either in host countries or in countries of origin through a network of different faith-based organizations and NGOs addressing this issue, it is important to begin by outlining some important steps which have already been achieved throughout the past years, mainly in the Italian context.

The Context of the “New Slave Trade” in Italy

At the beginning of the 1980s, following the ongoing economic difficulties in developing countries, thousands of women came to Europe in search of work and a better quality of life. Illegal, poor and vulnerable, many became the prey of international and trans-national criminal organizations linked to the sex industry. Italy was not exempt from this phenomenon. In fact, very quickly Italy became a country of “transit” and “destination” for thousands of young women.

The phenomenon of immigrant women from developing countries “imported” to Italy for the sex industry began in force in the early '90s. Since then the number of women working mainly on the streets of our towns and villages – in dehumanizing conditions – has been steadily on the increase. Italy's geography and position leads itself to easy entry by slave traders looking to “sell women and minors” to satisfy the demand of millions of consumers.

In recent years, due to an increased awareness and proven solutions, the phenomenon of trafficking in persons has changed faces, routes, modality, criminality, and led to new methods of interventions and reintegration of victims. However, the danger of women's exploitation is ever present, with the risk of victims falling into slavery and submission due to their vulnerability and absence of alternative opportunities. Various criminal mafias constantly change their strategies to ensure and protect the enormous financial earnings they reap through the recruitment and exploitation of young victims. Therefore, we need to be equally organised to counteract this criminality and assist its victims.

The response of the Italian Government and Legislation

Protection and rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking has being implemented legally in Italy since July 25, 1998, through the application of a special residence permit given for social protection and reintegration under a Legislative Immigration Decree No. 286. With this legislation, Italy is a pioneer among European countries that set up a special program to issue a residence permit aiming at recognizing and supporting

victims of exploitation, as well as cracking down on trafficking and traffickers.ⁱ The resident permit is not given automatically, but follows a certain procedure.

Conditions to obtain a resident permit for victims of human trafficking

A person can receive assistance and protection when she/he is:

- a victim of violence or exploitation and forced into prostitution;
- ready to leave prostitution and asks for help, either from police or from some NGOs;
- willing to go through a social rehabilitation programme, in a protected house or shelter;
- ready to testify against the traffickers, mainly when there are proper elements to do it;
- in danger of further violence, due to the testimony given about her traffickers.

The project will be discontinued if or when the applicant for legal status does not comply with the above requirements.

This legislation provides victims with:

- a resident permit for six months that can be renewed for another six months, while the victim applies for a legal passport;
- the permit can be renewed or extended for a period equivalent to the term of a work contract, if the person concerned has already a job, or if she is attending a course;
- the permit is also valid for a study program when a victim has proper requirements.

Since the implementation of this legislation the government allocates a budget for approved NGOs holding special programmes for counter-trafficking activities and rehabilitation of victims.

The main motive behind this law is the will and need to stop trafficking in human beings and to punish traffickers, as well as to support and assist victims in breaking the chains of this new form of slavery.

Building a global networking

Throughout the past few years, much has been achieved in giving voice, protection and hope to many voiceless women; however, more still needs to be done to break this new and invisible chain of slavery, to rescue our young girls and give them back their stolen dignity. This can be achieved only by:

- Joining efforts for more informed consultation and greater cooperation with government, NGOs, Caritas, religious, clergy, faith-based organisations and law enforcement in order to be more affective in eradicating this 21st century slavery, with the aims of eliminating corruption, illicit profits and the great demand from millions of “consumers” of paid sex. Unfortunately, even today, the issue of “demand” generated by millions of consumers of commercial sexual exploitation (often referred to as “johns”) is very seldom addressed or highlighted.
- Networking with “sending countries” (countries of origin) will form a strategic alliance. Aware of the great richness of our Christian values and of the reality of our presence in all parts of the world, faith-based organizations need to work in synergy between “sending” and “receiving” (countries of destination) countries. Our natural network and our motivations could be of great help in preventing the exodus of so many young women in pursuit of better opportunities which quickly dissolve into real slavery, but can also offer proper assistance and resettlement to women who want to return home after such exploitation.

The prophetic role of women religious

The commitment of the Italian women religious belonging to the Italian Union of Major Superiors (USMI)ⁱⁱ in dealing with counter-trafficking has increased over several years, in communion with the commitment of civil

ⁱ The European Union approved in February 2012 a new legislation on counter-trafficking with special attention to protection and reintegration of victims, binding all European Member States to implement the new legislation by 2013-2015.

ⁱⁱ USMI deals with 80.000 members belonging to 600 women Congregations working in several fields in Italy and abroad. Currently, there are 250 nuns - belonging to 80 congregations - working mainly in small shelters and in counter-trafficking ministry.

society and institutions. In the early 90's, several Religious Congregations, together with the Diocesan Caritas and groups of volunteers, were among the first to notice this phenomenon and immediately responded by offering alternative solutions to women and children enslaved – at that time, mostly from Albania and Nigeria, victims of sexual exploitation on the streets of Italy. Religious Congregations opened the “holy doors” of their convents to offer protection and concrete assistance to young victims who courageously rebelled against traffickers by running away from the streets.

In 2000, USMI created in Rome a specific office of “Counter-Trafficking of Women and Children”ⁱⁱⁱ to coordinate the service of hundreds of religious facing the challenge of this new ministry. Immediately, the new office became very active and started to create an alliance with several entities to respond to the emerging needs of victims, mainly by:

- urging congregations to open new shelters in response to the aim of the Jubilee to free enslaved women and children; Congregations offered structures, personnel and financial aid;
- networking with the Nigerian Conference of Women Religious to share our common concern for many young Nigerians living and working on the streets of Italy;
- co-operating with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to implement assisted repatriation of women who wanted to return to their Countries and families and to be resettled at home.

In a special way the collaboration and contact between USMI and the Women Religious Conference in Nigeria (NCWR) has been very positive. It began in 2000, when the President and two religious sisters were invited by USMI to visit Italy and to observe the phenomenon of trafficking for sexual exploitation with their own eyes. They were deeply troubled by what they saw. Upon their return to Nigeria, they immediately initiated several strategies of intervention including a full report to the Nigerian Conference of Bishops urging them to write a Pastoral Letter on this issue.^{iv}

Of the many actions taken by the NCWR, it is important to mention also the most effective one: the establishment of a “Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Woman.” This was started with some specific goals:

- executing a significant and constant awareness campaign;
- tracing and protecting the families of the victims against retaliation from traffickers;
- cooperating with local law enforcement, including NAPTIP (National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons), on this and other related matters;
- welcoming and assisting victims with social protection and reintegration through financed projects for those who choose to return home or are forcibly repatriated because they were found in Italy without proper documents;
- strategic information-sharing to monitor trafficking and traffickers.

In Italy the work for reintegration of victims is carried out in the following ways:

- Outreach Units coordinated by parish groups in the streets as first contact with the victims;
- Drop-in Centres to listen to and assist women seeking help;
- Safe Houses or Shelters for projects and programmes of social reintegration;^v
- Professional preparation, including language and vocational training;

iii The main role of this office is to form and inform, to support and stimulate, to encourage and sustain the network of all the activities of counter trafficking, because: “Working together is our greatest strength

iv A Pastoral letter on “Restoring the Dignity of Nigerian Women” was issued by the Nigerian Bishop’s Conference in February 2002 and read in all Parishes in two different Sundays.

v There are roughly 100 family houses run by nuns for programmes of human, social and legal reintegration. Many homes welcome mothers with children or pregnant women to protect them and safeguard the gift of a new life. The number of “girls” staying in any of our shelters never exceeds seven, and the length of staying varies from 12 to 24 months, the time necessary for an adequate healing and social reintegration to acquire a complete autonomy. To rebuild a victim of human trafficking is a long enterprise.

- Legal assistance, to acquire documents and rectify their illegal status;^{vi}
- Collaboration with embassy personnel to obtain required identification documents;^{vii}
- Psychological and pastoral assistance to victims held in a Centre of Identification and Expulsion in Rome (a temporary detention centre), while awaiting repatriation after being arrested for not holding legal documents.^{viii}

As religious sisters, our greatest strength and key to success in this ministry is to join our efforts in networking with all forces in combating human trafficking. Traffickers are professional networkers – we must be the same.

From the very beginning one of the first target of USMI was to connect with several Conferences of Women Religious to establish proper communication and cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination of trafficked victims. Along the years several initiatives have being implemented to cope with the needs of a phenomenon in constant changes and in need of attention.

We mention a few of them:

1. A Training Programme for religious women was carried out between 2004 - 2011 in various countries touched by the phenomenon of trafficking in persons: Italy, Nigeria, Albania, Romania, Thailand, the Dominican Republic, Brazil, the Philippines, Portugal, South Africa, India, Peru, Poland, Czech Republic, Senegal and Kenya. The training sessions were proposed by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, financed by the U.S. Department of State and carried out by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), in collaboration with UISG and, at the initial stage, also with USMI and Migrantes.
2. Anti-trafficking Educational Kit for religious communities, seminaries, schools, parishes and youth groups, available in six languages - English, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Polish, and Romanian - prepared by a working group on Counter-Trafficking in Women and Children of the JPIC Commission of man and women religious of International Union of Superiors General (UISG/USG).
3. A Shelter in Benin City: on July 11, 2007, as a result of a concrete cooperation between Italy and Nigeria, a “Resource Centre for Women” was officially opened - the first such shelter to be built in Nigeria and run by women religious. It was fully funded by the Italian Bishops Conference (CEI) and run by the Nigerian Conference of Women Religious. The shelter can accommodate 18 women at a time.
4. A Lagos COSUDOW Office and Shelter was opened in May 2009 with the help and finance of various donors provided by USMI to help sisters to assist repatriated victims. This is a strategic Centre dealing mainly with the Local government, religious authority and associations but mainly meeting victims at the airport travelling back from abroad.
5. An International Training Seminar was conducted in October 2007 in Rome by USMI, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, and financed by the U.S. Department of State’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons (then G/TIP, currently J/TIP), for 33 sisters from 26 different countries. The aim of such an important gathering was to strengthen our network, make local Conferences of Women Religious aware of the phenomenon and help Congregations to live fully our Prophetic role. The participants launched the first international network for women religious: INRATIP (International Network of Religious Against Trafficking in People).
6. USMI – Counter trafficking office in 2010 marked a mile stone of ten years of networking. For the occasion a dossier and a DVD have been realised highlighting the many steps taken and the many goals achieved in offering to several thousands of survivals to regain their freedom, their identity, their legality and more their dignity as women with a role and a mission to accomplish in their family, in the society and in the Church.

vi Since Article 18 came into force in 1998 more than 6,000 Residence Permits were obtained and trafficked women were helped to be integrated into Italian society.

vii Though the collaboration with the USMI Office of counter trafficking more than 4,000 passports have been issued by the Nigerian Embassy to comply with the procedure of residence permits according to Article 18.

viii Every Saturday a group of about 20 sisters from 13 different countries and belonging to 12 Congregations visits a Centre for Identification and Expulsion in Rome to meet immigrant women waiting deportation to their countries because they were found in Italy with no documents. At present, according to the Italian legislation they can remain in detention as long as 18 months.

7. UISG/IOM Congress: three important seminars were organised in Rome, in 2008, in 2009 and in 2011, for representatives of different networks of women religious with the aim to create a stronger international network involving and connecting National Religious Conferences and Congregations dealing with this ministry. Talitha Kum is the name of the new international network of Sisters. The network was launched officially in 2010 through a new website: <http://www.talithakum.info>. The original international network INRATIP has also been absorbed by Talitha Kum under the guidance of UISG (International Union of Superiors General).
8. RENATE - Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation is a new European network established in March 2009. It is an inclusive network of Religious from East and West Europe. RENATE organized its first major meeting with 80 Religious representing 19 Countries from East and West Europe. The Conference took place from September 4 – 9, 2011 in Krakow, Poland. See web-site: www.renate-europe.net

Women religious in this delicate field can offer to many young victims the possibility of finding assistance to regain their desire for living, and the courage to start from zero after their terrible ordeals. They need this help to recuperate an active role in their family and in society, to witness to the possibility of a revival in every situation and to collaborate with a more humane respect for the dignity of each person. This can be achieved only if we are determined to work together in communion and not in competition.

We are all called to: Join in the fight against trafficking in human beings to free its victims. Each one of us has a role to play:

- The global family to develop a strong economic system to offer women opportunities for a better life without being forced to sell their bodies;
- The State with proper legislation to suppress and punish trafficking in people and protect, legalize and reintegrate victims;
- The society to legally press for effective measures against the demand, to rescue men from generating demand and safeguard the family values of fidelity, love and unity;
- The Church with its Christian vision of sexuality and man-woman relationships to safeguard and promote the dignity of every woman created in God's image;
- The schools by forming and informing our children, the next generation, of the right values based on mutual respect of gender;
- The media in projecting a complete, balanced and accurate image of women that restores her to her full human value, presenting her as a subject and not as an object.

Conclusion

The annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report of the U.S. Department of State (issued each June), which assessed the efforts of 184 foreign governments last year, highlights the “three P’s” – prevention, protection and prosecution – as part of the States responsibilities in the fight against trafficking of human beings. Therefore, we, too, as members of mainly of faith-based organizations with common Christian values, having different roles and responsibilities, but belonging to the same human family should be equally called to action and to commit ourselves by implementing the “three R’s” – rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration.

May God help us to make His and our dreams of a world with no one enslaved become a reality.

Thank you for your attention.

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