



OFFICE FOR MIGRATION POLICY

Seminar on Human Trafficking

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“Breaking Down the Chains of Modern-Day Slavery”

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Introduction

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Bishop Patrick Lynch and Mrs. Cecilia Taylor-Camara for inviting me to be with you today – first, to take part in this important event organised by the Migration Office of the Episcopal Conference of Bishops of England and Wales, and secondly, to share with you my personal experience in response to the plight of trafficked women and children, imported and exported all over the world like commodities mainly for the “sex market.” We need to acknowledge that slavery still exists in the year 2011, and that the majority of its victims are women and children who do not choose to become prostitutes, but are forced into the trade by a variety of different circumstances.

I am aware that “trafficking in persons” does not refer just to women involved in the sex trade. Modern slavery takes many forms, such as trafficking for unpaid/unfairly paid labour, illegal child adoption, organ smuggling and begging; however, for several reasons, I will focus mainly on the phenomenon of forced prostitution and the prophetic role of women religious in counter-trafficking who respond with courage and determination the thousand of women who desperately need assistance to rediscover and embrace the gift of their own dignity and freedom.

A New Missionary Call: A Personal Experience

My commitment to this ministry for women trafficked from developing countries started in 1993, when, after being a missionary in Kenya for 24 years, I was asked to return to Italy for a new missionary challenge: to work with immigrant women in the northern city of Turin.

There, for the first time, in a Caritas Drop-in Centre, I met a Nigerian woman enslaved by the “sex industry.” Upon hearing her cry for help, my missionary life and commitment changed drastically.

Maria was 30 years old and the mother of three children she left behind in Nigeria. She came to Italy hoping to get a job to support her family; instead she was thrown on the street – a victim of the slave trade that was just then starting to emerge. Maria was sick, but being in Italy illegally, she had no right to medical treatment so began seeking charitable assistance. She turned to the Caritas Drop-In Centre where I was serving.

At that time I had no knowledge that thousands of young women were being exported, like commodities, from poor countries to meet the sexual demands of affluent western societies – societies where everything can be bought and sold, even the body of a young girl or woman.

I helped Maria with her basic needs, while in return she helped me to enter into the complexity of the “world of the night and of the streets.” Gradually I came to understand the mechanisms of trafficking and traffickers who take advantage of the poverty and lack of education of young girls in many countries of origin, entrapping and

exploiting them for lucrative gain. Moreover, I heard the cry for help from these victims, like Maria's, and came to understand their deep suffering and humiliation in being forced to become "prostitutes."

As a woman and as a missionary, I felt offended and indignant at seeing the life of so many young women--dreaming for a better future -- destroyed for futile interests. In a special way, I joined with other women religious who have been moved by such circumstances to open the "holy doors" of their convents to hide and protect women running from their torturers, seeking for help.

The Situation of Women in the World Today

A brief analysis of the situation of women in the world today will help us to understand some of the root causes of trafficking in persons.

The face of poverty, marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation in the world today is feminine. Women represent 80% of people living in conditions of absolute poverty and almost two-thirds of the 850 million illiterate adults in the world. More than half of those between 15 and 24 years of age infected by the HIV/AIDS virus, mainly in developing countries, are women. Yet:

- It is the woman who bears the weight of providing for large families in most countries
- It is the woman who suffers most because of famine, water scarcity, armed conflict and tribal fighting
- It is still the woman who most frequently suffers violence at home
- It is the woman who suffers for lack of medicines and from the infection of AIDS
- It is the woman or young girl who most often does not attend school and is eliminated from paid labour and advanced positions
- It is again the woman who is too often coerced or forced to leave her land in order to seek security and well-being, for herself and her family
- It is the woman who suffers many kinds of violence – mainly sexual – and is often forced to use her body, the only property she has at times, as an object of pleasure and a source of financial gain for others
- But the most humiliating poverty for a woman is that of being trafficked, of being sold and bought like a commodity

The Slave Trade: Women and Minors for Sale

A few facts regarding the global phenomenon of trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation will help us to better understand the magnitude of the problem and the great need for an appropriate pastoral ministry of liberation for thousands of victims through projects of prevention, rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

The trade in human beings, particularly of women and minors, has become a powerful global business, entangling countless countries of origin, transit and/or destination. According to the U.S. Department of State's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report released in June 2011, of the recorded 12.3 million trafficked persons, 80% of them are women and children. According to the United Nations, trafficking in persons generates an annual income of \$32 billion and falls only behind the trade of arms and drugs.

In Europe, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 500,000 women and minors are in circulation each year. Italy, too, has its fair share of victims. It is estimated that there are between 50,000 and 70,000 women from East Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe who work in nightclubs and on the streets of our urban centres and rural areas. Of these, 30% are minors—between the ages of 14 and 18. Since these women are without legal documents, it is difficult to assess the situation and provide clear or reliable statistics.

Before reaching their final destination in Europe, women cross several countries, such as Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Holland, Germany, Spain, France and Ireland, travelling for weeks or months over land, by air or sea.

In most cases, nowadays, Nigerian women are taken across the Sahara Desert before crossing the sea with light boats to enter Italy or other parts of Europe.

On arrival at their destination, women's passports or documents are seized. Unfortunately, documents (which are often forged for travel) are never returned, and women remain as persons with no identity--no name, no status, no nationality. They lose any sense of who they are. For many Nigerian girls, there are also "voodoo rituals" (black magic) forced upon them by criminal organizations before they travel to Europe which serves as a type of mental/psychological bondage.

A Globalized Market

Prostitution is not a new phenomenon, but what is new is the development of a global and complex trade which exploits the extreme poverty and vulnerability of many women and minors. They have become the 21st century slaves. Tricked, enslaved and thrown onto the street, the "prostitute" is the living example of the unjust discrimination imposed upon women by our consumer society.

- Trafficking of human beings for sexual exploitation has developed into a global market, involving countries of origin, transit and destination
- Countries of origin represent the "push" or "supply" side of the equation. That is to say, they provide the breeding ground of poverty which traffickers comb to find potential victims. The women are easy targets, vulnerable from utter poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, gender inequality, discrimination and war
- Transit Countries offer several routes through which trafficked persons are taken to reach their final destination. Traffickers have perfected ways to import and export their victims without risk of being stopped or having them sent back to the country of origin
- Destination Countries represent the "pull" or "demand" factor, and even though the main culprit here is the "client," other factors must also be considered in deciphering the global net of the sex industry – such as gender, desire for profit and power by the mafia, and other forms of international and trans-national organized crime. Nevertheless, the main protagonist of the perpetuation of trafficking for sexual exploitation remains the "client", or "consumer", who plays a key role in this business. He regulates and drives the demand factor, and the supply corresponds to his demand

Critical Root Causes of Human Trafficking of Women Include:

- The extreme poverty of many women and their desire for emancipation and evasion from a situation of submission and inferiority. For this, they risk everything – their life, dignity and identity – to enter a European country and lifestyle. Our mass media presents this "promised land" to them, and this is the dream that so many young women carry in their hearts
- Minimum (or no) school and work opportunities often lead women down the road to sexual exploitation, especially African women. The attraction is further compounded when African women return home with riches—often made from exploiting other African women—and proudly display them, breeding envy, greed and a desire for imitation
- Additionally, many young African women--as well as those from Eastern Europe--carry heavy family economic burdens, becoming easy prey for traffickers and exploiters offering jobs and money. Most victims are nearly illiterate, therefore, further vulnerable and easily lured. Many such young women, working in dehumanised conditions on the streets of our cities and country-sides, come from Nigeria and countries of Eastern Europe

Slavery and Chains

To be a slave is to be chained. That chain robs its victims of freedom, forcing them to live under the will of another. Modern-day slavery is a chain, made up of many links. These links have names: the victims with their poverty, the exploiters with their huge profits, the consumers with their search for easy pleasure and their desire to escape frustration, deep personal engagement and responsibility, the society with its empty values and permissiveness, the governments with their corruption and complicity, the church and every Christian, religious men and women included, with our silence and indifference. In fact, we also must take our share of responsibility because of our passive attitudes toward oppressed and exploited women.

The New Slave Trade

There are differences in the way the trade is run in African and in Eastern European countries. The management of the exploitation of Nigerian woman is still in the hands of women, who lure the young victims in their country of origin and control them once they reach the country of destination. Men, instead, usually oversee the delivery, transporting the “goods” from one country to another.

We know the new routes and the huge risks involved in the journey through the Sahara Desert, with unwanted pregnancies, children born along the way without documents, sea crossings on unsafe boats, with landings on the coast of Sicily or Spain, before a final destination in Italy or in other European countries.

In Nigeria, traffickers still use powerful “voodoo” rituals, which exercise a real psychological violence on the victims. These rites aim to ensure that the € 70,000 – 80,000 debt contracted with the criminal organisation overseeing transport to Europe/Italy will be paid.

Traffickers in Eastern Europe exercise other forms of power, mainly manipulating emotions and applying physical violence on young victims.

Typically, young women from Latin America are recruited and engaged as entertainers or dancers in night clubs, at the mercy of anybody requesting any service which they cannot refuse.

Aspects of the Phenomenon

On the competitive sex market, African women are considered second class; therefore, they get a lower price for their services. For a routine affair in a car they agree to € 10-15, whereas the Eastern Europeans will earn € 25. To pay back their debt bond, contracted with the traders who have recruited them and brought them to Europe, Nigerian women must undergo roughly 4,000 sexual acts. In addition to the initial debt, they are required to pay monthly expenses: € 100 for food, € 250 for lodging, € 250 for their work site, plus clothing, transport and personal needs.

For girls from Eastern Europe, the network often tricks them into bogus engagements and promises of marriage, but they find themselves on the streets, controlled by young men who work on their emotions. Nigerian victims are entrusted to “maman,” Nigerian women who have moved from being exploited themselves to exploiting others. This is a clear-cut case of women exploiting women!

The Risks of the Streets

The “prostitutes” must live in absolute secrecy and in strict obedience to their traffickers and mamans. In addition, they are vulnerable to the dangers of the streets: mistreatment, abuse, road accidents, and even death. Every year several girls face martyrdom on our streets, forced on them from violent clients or traffickers. Many die in the course of their exhausting journey, while others simply disappear.

There is also the risk of contracting HIV/AIDS. Ten to 15% of women on the street register HIV+. They face unwanted pregnancies followed by forced abortions. Women from Eastern Europe have an average of three to four abortions. For African women, who hold maternity as the highest human value, abortion represents not only the killing of a new life, but also of a culture. Among African victims, cases of mental illness are frequent

because they are obsessed by the “voodoo” used against them, as they fear revenge against their families back home.

The Victim: Object or Person?

On the street the “prostitute” completely loses her psycho-physical identity, her personal dignity and her freedom of choice. She comes to consider herself as an object, a thing, a piece of merchandise. She must live as an illegal, a social and cultural outcast, with only one option open to her - to demand payment for a sexual service. Yet she keeps none of her earnings.

Sexual abuse degrades a person, empties her of her deepest values and destroys her womanhood, her femininity, her self-esteem, her concept of love and life, her interior beauty, and her dream of a bright future. Often on the street, the victim assumes an attitude of self-defence, expressed by vulgarity, violence and aggression. She lives a contradictory reality: on one hand she is courted by the “client” and on the other criticized, judged, condemned and rejected by the very well-off, consumer society that uses her. She lives in isolation and carries within herself a strong sense of guilt and shame. Restoring her balance and harmony is not an easy or quick task.

Demand Drives Supply: The Consumers

In the chain of slavery of the Third Millennium, the consumer or client is one of the strongest links. In reality, he supports and fuels this sex industry.

So often today, sex is no longer considered to be a reciprocal gift, interpersonal communication or a loving encounter, but has been perverted into a mere physical and economic transaction. The fact that there are so many “prostitutes” - the poor, defenceless women, with no identification papers, no legal status, no rights and no family – on our streets, forced to sell their bodies, is proof that there is a high demand, and these women are seen as the supply.

The customers—whose average age ranges between 18 and 70—come from all walks of life and regularly use and abuse these “street slaves.” Seventy per cent of the clients are either married or live with a partner. Unfortunately, little is known and said about the clients who look for “prostitutes,” use and then dispose of them like trash. This act is yet another manifestation of our consumer society-- “disposal,” use and throw away.

Building a Global Network

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, to rescue our young girls and give them back their stolen dignity. This can be achieved by:

- Joining efforts for more informed consultation and greater cooperation with government, law enforcement, NGOs, Caritas, religious and faith-based organisations in order to be more effective in eradicating this 21st century slavery, with the goal to eliminate corruption, illicit profits and the great demand from millions of “consumers” of paid sex. Unfortunately, even today, the issue of ‘demand’ from consumers is very seldom addressed or highlighted
- Networking with 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 countries of origin and destination. Our natural network and motivations could be of great help in preventing the exodus of so many young women in pursuit of opportunities which quickly dissolve into slavery scenarios

From Victims to Citizens: Women Helping Women

The Italian Union of Major Superiors (USMI), a conference of women religious, coordinates the critical and challenging ministry of all women religious. USMI established a “Counter-Trafficking” Office in Rome in 2000, responsible for training, growing and supporting the network of religious congregations working on the issue.

At present, 250 sisters - belonging to 80 congregations - work in more than 100 projects in Italy, often in collaboration with Caritas, other public or private bodies, volunteers and associations, while maintaining their identity motivated by the Gospel imperative. At this very moment, several hundred victims, from various different countries, are present in our “convents turned shelters,” where they are assisted in rebuilding their broken lives.

Some of the various ways in which women religious are present and bear prophetic witness in dealing with restoring human rights and dignity to trafficking victims include:

- Outreach units as a first contact with the victims on the streets
- Drop-in Centres to identify the problems of women in search of assistance
- Safe communities or shelters for programmes of social reintegration
- Restoring legal status through assisting victims in the acquisition of documents
- Collaboration with embassies to obtain necessary identification documents
- Professional preparation through language, skills and job training
- Psychological and spiritual aid to help survivors to rediscover their cultural roots and faith, to regain their self-respect and heal the deep wounds of their experience;

Other initiatives carried out by inter-congregations as part of our networking:

Anti-trafficking educational kit for religious communities, seminaries, schools, parishes and youth groups, available in seven languages: - English, Italian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Polish, and Romanian - has been prepared by a working group on Counter-Trafficking in Women and Children of the JPIC Commission of the International Union of Superiors General.

Weekly visits to one of the many Centres of Identification and Expulsion on the Italian territory, by a group of 16 nuns - from 12 congregations and of 13 different nationalities for the pastoral care of 180 immigrant women awaiting deportation, because they have no documents.

A Training programme for religious women 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.

A new shelter in Benin City: On July 11, 2007, as a result of 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 and will benefit Nigerian victims of human trafficking who have either forcibly repatriated, or have simply chosen to return home for several reasons, including physical and/or mental illness.

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 (G/TIP), for 33 sisters from 26 different countries. The aim was to strengthen existing anti-trafficking networks, make local conferences of religious aware of the phenomenon and help Congregations live their prophetic role. The participants launched the international anti-trafficking network INRATIP (International Network of Religious Against Trafficking in Persons) – the first of its kind.

UISG/IOM Congress - Three important seminars were organised in Rome, in 2008, 2009 and 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 issue. In 2010, a new international network of sisters, Talitha Kum, was officially launched with a new web-site: www.talithakum.info. The INRATIP network is now a part of Talitha Kum.

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 Eastern and Western Europe. RENATE organized its first conference in September 2011 in Krakow, Poland, where 80 women religious from across Europe took part. renate-europe.net

A call for action: “Joining the fight against trafficking in human beings to free people!”

According to specific roles and functions, we call upon:

- 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 states with proper legislation to suppress and punish trafficking in people and protect, legalize and reintegrate victims
- Global society to legally press for effective measures against the demand, to rescue men 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 to the right values based on mutual respect on gender
- The media in projecting a complete, balanced and accurate image of the woman that restores her to her full human value, presenting her as a subject and not as an object

Conclusion: Who is My Neighbour?

In responding to the demands of a world that is constantly changing and in search of justice, solidarity, dignity and respect for the right of every person, especially the weak and the vulnerable, we are all called to offer our contribution. Only by working together can we find success in our ministry to break this invisible chain of human trafficking -- a crime against humanity. Like prophets, we too have been called and sent on a mission ‘to set the downtrodden free’. Signing a true ‘covenant with the poor’ is the new vision and the challenge of an authentic and prophetic Church to be faithful to Christ and to His mission.

In rediscovering our own role as women religious together with all members of the Christian communities we will respond in a concrete and clear way to the question:

“Who is my neighbour?” The answer cannot but be, “Go and do the same!”

May God help us to make His and our dreams become a reality. Thank you.

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