



Counter Trafficking Office

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***Fighting Against
Trafficking in Human Beings:
A Joint Effort***

***Brussels, Belgium
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***Evening Debate:
Women Helping Women
in Counter-Trafficking in Persons***

By Sr. Eugenia Bonetti, MC

Introduction:

Before entering into the debate of this complex phenomenon of trafficking in human beings, I want to express my gratitude to the organisers of this COMECE evening dialogue. It is my great hope and prayer that such a debate can highlight the great value of and need to join our efforts in the fight against all forms of trafficking and exploitation of persons. This evening, I am glad to share my personal experience in responding to the plight of trafficked women and children around the globe, imported and exported like commodities, mainly for the international "sex market." We need to acknowledge that "slavery" still exists in 2014, and that the majority of its victims are women and children who do not choose to be exploited, but are forced into it by circumstances of poverty and vulnerability.

Though my experience as the Coordinator of the Counter-Trafficking Office of the Italian Conference of Women Religious (USMI) is extensively with victims of sex trafficking, it is critical to note that "trafficking in persons" does not refer only to those involved in the sex trade. Modern-day slavery takes many forms, such as trafficking for unpaid/unfairly paid labour, illegal child adoption, organ smuggling, begging, domestic servitude and false marriages, to mention just a few. However, for several reasons, I will focus mainly on the phenomenon of forced prostitution and the involvement of women religious in counter-trafficking in persons: women helping women, in the most prophetic and transformative ways.

A New Missionary Call: A Personal Experience

In 1993, my commitment to this ministry for women trafficked for sexual exploitation from developing countries was born – 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 that evening.

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

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, desperately seeking help.

A Global Phenomenon

A few facts regarding the global phenomenon of trafficking in human beings, mainly 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.

Human trafficking is one of the worst forms of slavery in the 21st century. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), roughly 21 million people, often very poor and vulnerable, are victims of trafficking for many forms of exploitation. 60 - 70% of victims are women and children.

On the other hand, for traffickers and pimps, this is one of the most lucrative illegal activities in the world, generating a total of 32 billion dollars a year. Trafficking in human beings is the third most profitable “business” – only after the sale of drugs and arms.

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 - 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, 20% are minors—between the ages of 14 and 18. Since they have no documents – as

one of the first violations against victims traffickers commit is to confiscate their 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 and France, 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. Traffickers are experts in drawing new routes to avoid border controls and getting their victims where they are most needed to meet demand.

On arrival at their destination, women's passports or documents are seized with the empty promise of having them returned after they pay their debt bond (the price a trafficker charges a victim for transport, lodging and "work" arrangements, etc.) to the slave traders. 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.

Root Causes of Human Trafficking Include:

- **The extreme poverty of many women** and their desire for emancipation and elusion 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," and this is the dream that so many young women carry in their hearts, never understanding the true costs of that lifestyle until it's too late.
- **Minimum--or total absence of--education and work opportunities** often lead women down the road to sexual exploitation, especially African women. The attraction is further compounded when African women (mamas) return home with riches, made from exploiting other African women who have been trafficked.
- Additionally, many young African women--as well as those from Eastern Europe--**carry heavy family economic burdens**, and are therefore more easily vulnerable to traffickers' interests. Many victims are illiterate, or with minimal education, and therefore are further vulnerable and easily lured. Many such young women, working in dehumanized conditions on the streets of our cities and country-sides, come from Nigeria and from Eastern European countries.

The New Slave Trade

There are differences in the way human trafficking is run in African and 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 are aware of the routes and the huge risks involved in the journey through the Sahara Desert, with unwanted pregnancies, children born along the way, sea crossings on unsafe boats, arriving on the coast of Sicily or Spain before their final destination in Italy or in any 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 Euro debt contracted with the criminal organization overseeing transport to Europe/Italy will be paid. Nigerian victims are entrusted to "mamas": Nigerian women who moved from being exploited themselves to exploiting others. This is a clear-cut case of women exploiting women. 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. Predominantly, young women from Latina America are recruited and engaged as entertainers or dancers in night clubs, thus being at the mercy of everybody requesting any service they cannot refuse.

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 are killed on our streets, either from 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 the East have an average of three to four abortions each. 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 very frequent because they are obsessed by the "voodoo" rituals, as they fear revenge against their families back home.

From Victims to Citizens: Women Helping Women

How has society and the Church responded to this phenomenon? Women religious were among the first in Italy to respond to this new challenge and open their convents to rescue victims asking for assistance. Since 2000, the Italian Conference of women religious has overseen this critical and challenging ministry with a "Counter-Trafficking Office" based in Rome. I have been the Office's Coordinator since it opened.

At present, 250 sisters - belonging to 80 congregations - work in 110 projects in Italy, often in collaboration with Caritas, other public or private bodies, volunteers and associations. Several hundred victims, from various different countries, are at the moment present in our shelters.

Women religious have played critical roles in the following ministries to trafficking victims:

- **Outreach Units**, as a first contact with the victims on the streets;
- **Drop-in Centres**, identifying problems and solutions for women in search of assistance;
- **Safe Communities or Shelters** for programs of social reintegration¹;
- **Restoring legal status** through assisting victims in the acquisition of legal documents²;
- **Collaboration with Embassies** to obtain necessary identification documents³;
- **Professional preparation** through language, skills and job training;

¹ There are 80 family houses run by nuns for programmes of human, social and legal reintegration; many shelters also welcome mothers with children or pregnant women to protect them and safeguard the gift of a new life.

² Protection and rehabilitation of victims of human trafficking has been 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. Since Article 18 came into force in 1998 about 6,000 residence permits were obtained by women living in our shelters.

³ Since the beginning of our collaboration with the sector Trade in Human Beings, more than 4.000 passports have been issued by the Nigerian Embassy to comply with the procedure of residence permits according to the Italian legislation.

- **Psychological and spiritual aid** to help survivors rediscover their cultural roots and faith, to regain their self-esteem and heal the deep wounds of their experience;
- **Weekly visits to the Identification and Expulsion Centre in Rome:** For more than a decade, 60 religious sisters from 27 different countries, belonging to 28 religious congregations, have offered a healing ministry of mercy and comfort through spiritual, religious and pastoral assistance, as well as psychological and moral support to women arrested because they have been found in Italy with no legal documents. Many of them, mainly Nigerians, are also victims of human trafficking, but for several reasons, including acts of revenge on their families, they are afraid to reveal their connection with traffickers and mamans. They are also reticent to return to their home countries empty-handed and labelled as "prostitutes."
- **Voluntary Repatriation and Financial Social Integration Project:** The latest initiative is to assist in the repatriation of women – mainly women with children – who request to return to their home countries and rebuild their lives. Since September 2013, our network of nuns has assisted 13 women with several children born in Italy, and many others in Nigeria. To be able to operate efficiently for this unique project a new association: “Slaves no more” was established in 2013. Women who want to return home in a dignify manner are offered a flight ticket and a specific budget for a personal and reintegration working project. This is done in connection and cooperation with the local Sisters.

The strength of networking: Being aware of the importance of having connection with women religious in countries of origin in the year 2000 we started to communicate and cooperate with women religious in countries of origin, mainly Nigeria. For this reason some important initiatives and steps were taken, such as:

- ❖ **Shelter in Nigeria:** in the year 2007, a “*Resource Centre for Women*” was officially opened in Nigeria and run by women religious. The new building 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 are either forcibly repatriated or have simply chosen to return home for several reasons. including physical and/or mental illness.
- ❖ **An International Training Seminar** was also conducted in October 2007 in Rome by the USMI Counter Trafficking Office, in collaboration with the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, for **33 Nuns coming from 26 different Countries. The aim of such an important gathering was to** strengthen our network, making local Conferences of Religious aware of the phenomenon and helping Congregations to get more involved. The participants launched an international network: INRATIP (*International Network of Religious Against Trafficking in Persons*).
- ❖ **Talitha Kum** is the name of the new international network of Sisters dealing with counter trafficking. The network was lunched officially in June 2010 during a seminar for sisters from different countries and congregations coming from all the five Continents who met in Rome. <http://www.talithakum.info>
- ❖ **RENATE** (*Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation*) is an inclusive network of women religious from East and West Europe, founded in March 2009. **RENATE** held its first major network conference in September 2011, in Krakow, Poland, attended by roughly 100 religious from East and West. www.renate-europe.net
- ❖ **A World Day of Prayer and Awareness Against All Forms of Slavery and Trafficking in Persons** will be celebrated for the first time on February 8, 2015, the Feast of St. Bakhita. (*St. Bakhita was a Sudanese-born former slave who became a Canossian nun in Italy, living and working there for 45 years. She was declared a saint by the Roman*

Catholic Church in 2000.) This special event is strongly supported by Pope Francis and several Vatican Dicasteries. It is being organized and launched by the network of women religious in collaboration with other Christian organizations.

A Call for Action: “Joining the Fight Against Trafficking in Human Beings to Free People”

According to their varying positions and specific roles we call upon:

- **The Global Economic Complex** 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 prostitution, punish trafficking in people and protect, legalize and reintegrate victims;
- **The Global Family** 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;
- **The Media** in projecting a complete, balanced and accurate image of women that restores them to their full human value, presenting them as subjects and not as objects.

Conclusion: Who is My Neighbour?

In a globalised world, we are all called to build a better future by joining together in the fight against all forms of poverty, discrimination, exploitation and inequality to build a society where everybody is accepted, valued, respected, appreciated and loved. No man, woman or child is born to be a “prostitute” or a “slave,” so we must stop the reduction to slavery of millions of individuals around the globe by our consumer society. Women and men must be rescued, rehabilitated and reintegrated to form a new Global Family – in which **everyone** has an important role to play to ensure that we live in harmony, peace and love. We are **all** called to offer our contribution to break **all** chains of slavery to ensure that **all** people are free.

In accordance with the new demands of a world that is constantly changing and in search of justice, solidarity, dignity and respect for the rights of every person, especially the weak and the vulnerable, we are each called to offer our contribution. Only by networking and working together can we find success in our ministry to break the invisible global chain of human trafficking, and give new hope to broken and exploited women, men and children. Together, with all members of Christian communities and people of good will, we respond in a concrete and clear way to the question:

"Who is my neighbour?" The answer cannot but be,

"We are all neighbours. Go and do the same!"

Thank you for your attention and concern

Sister Eugenia Bonetti, mc
USMI Counter Trafficking Office
President of “Slaves No More” Association
Via Zanardelli, 32- Rome – 00186
Tel. +39 06 68400555 - +39 3391934538
tratta@usminazionale.it / ebonettimc@pcn.net
www.slavesnomore.it

