

“WOMEN HELPING WOMEN”.

The Prophetic Role of Women Religious in Counter-Trafficking in Persons

*Sr. Eugenia Bonetti, MC**

Introduction

I wish 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 it 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 today, 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 religious in counter-trafficking in persons.

A New Missionary Call: A Personal Experience

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

* Consolata Missionary sister and director of the anti-trafficking in persons (TIP) office of the Italian Union of Major Superiors (USMI), the umbrella organization for thousands of nuns throughout Italy. E-mail: ebonettimc@pcn.net. Rome/Italy.

Here in a Caritas Drop-in Centre, for the first time, I met a Nigerian woman enslaved by the “sex industry” and 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, therefore, she came seeking assistance from a charitable organization. She turned to a Caritas Centre for help.

At that time I had no knowledge that thousands of young women were being exported, like commodities, from poor countries to meet the demands of affluent western societies, 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, taking advantage of the poverty and lack of education for young girls in many countries of origin, entrapping and exploiting them for lucrative gain. Moreover, I heard the cry for help from these victims and I 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 people – 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 tortures and seeking help.

The Situation of Woman 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 person.

The face of poverty, marginalisation, discrimination and exploitation in the world today is assumed by women. Women represent 80% of the people who live 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 many countries.
- ✓ It is the woman who suffers because of famine and water scarcity, of armed conflicts and in tribal fights.
- ✓ It is the woman who suffers for lack of medicines and from the infection of AIDS.
- ✓ It is the woman who cannot always attend school and is eliminated from paid labour and responsible positions.
- ✓ It is still the woman who most frequently suffers violence at home.
- ✓ 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.
- ✓ Above all, 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 gain for others.
- ✓ But the most humiliating poverty for a woman is that of being trafficked, of being sold and bought like a commodity.

A global phenomenon

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 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 latest report by Save the Children, issued on August 23, 2008, the victims of trafficking in persons are estimated to be annually 2.7 million and 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 have no documents (as they are routinely seized by their traffickers), 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/Europe.

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 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. 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.

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 who have emigrated. 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 and sent back to the country of origin.

- *Destination Countries*, on the other hand, 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 transnational 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 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 total absence of – 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 – made from exploiting other African women – and proudly display them.
- Additionally, many young African women - as well as those from Eastern Europe - *carry heavy family economic burdens*, thus easily becoming prey of traffickers and exploiters. Most 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 from Eastern European countries.

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 included, with our silence and indifference. In fact, we must take our share of responsibility because of our passive attitudes toward oppressed women.

The new slaves-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, and 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 Euro 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.

For young women from Latina America normally they are recruited and engaged as entertainers or dancers in night clubs, thus being at the mercy of everybody requesting any service, for which they cannot refuse.

Some 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 of € 70,000 - 80,000, contracted with the traders who have recruited and brought them to Europe, Nigerian women must undergo sexual favour at least, 4.000 times. In addition to the initial debt, they have to pay monthly expenses: € 100 for food, € 250

for lodging, € 250 for the work-site, in addition to 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 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 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 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 a quick task.

Demand Drives Supply: The Consumers

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

While socio-economic evolution in developed countries has facilitated the emancipation of women in all fields and made them independent, self-sufficient, competent, and no longer passively submissive to males, it has had a different effect on men. They have not experienced the same personal growth and liberation, but instead have attempted to maintain a stance of dominion, power and a search for instant gratification. Often in the area of relationships and affection, men have opted for a short cut, using "masculine" methods that do not allow for difficult discussion, or actions that make them feel uneasy. In many cases, men consciously prefer to pay for sex because in that scenario the woman does not engage him, as she is not considered to be a person, but only an object upon which he can vent his personal frustration, insecurity, and need for contact with, but also possession of and dominion over, another individual.

In this manner, sex becomes banal; it is no longer considered to be a reciprocal gift, interpersonal communication or a loving encounter, but is 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 rubbish. This act is yet another manifestation of our consumer society – "use and throw away." We so often speak of prostitution as a *woman's* problem; we must begin to address it as a *man's* problem.

Building a Global Networking

Throughout the past few years, much has been achieved in giving voice, protection and hope to many voiceless women; however, much 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 only by:

- *Joining efforts* for more informed consultation and greater cooperation with government, NGOs, Caritas, religious and faith-based organisations and law enforcement in order to be more affective 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 Sending Countries* will form a strategic alliance. Aware of the great richness of our charisms of charity and of the reality of our presence in all parts of the world, Religious women need to work in synergy between sending and receiving 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 slavery¹.

From Victims to Citizens: Women Helping Women

In Italy, the Italian Union of Major Superiors (USMI = Conference of women religious) coordinates this critical and challenging ministry of all women religious, with a specific “Counter Trafficking” Office, set up in the year 2000. This trains and informs, supports and stimulates, encourages and links the network of Congregations working on the issue.

At present, 250 sisters - belonging to 75 congregations - work in 110 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. Several hundred victims, from various different countries, are at the moment present in our shelters where they are assisted in rebuilding their broken lives.

¹ In the year 2000 USMI has invited three sisters from the Nigerian Conference of Women Religious to come to Italy to see what was happening to thousands of their young women displayed on all our streets. The experience was shocking but very useful because channels of communication and cooperation were created between the two countries.

Some of the various ways in which the religious sisters are present and bear prophetic witness in dealing with human rights and dignity 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;²
- *Restoring legal status* through assisting victims in the acquisition of documents;
- *Collaboration with embassies* to obtain necessary identification documents;³
- *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 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 (UISG/USG).
- ❖ *Weekly visits to Ponte Galeria, Rome*, by a group of 16 nuns – from 12 congregations and of 13 different nationalities – to one of the many Centres of Identification and Expulsion on the Italian territory – for

² There are roughly 100 family houses managed by nuns for programmes of human, social and legal reintegration, many of them welcome mothers with children or pregnant women to protect them and safeguard the gift of new life; the number of "girls" staying in any one community never exceeds seven, and the length of stay varies from 12-24 months, the time necessary for an adequate social reintegration to complete autonomy.

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 Article 18.

the pastoral care of 180 immigrant women awaiting deportation, because they have no documents.⁴

- ❖ *A Training programme for religious women* carried out between 2004 - 2010 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 and Senegal. 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. For the occasion an Italian delegation of 14 people (8 Sisters and 6 lay people) visited Nigeria, attended the celebration and strengthened mutual cooperation of networking.
- ❖ *A new Lagos COSUDOW office* was open in May 2009 with the help and finance of various donors provided by USMI to help sisters to assist repatriated victims.
- ❖ *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 coming from 26 different countries. The aim of such an important gathering was to strengthen our network, make local Conferences of Religious aware of the phenomenon and help Congregations to live our Prophetic role. The participants launched an international network (INRATIP/International Network of Religious Against Trafficking in Persons).

⁴ For the past eight years Sisters have been offering this ministry of mercy and comfort for religious and pastoral assistance, moral and psychological support to the many women in despair who do not want to go back home empty-handed and labelled as “prostitutes.”

- ❖ *UISG/IOM Congress*: three important seminars were organised in Rome, June 2-6, 2008, June 15-18, 2009 and 29/5 – 1 June 2011, for representatives of women religious who have previously attended one of the formation courses for sisters. Once again the aim was to evaluate the need of such formation courses for sisters and create a strong international network to involve and connect National Religious Conferences and Congregations dealing with this ministry. *Talitha Kum* is the name of the new international network of Sisters dealing with counter trafficking. The network was launched officially in June 2010 through a new web-site: www.talithakum.info.
- ❖ *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* is planning its first major meeting with 100 Religious from East and West Europe who will be invited to a Conference planned to take place from September 4th – 9th 2011 in Krakow, Poland. See web-site: www.renate-europe.net.

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

If the annual TIP Report of the U.S. Department of State - assessing the efforts of foreign governments - highlights the “three P’s” – *prevention, protection and prosecution* – as part of the States responsibilities in the fight against trafficking of human beings; we too as members of the same human family are equally called to action and to commit ourselves by implementing the “three R’s” – *rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration*.

According to different specific roles and positions 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;
- *The 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;
- *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: 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 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.