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# WOMEN HELPING WOMEN: THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN COMBATING HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND MODERN-DAY SLAVERY

SR. EUGENIA BONETTI, MC\*

## *Introduction*

I am grateful to Mr. Mathias Nebel for the invitation to take part in this Parallel Event organized by the “Fondation Caritas in Veritate,” addressing the topic of “The Role for Religions in the Fight against Contemporary Forms of Slavery.” I also thank H.E. Archbishop Silvano Tomasi for moderating today’s event, and Ms. Urmila Bhoola for offering what I’m certain will be thought-provoking concluding remarks.

As the National Counter-Trafficking Coordinator for the Italian Conference of Women Religious (Union of Women Major Superiors of Italy, or USMI), I have come from Rome to share with you some strategies carried out by hundreds of nuns to effectively combat modern-day slavery. At present, 250 sisters—belonging to 80 congregations—work in more than 100 convents-turned-safe-houses for trafficking victims throughout Italy, often in collaboration with Caritas, other public or private groups, volunteers and associations, but always maintaining their identity motivated by the Gospel imperative: “[w]hatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do it to me.” At this very moment, several hundred trafficking victims, from different countries, are sheltered in these homes, being lovingly assisted in rebuilding their broken lives. I am grateful for the opportunity I have today to talk about our experience, because though such strategies are carried out mainly by women religious, there are aspects that could be carried out equally effectively by

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faith-based organizations.

*I. The Global Slave Trade: Women and Minors for Sale*

To begin, a few facts on 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. The trade in human beings, particularly of women and minors, has reached the borders of almost every country, drawing each into the evil chain of trafficking through countries of origin, transit and destination of victims.

According to the United Nations, trafficking in persons generates an annual income of roughly \$32 billion—behind only the trade of arms and drugs. Despite new efforts to protect and reintegrate victims, the danger of women’s exploitation is ever present, with the risk of victims falling into slavery and submission due to their vulnerability and lack of alternative opportunities. Criminal mafias constantly change their strategies to ensure and protect the enormous financial earnings they reap; therefore, we—women religious and all people of faith and good will committed to ending slavery in our time—must be equally organized to counteract this criminality and assist its needy victims.

I am aware that the terms “trafficking in persons” and “modern-day slavery” do not only refer to women involved in the sex trade, but also trafficking for unpaid/unfairly paid labour, illegal child adoption, organ smuggling and begging, as well as many other forms of exploitation; however, to draw upon my expertise, I will focus my presentation mainly on the phenomenon of forced prostitution and the prophetic role of religious congregations in counter-trafficking in persons.

*II. My Entry into the “World of the Night”*

The call to this ministry for trafficked women (mainly from developing countries) came to me more than 20 years ago—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, a Nigerian woman enslaved by the “sex industry” came to the Caritas Drop-In Centre where I was serving. Sick, in Italy illegally with no right to medical care, she turned to Caritas—and me—for help. Upon hearing her cry for help, my missionary life changed radically.

Her name was Maria; she was 30 years old and the mother of three children she had left behind in Nigeria. She came to Italy hoping to get a job to support her children, and much of the rest of her family. Instead she was forced onto the street – a victim of the slave trade that was just starting to emerge in Italy. 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 an affluent western society where everything can be bought and sold—even the body of a young foreign 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, and I came to understand their deep suffering and humiliation in being forced to sell their bodies, as well as their youth and their dreams.

As a woman and as a missionary, I was offended and indignant to see the lives of so many young women—dreaming for a better future for themselves and their families—destroyed by others’ lust, greed and power. Very soon, I turned to other nuns who were also touched by the phenomenon and ready to open the “holy doors” of their convents to hide and protect trafficking victims running away from their torturers, pimps and madams.

The pages of my journals are filled with details of victims I've encountered—so many different names, but all with similar horror stories. Many, I met on the street at night and took into safe houses. Others, I met in Caritas Centres or with other organizations asking for help. Others, still, I met in a temporary detention centre (Ponte Galeria) on the outskirts of Rome, awaiting deportation because their identification documents were stolen by their traffickers and they were therefore undocumented and illegal. Others, yet, took the risk to seek help, exhausted from their life in bondage and wanting to return to their home countries, no matter how bad the reality they had run away from.

I remember Mercy, a Nigerian, who was brought to Italy at the tender age of 14 and sold by an uncle to a human trafficker. She was thrown on the street, but eventually rescued by police and welcomed into a facility for minors. Mercy had lost contact with her family for six years, but thanks to the efforts of nuns in Nigeria, she was reunited with her mother over the phone, and a year later was assisted in visiting her family to celebrate Christmas.

And Joy, 19 years old, the first of eight children, who left her home in Nigeria with the dream to earn money to send her brothers to school. During her journey she was raped and became pregnant; for six months she was forced to work on the streets to pay a debt bond of 40,000 Euros, contracted without her knowledge by criminal organizations. She hid her pregnancy, and it was only due to the consistent intervention of an "Outreach Unit" of lay people and nuns that she was convinced to leave the street. She was welcomed into one of the many shelters where she was attended to with love and care. Despite her initial fear and despair, she welcomed the gift of a new life—a baby girl.

And Gloria, 22, also working the streets in Italy to pay a large debt bond. Before leaving Nigeria, she was forced before the witch doctor who performed "voodoo rituals," which continued to have a very powerful hold on her psyche. A beautiful young woman, she became the favorite of a 38-year-old divorced man. He fell in love with her and wanted to bring her to his home, but she refused. As punishment, he threw Gloria from a bridge and her lifeless young body was found the next day. Unfortunately, even today many

young women are still murdered on the streets, often as a warning to others to submit to their traffickers and madams and fulfill what they ‘promised’ through voodoo rituals. In most cases, their killers are never found and punished for their heinous crimes.

### *III. A Globalized Market*

So how does a girl like Maria or Gloria—or the millions of others—end up to be forced to become prostitutes on the streets of Italy or any other country rather than staying safe at home?

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 so many women and minors. Tricked, enslaved and thrown onto the street, the “prostitute” is the ultimate example of the unjust discrimination imposed upon women by our global consumer society.

Trafficking of human beings for sexual exploitation has developed into a global market, involving countries of origin, transit and destination.

- i. *Countries of Origin* represent the “push” or “supply” side of the equation. They are the breeding ground of poverty which traffickers comb to find potential victims. The women in these countries tend to be easy targets, vulnerable from extreme poverty, heavy family and financial responsibilities, lack of education and job opportunities, gender inequality, discrimination and war—and because of this, willing to risk everything (their dignity, identity, even their life) to enter a European country or lifestyle—or some other “promised land”. The attraction is further compounded when African women return home with riches—often made by exploiting other African women—and proudly display them, breeding envy, greed and a desire for imitation.

- ii. *Transit Countries* offer several routes through which trafficked persons are taken to reach their final destination. Traffickers have perfected their methods to import and export their victims to avoid risk of being stopped or having them sent back to the country of origin.
- iii. *Destination Countries* represent the “pull” or “demand” factor, the global net of the sex industry fuelled by desire for profit and power by the mafia, and other forms of international and trans-national organized crime. However, the main culprit in the perpetuation of trafficking for sexual exploitation is the “client” or “consumer” who drives the demand factor—and the supply corresponds to his demand.

#### *IV. From Victims to Citizens: Women Helping Women*

The Italian Conference of Women Religious, known as USMI, numbers 600 Women Congregations working in different fields in Italy and abroad—totalling 80,000 members. These are women who have consecrated their lives to God for an active and meaningful presence in the world. USMI coordinates the critical and challenging ministry of all women religious and was visionary in establishing a “Counter-Trafficking” Office in Rome, in 2000. Under my direction, the office is responsible for training, growing and supporting the network of religious congregations working on the issue of human trafficking in different forms including sexual exploitation.

Women religious in Italy—in collaboration with sisters in countries origin and of transit—have responded to trafficking victims in many inspired ways. The below is a brief overview of the main thrusts of our work in support of women who have been trafficked into Italy:

- i. *Convents-Turned-Shelters/Safe Houses*: As I mentioned, over the last 20 years, women religious in the counter-trafficking network I direct have opened the “holy doors” of their

convents to convert them into safe houses for more than 6,000 girls and young women. The girls have come from different countries, some pregnant, some already mothers with children. They have been loved, cared for, invested in and reintegrated so that they can either make a new life in Italy or return to their home countries under a specially financed project launched last year for social and working rehabilitation.<sup>1</sup>

- ii. *Reacquiring Identification Documents:* Often a trafficker's first violation against a victim is the confiscation of her legal documents—instantly making her illegal and helpless in the country in which she has been trafficked.<sup>2</sup>
  
- iii. *Outreach Unit at Ponte Galeria:* Since 2003, 60 nuns from 27 congregations and 28 different countries (mainly from the countries that trafficking victims come from) enter behind the prison walls in a Centre for Identification and Expulsion on the outskirts of Rome, often “home” to more than 150 trafficking victims at a time.<sup>3</sup> The sisters offer prayer,

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<sup>1</sup> These shelters see young and old nuns living together with rescued victims sharing meals, prayer, daily running of the house, language learning, house managements, and other useful skills and education -- a radical divergence from life on the streets that proves most healing. The family atmosphere -- infused with Christ's example of unconditional love -- offers victims the safe space necessary to face their trauma, heal their wounds, and be understood in their moments of rebellion and frustration. I have been referred to as “the old mama”, called upon to assist victims in our communities in dealing with their internal and external tensions and difficulties.

<sup>2</sup> Since 2000, my network has collaborated closely with the Nigerian Embassy in Rome, successfully obtaining more than 4,000 legal passports for trafficking victims, allowing us to then complete all the required documents to apply for a resident permit in Italy. This critical collaboration requires enormous amounts of time, communication and trust from both sides.

<sup>3</sup> This is a place of great suffering, and we enter once a week to offer prayer, psychological and pastoral support and assistance (usually in a victim's mother tongue), sharing and compassion to these women who often wait months on end to be deported simply because their traffickers stole their legal documents. We do our best to bring joy into this dark place by celebrating feast days and special



comfort and counsel, most often in the trafficking victim's mother tongue.

Additional programs in which women religious bear prophetic witness in dealing with restoring human rights and dignity to trafficking victims include:

- a. *Outreach Units*: coordinated by parish groups go to the streets and serve as a first and direct contact with victims;
- b. *Drop-In Centres*: facilitate listening to and assisting women seeking help;
- c. *24-Hour Anti-Trafficking Hotline*: (800-290-290), with staff ready around the clock to rescue anyone in danger requesting assistance.
- d. *Professional Preparation*: including language and vocational training, provided or paid for by sisters;
- e. *International Counter-Trafficking Trainings*: Begun 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).<sup>4</sup>
- f. *Counter-Trafficking Networks*: The participants of the USMI/J/TIP counter-trafficking training launched the first-ever international network for women religious, INRATIP (International Network of Religious Against Trafficking in

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occasions with parties and useful gifts.

<sup>4</sup> The aim of such an important gathering was to strengthen women religious and their networks, make local Conferences of Women Religious aware of the phenomenon and help Congregations to live fully their prophetic role.

People), which presented a blueprint for the creation of a European network RENATE (Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation) in March 2009. RENATE is an inclusive network of nuns from East and West Europe committed to combating human trafficking. See website: [www.renate-europe.net](http://www.renate-europe.net). In 2010, a new international network of sisters, Talitha Kum, was launched. See website: [www.talithakum.info](http://www.talithakum.info). The original international network INRATIP was absorbed by Talitha Kum under the guidance of UISG (International Union of Superiors General).

- g. *Resource Centre in Benin City*: The result of cooperation between Italy and Nigeria. Inaugurated July 11, 2007, this is 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.
- h. *Office and Shelter in Lagos*: Opened in May 2009, this is a strategic centre dealing mainly with the local government, religious authority and associations, as well as facilitating reintegration of returning victims at the airport.
- i. *Educational Materials*: Upon the 10-year anniversary of the USMI Counter-Trafficking Office, a dossier and DVD was made highlighting the many steps taken to assist several thousand victims regain their freedom, their identity, their legality and their dignity as women with a role and a mission to accomplish in their family, in the society and in the Church.
- j. *Educational Seminars*: UISG/IOM Congresses were held 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 ministry.

- k. *Voluntary Repatriation and Financial Social Integration*: The latest initiative 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 10 women with several children born in Italy, and five others in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup>
- l. *A First World Day of Prayer and Reflection Against all Forms of Slavery and Trafficking in Human Beings*: It will be celebrated on February 8, 2015, the Feast of St. Bakhita, organized and launched by the network of women religious with the aim to involve Christian organizations worldwide, with special emphasis on Catholics, in contemplating this global scourge. Today, roughly 27 million modern-day slaves need that prayer to be answered.

#### *V. 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 only by:

- i. *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 21<sup>st</sup> century slavery, with

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<sup>5</sup> To be able to operate efficiently for this unique project a new association: “Slaves no more” was established in 2013. Women who wants to return home in a dignify manner are offered a flight ticket and a specific budget for a personal reintegration working project

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.

- ii. *Networking with Sending Countries* 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. 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.

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 so that, as Pope Francis implores, there might be “*no more slaves, but only brothers and sisters.*”<sup>6</sup>

*According to Specific Roles and Functions, We Call upon:*

- i. *The Global Economy:* to develop strong and fair economic systems to offer opportunities to women for a better life without being forced to travel abroad to sell their bodies to survive;
- ii. *The State:* to develop and apply legislation to suppress and punish trafficking in persons and protect, legalize and reintegrate victims<sup>7</sup>;

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<sup>6</sup> From the theme for the World Day of Peace 2015: “No more slaves, but brothers.”

<sup>7</sup> See in Appendix I the response of the Italian government and our legislation regarding protection and rehabilitation of victims and prosecution of traffickers.

- iii. *The Global Family*: to demand effective legal measures to prosecute those involved in sexual exploitation, and to safeguard the family values of fidelity, love and unity;
- iv. *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;
- v. *The Schools*: to impart to our children, the next generation, values based on mutual respect for gender;
- vi. *The Global Media*: to project a complete, balanced and accurate image of women that restores her to her full human value, presenting her as a powerful subject and not an object.

*Conclusion: Who is My Neighbour?*

In responding to the demands of a world that is constantly changing, and seeking justice, solidarity, dignity and respect for the right of every person, especially the weak and the most vulnerable, we are each called to offer our contribution to free the slaves of today's global human trade. Only by working together can we find success in our commitment to break this invisible chain—a grave crime against humanity that binds more than 27 million victims. So we, as members of mainly faith-based organizations with common Christian values, having different roles and responsibilities, but belonging to the same human family, should be called to action and to commit ourselves by implementing the “three R's” – rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration.

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 vision. In rediscovering our own role as women religious in the battle against trafficking in persons, in collaboration with all members of Christian

communities who answer this call, we will respond in a concrete and clear manner to the question: “*Who is my Neighbour?*” With Christ as our model, the answer cannot but be, “*Go and Do the same!*”

Thank you for your attention and your concern.

## APPENDIX I

## THE RESPONSE OF THE ITALIAN GOVERNMENT AND LEGISLATION

*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 granted for social protection and reintegration under *Legislative Immigration Decree No. 286*. With this legislation, Italy marks itself as a pioneer among European countries taking aggressive steps to provide residence permits that recognize and support victims of exploitation, as well as crack down on trafficking and traffickers.<sup>8</sup> The resident permit is not given automatically, but through the following procedure:

*Conditions to obtain a resident permit for victims of human trafficking:* A person can receive assistance and protection when she/he is:

- i. a victim of violence or exploitation and forced into prostitution;
- ii. ready to leave prostitution and requests assistance, either from police or from some NGO's;
- iii. willing to go through a social rehabilitation programme, in a protected house or shelter;
- iv. willing to testify against his/her traffickers;
- v. in danger of further violence, due to the testimony given about his/her traffickers.

A project of assistance and protection will be discontinued if or when the applicant for legal status does not comply with the above

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<sup>8</sup> The European Union approved in February 2012 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.

requirements.

*This legislation provides victims with:*

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

Since the implementation of this legislation, the Italian government has allocated a budget for approved NGO's facilitating special programmes for counter-trafficking activities and rehabilitation of victims.

The main motivation behind this legislation is the need to stop trafficking in human beings, to punish traffickers, and to support and assist victims in breaking the chains of this new form of slavery.



