

2006

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Eugenia Bonetti

Coordinator of the Counter-Trafficking sector, USMI National (Unione Superiori Maggiori d'Italia)

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Recommended Citation

Eugenia Bonetti, *Putting Lives Back Together: Women Helping Women the Italian Experience of Women Religious*, 1 Intercultural Hum. Rts. L. Rev. 43 (2006).

Available at: <https://scholarship.stu.edu/ihrlr/vol1/iss1/7>

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PUTTING LIVES BACK TOGETHER: WOMEN HELPING WOMEN THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS

SR. EUGENIA BONETTI*

I. Introduction

Your Excellency Mr. Nicholson, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, Ambassador John Miller, Monsignor Franklyn Casale, President of St. Thomas University, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen. I am grateful to Michele Gillen and the organizers of this conference for inviting me to share my personal experience in the fight against the trafficking in human beings, mainly by helping victims to break their “invisible chains,” thus regaining their lost identity, dignity and freedom. I wish also to highlight the commitment and the role of 250 women religious belonging to 70 different congregations who are presently working in Italy, answering to the emergency of thousands of immigrant women, lured, imported, enslaved and exploited on our streets.

II. A New Missionary Call: A Personal Experience

I am a Consolata Missionary Sister. After 24 years spent in Kenya, working with children and youth in schools and with women’s groups in Parishes, in 1993 I was asked to return to Italy for a new missionary challenge: to work with immigrant women in the city of Turin. There in a Caritas Drop-in Centre, for the first time, I met a Nigerian woman enslaved by the “sex industry,” and my missionary life changed drastically.

* Sr. Eugenia Bonetti MC, Consolata Missionary Sister, Coordinator of the Counter-Trafficking Sector, USMI National (Unione Superiori Maggiori d’Italia). The U.S. State Department’s Trafficking in Persons Report of June 2004 salutes Sister Bonetti as one of the “heroes acting to end modern-day slavery.” U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT’S TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS REPORT, JUNE 2004, at 36 (2004).

Maria was 30 years old and the mother of three children, left in Nigeria. She came to Italy, hoping to get a job to help her family. Instead, she was thrown on the street, a victim of the new slave trade that had started to emerge. Maria was sick, but being in Italy illegally, she had no right to medical treatment; therefore she asked assistance from a charitable organization.

At that time, I had no knowledge of the new phenomenon of thousands of young women being exported, like commodities, from poor countries to meet the demand of a well-off society, where everything can be sold and bought, even the body of a young girl who could not voice her objections. Maria helped me enter into the complexity of the “world of the night.” Gradually, I came to understand the mechanisms of trafficking and traffickers, taking advantage of the poverty and lack of education in many countries of origin, entrapping and exploiting so many victims for lucrative gain. Moreover, I heard the cry for help of these victims 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 to see the life of so many young people, dreaming for a better future, be destroyed for futile interests. I felt the need to join other voluntary organisations in the fight against sex exploitation that stripped women of their identity, leaving them completely empty. 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 away from their tortures.

III. A Brief History of the New Italian “Slave Trade”

The phenomenon of immigrant women from developing countries “imported” to Italy for the “sex industry” started in the early 1990s. Since then, the number of women working mainly on the streets of our towns and villages, in dehumanized conditions, has been steadily on the increase. Italy’s geographical position offers slave traders several opportunities to bring in “women for sale” to satisfy the great demand of millions of consumers.

Early on, some Catholic organizations, such as Caritas and religious Congregations, took notice of the phenomenon because

some of the girls running away from their traffickers asked them for help. Several convents and Caritas Centres accepted the challenge and the risk of the unknown by taking the girls in, hiding them within their walls. At the beginning, we met with many difficulties in assisting the victims – such as the language barrier, cultural differences, moral issues, public opinion and legal status. Very soon, by listening to their dramatic stories, we came to understand that their work as prostitutes – “the oldest profession in the world,” as many people refer to it — was not a choice they had made. No. What we were faced with was a horrible and new form of slavery. This situation was challenging our values, our mentality, our tradition and our security, asking for immediate answers. Some female congregations responded positively with a prophetic intuition by providing shelters, language courses, training skills and job opportunities for the victims they encountered. In this new environment, victims were also helped to heal their deep wounds caused by the dehumanizing experience. They were helped to regain their sense of self-worth, trust and hope. A major obstacle, however, remained: the legal aspect. Having no documents, the women could not claim any legal rights.

In 1996, with courage and determination, the Union of Major Superiors in Italy (USMI), with the Italian Caritas and a few other NGOs, approached several women parliamentarians to highlight the phenomenon of trafficking. Together we lobbied for a new *ad hoc* legislation for prevention, protection and prosecution. Article 18 of a Legislative Immigration Decree No. 286, dated July, 25 of 1998, crowned the efforts of collaboration between government and NGOs. In this regard, Italy to date is the only European country that has granted legal status to victims with a residence permit aimed at full reintegration into society.

The conditions for women to benefit from such a program are:

- To be a victim of violence, exploitation and/or forced into prostitution;
- To be willing to leave prostitution and ask for help, either from the local police authority and/or from NGOs;
- To be ready to cooperate with the authorities by denouncing criminal organizations;

- To be in danger of further violence, because of the testimony given;
- To be willing to go through a social rehabilitation program, mainly in a protected shelter where victims receive a permit to stay and work and a passport issued by their respective embassy.

On a case-by-case basis, the program can be stopped in the event that the applicant for legal status does not comply with the above requirements. Since Article 18 has been implemented, every year, between 600 and 800 women have benefited from the programme and were granted legal documents which allowed them to become fully autonomous.

IV. The Slave Trade: Women and Minors for Sale

These days, only in Italy can we speak of figures between 50,000 and 70,000 young women – mainly from West Africa, Latin America, Albania and more recently, from Eastern Europe—that are involved in this slave trade. Of these, about 40% are minors, between the ages of 14 and 18. As they are in Italy illegally, it is difficult to have exact statistics as to their number, age, origin and movements.

On the competitive sex market, African women are considered second-class, because they are "black" and do not speak Italian. They are not educated and they are less youthful and slim, therefore they get a lower price for their services. For a routine affair in a car they agree to \$10 or \$15, whereas the Eastern Europeans will earn \$25. For the girls to pay back their debt—which runs as high as \$40,000 to \$60,000 contracted with the new traders who have recruited them and brought them to Italy—, they must undergo, at least, 4,000 acts of sexual intercourse. In addition to this initial debt, they have to meet monthly expenses: \$100 for food, \$250 for lodging, \$250 for the work site (a stretch of pavement), as well as clothing, transportation, and various personal needs. To repay their debt, they have to “work” every day, or every night, seven days a week for no less than two or three years.

On arrival in the destination country, the women's passports or documents are seized with the promise of returning them after completing the debt payment to the slave traders. Unfortunately, documents, which are often forged to begin with, are never returned. As a result, women remain as persons with no identity, no name, no status, no nationality. They gradually lose the sense of who they are. This applies mainly to Nigerian girls who are also subjected to the criminal organization by means of "*voodoo rituals*" (black magic), undertaken in the presence of the witch-craftsman before leaving their homes and travelling to Europe.

The women usually cross several countries before reaching their final destination in Europe. They may pass through Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Holland, Germany, Spain and France, travelling for weeks or months over land, by air or sea. In the case of many Nigerian women today, they cross the Sahara Desert because documents are no longer needed to do so.

For the girls from the East, the network often tricks them into bogus engagements and promises of marriage. They are controlled by men who manipulate their emotions. On the other hand, the Nigerian victims are entrusted to "*mamans*". These are Nigerian women, who turned from being exploited into being exploiters. They teach the new recruits how to work the streets, control them, collect the earnings, parcel out the stretch of pavement where they are to work, punish them in case of resistance, and above all, they keep them subjugated through the "*voodoo rites*" which exert a terrible psychological violence on the victims. Yes, this is women exploiting women!

V. 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 liable to the dangers of street maltreatment, abuse, road accidents and even death (I know three girls who were badly burnt while warming themselves around the fire at night.). Annually, hundreds of girls experience martyrdom on our streets, either from clients, or from maniacs or from traffickers (Glory, a 22-year old girl, was killed by a client who fell in love with her.). Many die in the course of their exhaust-

ing journey, or simply disappear. Other women become pregnant during their journey of being trafficked, with some children being born in the desert. Many times I wondered how such young people can bear so much suffering!

There is also the risk of contracting HIV and AIDS: 10 to 15% of women working the street test HIV+. They face unwanted pregnancies, followed by forced abortions. Women from Eastern Europe have an average of three abortions each. For African women, who hold maternity as the highest value, abortion represents not only the killing of a new life, but also of a culture. Among African women, cases of mental illness are frequent since they are obsessed by the *voodoo rituals*, fearing reprisals against their families back home.

On the street the "prostitute" completely loses her psycho-physical identity, her personal dignity, her freedom of choice. She comes to consider herself 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 encounter – yet she keeps none of her earnings.

VI. From Victims to Citizens: Women Religious Promoting Women

Once aware of the complexity of this "21st century of slave trade," in constant evolution, the Italian Religious who initially responded to this ministry with simple means, later felt the need to be better organized and to have a specific professional formation. To implement the requirements of the new Italian legislation they had to respond adequately to the government's demands and move into networking with other organisations. Our specific role was still rehabilitation and reintegration of victims: putting their lives back together. This is a delicate ministry that requires human and spiritual qualities of touching and healing the wounds, an unconditional love expecting nothing in return, the capacity to listen and understand, without judging or condemning, allowing time to change and to grow, respecting their freedom of choice, ready to face even failure and disappointment.

In Italy, 250 Sisters from 70 different Congregations are providing such help to the victims of human trafficking. They work through 110 structures and offer the following types of assistance:

- ✓ **Outreach Units** for a first contact with the victims on the streets, giving information about alternative solutions to coercive prostitution (Elisabeth, 6 months pregnant, was contacted on the street and helped to escape this way);
- ✓ **Hotline Telephone** – a 24-hour service in all the regions of Italy which has been set up to answer immediate calls for help: 800.290.290;
- ✓ **Drop-in Centres** – to deal with women who call in/search for help;
- ✓ **Sheltering Communities** - there are about 100 small shelters, run by sisters who offer hospitality to 6 to 8 persons at a time for 6 to 12 months, or longer, if necessary. They concentrate on the victims' human, social and spiritual re-integration. Many communities also welcome mothers with children, or pregnant women, to protect them and to safeguard the gift of a life about to be born. The Community becomes a family for these young women. In it, they feel welcomed, loved, understood and supported in their difficult journey of social re-integration.
- ✓ **Professional Training** with language and professional courses;
- ✓ **Restoring Victims to Legality** - assisting victims in the acquisition of documents;
- ✓ **Pastoral Ministry** - to help victims to rediscover their faith; almost all of them come from Christian families and have a strong sense of God and also a sense of guilt;
- ✓ **Temporary Detention Centres** - for two years now, a group of 10 Religious of different nationalities has visited a Temporary Detention Centre in Rome to offer religious, moral and psychological support to women waiting for mass expulsion. Found with no documents, they are kept in the Centre for a maximum of 60 days before being sent back to their countries

of origin, in total despair, empty-handed and labelled as "prostitutes";

- ✓ **A Working and Reflection Group of the JPIC** (Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation) is formed of male and female members of international Congregations to counteract trafficking in human beings. This group has recently prepared a kit with an information and a training program in four languages: English, Italian, Spanish and French. It is one of the best means of raising awareness among religious communities, seminaries, schools, parishes and various youth groups.
- ✓ **A Training Program for 85 Religious**, proposed by the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, Mr. Jim Nicholson, financed by the United States, and organized by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in collaboration with USMI and UISG, took place in Rome, Nigeria, Albania and Romania from January to May, 2004. Women Religious in Poland held a two-week session for 24 sisters, organized by International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC). The formation courses are important means of communication and collaboration with countries of origin to make sisters aware of the problem and of the need for them to get involved in the work of prevention and reintegration of victims who return home broken, disappointed and sick.

VI. Cooperation with Women Religious in Countries of Origin

Our role and our intervention for women in *countries of destination* cannot be incisive if it is not in strict collaboration with the local governments, churches and with the religious communities in the *countries of origin*. In the past few years, we have established channels of cooperation with the Conference of Religious in Nigeria and we have already obtained noteworthy results in prevention campaigns, family tracing, which is assistance of returnees (either on a voluntary basis or forcibly deported).

Thanks to the above-mentioned courses of formation for Religious, we have started our contacts with some Conferences of Major Religious Superiors in Eastern Europe, such as Romania, Albania

and Poland, and we hope to establish contacts of exchange and collaboration with religious of other countries of origin to hit the problem in all its forms.

VII. We Particularly Feel the Urgency of:

- helping religious congregations in countries of origin face the emergency of mass repatriation and support victims with financed projects;
- creating an authentic network with Religious in Eastern Europe;
- organising meetings with all Women Religious groups working in different parts of Europe. This will allow us to meet, to confront, to share our projects, to study new strategies of intervention and to stimulate strong legislative positions against the trafficked and the traffickers;
- urging the Episcopal Conferences of the countries involved in the "trafficking" to assume their responsibility and denounce this social scourge;
- involving the Male Religious congregations who, as of today, are still absent in this fight. Their service would be very important for the formation of young people to the value of respect and relationship, but mainly for the contact and rehabilitation of the "consumers"... men;
- offering full collaboration to all public and private forces, lay and religious, that work in this sector towards a common effort of crushing the "trade" forever;
- collaborating with the mass media to ensure the distribution of accurate information about the problem;
- keeping contacts with the Monasteries, asking the support of their prayers, knowing that, *"If Yahweh does not build the house, in vain do its builders toil"* (Psalm 127, 1);
- giving attention also to the one who, with his constant demands, supports and increases the paid-sex market. The "client" himself is a victim of the consumer system of our society. We are called

to join forces to form and to inform, to recuperate the values of reciprocal respect, of inter-personal and family relations, to find once again balance and harmony, mainly in the man-woman relationship.

VIII. Conclusion

I want to conclude my presentation with a prayer we said at the funeral of Tina Motoc. In this prayer we ask Tina, a 21-year old Romanian girl, who was killed on the street in Italy, to forgive us because we are all responsible for her death as for the death of many other young girls, victims of human trafficking of the invisible chains.

Dearest Tina:

In this last salute, I would like to speak on behalf of many people that are both present and absent. Together we would like to ask your forgiveness for our personal and collective responsibilities. Your young life, so suddenly interrupted thirteen months ago, weighs terribly on our consciences and we need your forgiveness to find the strength to continue the fight against all forms of slavery and exploitation.

❖ *We ask for the forgiveness of your daughter Elisa, whom you left in Romania a few months after her birth; we also ask for the forgiveness of your mother and all the mothers who weep every day for the hundreds of daughters who came to Italy with the dream of a life full of hope but instead are struck by a cruel and humiliating death like yours.*

❖ *Tina, forgive the hypocrisy of our society, which is based on wealth and materialism, and is concerned about technology and progress, but has forgotten how to be respectful of the dignity and sacredness of each individual.*

❖ *Forgive the connivance of those in power who tolerate this new form of slavery and do not want to defeat the racket and organizations of the traffickers of human beings, thereby allowing the destruction of thousands of young and helpless people at the hands of powerful interest groups and shameful earnings.*

❖ *Forgive the law enforcement agents who did not protect and defend you because you were an illegal alien, without identification, and consequently stripped you of your dignity and liberty.*

❖ *Especially forgive those who, every night, looked for you, raped you and used you as an object of pleasure, only to throw you back on the streets like waste, collaborating with your tyrants, increasing their earnings and paying a fee destined to sustain organized crime.*

❖ *Forgive the religious authorities that were not able to shout your sorrow loud enough and denounce the injustice of your exploitation and your reduction to slavery. During the Holy Year of the Great Jubilee you waited in vain for the chains to be broken for you and your street companions, so that "The Lord's year of grace and mercy" (Luke 4, 19) could be special for you too.*

❖ *Forgive the attitudes of many Christians who judged and condemned you as the adulterer of the Gospel because you were a nuisance to them, because you supposedly soiled our streets and humiliated our false sense of shame.*

❖ *I ask your forgiveness, Tina, in the name of all of us women, because we left you alone on the streets to live your drama of solitude, anguish and fear through our indifference and silence.*

❖ *I ask your forgiveness, Tina, even in the name of the killer who mutilated your young body in a barbarous way. But he is not the only one responsible for your death; in fact, before you were struck, you were already dead. How many people had already killed the dreams and expectations of your twenty-one years of life? We are all guilty and co-responsible for your death and for this we invoke the mercy of God.*

Now, we want you to rest in the peace and love of that God who is Father of all the marginalized, the desperate, the humiliated and the despised by history, because he is the one who "cast the mighty from their throne and exalted the humble", he is the one who "filled the hungry and sent away the rich empty-handed (Luke 2, 52-53)." May He now wipe away all your tears and give you the joy and peace of eternal life. May the comfort of our prayers, our solidarity and our participation in this great loss come to little Elisa and your

family. May we stand up to the challenge of defending and liberating all the slaves of the 21st century. Amen.

Many thanks for your interest and your attention.