

“Looking for new ways to extend a hand to women exploited by social structures.”



The “trafficking” of women and minors for work and sexual exploitation challenges our educational mission in their countries of origin, as well as in those where “the victims” are sent.

Sr. Eugenia Bonetti, MC *

Introduction:

The feminine religious communities, faithful to the prophetic and charismatic insights of their Founders, have been, in recent centuries, shining examples in their manner of responding to the needs and forms of poverty of each era.

Almost all the feminine Congregations have looked for ways to respond to and tend to the needs of marginalized women relegated to roles of submission and exploitation. The most efficient manner to remove young women from poverty and vulnerability and to offer them the opportunity of a real freedom which restores the dignity that is rightfully theirs is without a doubt a solid formation and instruction. Even today, many women live marginalized as they did four centuries ago– especially in developing countries. At that time, Jeanne de Lestonnac knew how to listen to and accept the cries for help of so many young women, transforming the emptiness of their “night” into the light of day and offer them life through education.

After four centuries of dedication and experiences which have matured in the instruction of youth throughout the world as they asked for guidance to obtain a place in society, we continue to find ourselves before great challenges due to radical changes. However, -- thanks be to God, -- there continues to exist a charism that is contemporary and filled with vitality even in the midst of a constantly changing society that questions our values and our systems of education and social structures. This reality requires networking and bringing together all the forces who work in this field, to rediscover lost values and nurture the growth of a society that is balanced, harmonic and respectful of the rights and duties of each person created in the image of God.

The aim of this quest is to share, be it with the members of the Company of Mary, be it with the countless persons who work in the area of education and formation, the desire to discover new fields of action and of teaching. The sad state of thousands of women and youth, a great part coming from poor countries and experiencing all times of exploitation, is a great challenge that calls into question our methods of education. Nowadays, there are still many persons who ask for and do not find an extended hand that will guide them towards the light. The exploiters and consumers of the prostitution market are in need of being helped to break the chains of their slavery, of death and of disorder in order to rediscover the true values upon which they may rebuild their lives.

* Coordinator of the program fighting against trafficking of persons, of the USMI – Union of Major Superiors of Italy.

My research and sharing are not based on rhetoric, or on intellectual studies of a phenomenon that is in constant evolution. But rather, I want it to be the sisterly communication of a 13 year long experience lived in direct contact with the “night life”, first in Torino at a Shelter Center for Immigrant Women, and later in Rome, beginning in the year 2000, as the person responsible for the sector concerning “Trafficking” in the USMI. (Union of Major Superiors for Italy)

1. ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

To better understand the phenomenon of the exploitation of so many young women in our streets, forced to sell their bodies, as well as their youth, their dignity and liberty, we must consider some factors that favor and encourage the “trafficking” of women and minors. Only after having understood the problem in its reality as well as how it’s made to appear, will we be able to plan and adopt adequate educational methods.

a) The situation of women in the world today

The face of poverty, of exclusion, of discrimination and exploitation in the world today is a woman’s face. Women represent 80% of the persons who live in conditions of absolute poverty: almost two thirds of the 850 millions of illiterate adults in the world: more than half of those affected with HIV – Aids, between the ages of 15 – 24 years old.

It is the woman who bears the weight of the large family in developing countries;

It is the woman who suffers the high cost of living, due to the scarcity of water, armed conflicts and tribal battles, lack of medicines and the spread of Aids;

It is the woman who cannot always go to school and consequently she is eliminated from high paying jobs or managerial positions;

It is the woman who suffers violence within the domestic walls;

The woman is obliged to leave her homeland to find the security and well-being for herself and her family in other countries;

It is the woman who above all – as in other times – suffers violence in many forms: such as sexual, making of her body the only “wealth” she has been allowed to have and to negotiate. It is an object not always of pleasure, nor a source of support, as is often believed.

The most humiliating thing for all women is, being “exploited”, sold and bought, in other words, feeling she is being used as merchandise. According to the World Organization for Migrants, the trafficking of human beings, especially of women and minors, has been transformed into a veritable worldwide commerce that produces a yearly income of eight thousand million dollars. No country can consider itself alien to this phenomenon, once interests and gains have been put into play, be it for those who “import women and minors” from poor countries, be it for consumers who, with a constant demand, foster and sustain this shameful market. Prostitution is not a new phenomenon, what is new is the taking advantage of the situation of poverty and vulnerability of so many immigrant women: the new slaves of the XXI Century.

It is difficult to give numbers for the trafficking of women. A recent Information Sheet from the UN states that four million women are trafficked from one nation to another, or simply dealt with within a nation. On the other hand, the June 14, 2004, U.S. Information Sheet states that there are about 700,000 – 2,000,000 women and minors being trafficked every year for the sex industry or for work exploitation.

In Europe alone, according to OIM estimations, there is trafficking of about 500,000 women and minors for the same reasons. Italy has a large percentage of victims in this sense. Actually, it is estimated that there are about 50 – 70 thousand women coming from Eastern Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, who live and work in the streets of our cities and in the countryside, including work in night clubs and brothels. Of these women, about 40% are minors, about 14 – 18 years old. They are in Italy without documentation, these having been taken away from them by those who exploit them. Consequently, they live in hiding, making it difficult to have exact statistics.

The greater part of these women, having been seduced into conditions of slavery, come from countries evangelized by missionaries who have shared with their struggles and sufferings as they tried to spread the Christian faith; the Faith that proclaims hope, and freedom, dignity and justice, solidarity and emancipation. Here lies a very big challenge for the missionary Church and for religious congregations whose charism gives specific attention to the education of women, above all that of exploited women.

b) Countries of Origin, Causes, and Categories

There is an well networked organization of traffickers, men and women, who make contact with these victims in their countries of origin, where poverty is rampant, families are numerous, and the youth are uneducated. Consequently, they do not have the opportunity and hope for a different kind of future. In exploiting the economic and social conditions the new oppressors deceive these women and their families promising them a paid job, of course, not being specific about what kind. Afterwards, as is the usual case with all victims of trafficking, the women are brought to Italy clandestinely by various means, thanks to the corruption and complicity of the civil servants of embassies, airports, immigration offices, travel agencies, owners of apartments and hostels, and taxi drivers. The profits are great, risks relatively limited and many persons risk themselves destroying the lives of many young women. Once they have arrived here, after weeks or months, having traveled by plane or, as is the case with the Nigerians, – across the Sahara Desert – they are not given their documents – which for the most part are fraudulent. They lose their name, their identity and freedom. Simply, they no longer know who they are.

For the young women of Eastern Europe, the contacts and negotiation almost always take place by means of a false boyfriend who gives them apparent emotional support. For the Nigerians, the practical negotiation of the victims is entrusted to the *maman*: – Nigerian women who have moved from exploited to exploiters. They prepare the women for the work on the street, they control them, assign them the section of the sidewalk that will be their workplace, they collect all their earnings, punish them in case of rebellion and, above all, they influence them with *voodoo* ceremonies, rites of black magic which take place in the presence of a witch doctor, and cause real psychological violence on the victims.

c. The risks of the street

Besides living in total submission to the traffickers and the *maman* and in the most clandestine manner, these women experience the perils of the street, for example, the bad treatment and abuses, accidents and homicides. Hundreds of young people, every year, suffer martyrdom on our streets brought about by clients, maniacs, or the same traffickers

attempting to settle debts. And, who can count the number of young people who die during the long tiring trips, by land, sea or who simply disappear with no one's knowledge?

There is also the risk of contracting AIDS and of unwanted pregnancies and the consequent abortions. The young women from Eastern Europe suffer an average of three abortions each. For an African woman, who considers motherhood the highest value, abortion does not only mean the ending of a life, but the death of a culture. Many end up mentally disturbed, obsessed by *voodoo* rites and the continuous threats and extortions perpetrated on their families, even though they far away. On the streets, the prostitute completely loses her psycho-physical identity, her personal dignity, her freedom of choice; she experiences herself only as an object, a thing, a product; she is forced to live clandestinely suffering contempt and cultural and social rejection. Only one option remains: that of earning money by selling her body, although she cannot keep anything because she is obliged to settle the contract agreement, made without her knowledge, with the traffickers. It is a debt that generally reaches 60 or 70,000 lira. To settle this debt, the young Nigerian will have to engage in no less than 4,000 sexual services. In addition to the initial debt she must pay room and board.

Countries of destination, the demand promotes the supply.

In the slave chain of the third millennium, the consumer/client is one of the most stable links because it sustains and supports the sex industry. The socio-economic evolution of the rich countries has favored the emancipation of the woman in all areas and has made her competent, no longer submissive. Not all men, however, have followed the same course of growth and liberation and have remained in their positions of dominion, power and search for pleasure. Frequently, in the area of relationships and affectivity they have preferred a quick shortcut with chauvinistic attitudes, treating the woman like an object for pleasure rather than a person, one on whom he can vent his frustrations.

In this evolution sex has been trivialized: it is not considered a mutual gift, as an interpersonal communication, affective relationship, but rather as a true economic product. In this state of affairs, the demand and the supply go hand in hand. If there are many "prostitutes" on our streets, it is because there is a great demand and the immigrant woman, poor, defenseless, without documents and without a country, has been the answer to this demand.

The clients are usually persons between 18 and 65 to 70 years old, from all classes and social rank. 70% are married persons or who live with someone. Unfortunately, little is known or spoken about those who, every night, seek the "prostitute" woman, use her and then throw her away like trash, what in our consumer society is called: "use and throw". This phenomenon, more than considering it a female problem should be faced as a serious **masculine problem**, a problem that breaks and destroys the social and family relations.

2. SLAVERY IN THE XXI CENTURY, NEW CHALLENGE FOR RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

The chain has always been the symbol of all slavery. And it is made up of many links, thus being the case of the chain of these new slaves of our century. The links have names and they are the **victims** of poverty, the **exploiters** with their inconceivable gains, the **clients** with their frustrations, **society** with its opulence and lack of values, **governments** with their corrupt structures, the **Church** and every Christian who is indifferent and silent.

Our passivity and silence in the face of trampled dignity and lost liberty of so many women is itself a responsibility.

3. THE RESPONSE OF RELIGIOUS LIFE: THE IMAGE OF CHARITY

It has been evident on many occasions that women's religious congregation, in spite of decreased numbers, have found the strength to renew themselves, revitalizing their own charisms, and placing themselves at the service of new forms of poverty. A consistent number of women religious were the first to "read" the phenomenon and to develop a new Diakonia of Charity accepting into their own structures women, "victims of trafficking", without fear of soiling their hands or of contamination.

It is the specific testimony of the vitality of so many communities that, facing this challenge, rediscover the relevance of their mission in the church and in the contemporary world.

The same has not happened in the male religious congregations, still absent from this ministry. There is yet much resistance on the part of priests and religious men in drawing close to the "night life" in order to understand it and take steps to respond to the many demands of commercialized sex. Its implication would be a precious service for the formation of youth, for reaching out to and recuperating the "consumers" and for safeguarding the family. The same "client" is victim of a system of consumerism, where every day everything can be desired and bought, including the "poverty" of so many women.

As a church that proclaims "*the preferential option for the poor*", we must assume the new kinds of poverty and unite our forces to form and inform, to recuperate the values of mutual respect, of inter-personal and familiar relations, to rediscover the equilibrium and harmony, above all with regard to men-women relationships.

At present in Italy there are close to 250 women religious, of different Congregations, involved in aid to women victims of trafficking. They work in approximately 110 formed groups, many of which were provided by the same congregations or by Caritas. They collaborate with many other public or private forces, with volunteers or associations, and without putting the identity of the charism at risk. There are more than 4,000 women from various countries sheltered in our communities and being helped to reconstruct their own lives and future.

This service is an expression of the new "*image of charity*" which is also "*a prophetic insight*" and fruit of "*feminine ingenuity*".

Contact with victims offering alternatives to the street life take place through:

Street Units – first contact with the victims carried out by street operators offering information and alternate solutions to forced prostitution; **Green Number** – active 24 hours a day in all regions providing immediate response to whomever asks for help: 800-290-290; **Listening Center** – diocesan or parochial Caritas – providing to women looking for help; **Municipal Windows** – for problems of health, accusations, escape requests; **Communities for 1st and 2nd Welcome** – there about 100 small family homes administered by religious offering shelter to 6-8 persons for a period that varies from 6-12 months and also providing programs of human, social, legal and spiritual formation and reintegration. Many Communities even receive mothers with their small children or pregnant women protecting them and taking care of the life yet to be born. The Community becomes the new family for these young women, where they feel accepted, loved, listened to, understood, supported in their difficult road to recovery and social reintegration leading to a complete recovery. Some of these family-communities are managed by religious of several congregations who work together and also with many lay volunteers. **Professional preparation** – these communities have the support of prepared professionals who offer adequate help so that the woman can integrate her past and look towards the future; the guests receive courses in language and professional preparation for insertion into the working world.



4. RESPONSES AND INTERVENTIONS IN COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN: WORK FOR PREVENTION

The phenomenon of “Trafficking of human beings” is complex and growing. It includes all the countries of this “global village” uniting the two extreme poles: a great poverty on the one hand and comfort on the other. Poverty promotes the supply and comfort the demand. Where there is demand the supply is created to satisfy the requirements of commerce.

It is necessary and urgent to re-establish equilibrium between rich and poor countries, to offer all women the right to live a life worthy of the human person and give the possibility of a future to the same family. This can be accomplished only through information and education of the families, in schools, in parishes, in youth groups, and above all with strong pressure on governments and persons who exercise roles of authority.

5. COOPERATION WITH THE CONFERENCE OF RELIGIOUS IN THE COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

We are conscious of the strength of normal networks existing in the entire world with the presence of so many religious communities as an efficacious means to inform about the risks, to contrast with the phenomenon, to offer alternatives to the exodus and negotiate the actual emergency. In order that this network be efficacious, it should be constantly linked to and informed, conscious of its important role in the defense and protection of the dignity of each woman.

It has been several years now that we, as USMI, have been trying to keep in touch with the Conferences of Religious of the countries of origin in order to have reference points and avenues of collaboration. Unfortunately, because of a series of reasons, we have not always attained our objective. But we are firm in our resolve to continue in this effort, contacting and informing the local conferences and international congregations present in so many countries. We hope to raise awareness regarding the problem and to bring about responses.

6. RESPONSES AND INTERVENTIONS IN THE COUNTRIES OF DESTINATIONS:

The countries of the women’s destination have the task of welcoming and accompanying the victims on their way to recuperation and give them back, out of justice and not of charity, that of which they have been deprived. But even more, they have the delicate task of offering information and educating citizens of all sectors and categories in assuming a proper mentality based on legality, respect, the dignity of each person, the parity of rights and equality between men and women. This has to be given in the first place in the family, in school, in Christian communities, in youth groups, with programs suitable for a correct understanding and living out of their own affectivity and sexuality. However, we cannot forget the big influence that mass media plays in this sector. What image of woman do the means of social communication offer? What place do women have in the consumer society and how is she presented? These are important elements that we have emphasize in the educational projects.

7. PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION OF RELIGIOUS AND LAY PERSONNEL

Conscious of the complexity of this phenomenon, the Italian religious, who initially opened themselves up to this ministry with simple means and without preparation, have felt the need of professional preparation to better respond to this challenge and to collaborate with other persons who work in this sector.

Courses for religious have been held in countries which are the principal target: Italy, Nigeria, Albania, Rumania, Thailand, and Santo Domingo, with the objective of an adequate professional preparation to better understand and take steps in the countries of origin in the work of prevention and the reintegration of victims.

The second phase of the project consists of evaluation meetings and a deeper reflection of the problem, always in the same countries.

8. EXPERIENCES ACCOMPLISHED

There are many positive experiences. One of the most efficient has been building collaborative bridges among the religious of different countries in the immediate response to emergency situations. Among these the collaboration between the USMI and the Conference of Religious in Nigeria has been most efficacious. In the year 2000, at the invitation of USMI, the president and two other religious, came to Italy to get a close look at the situation of so many enslaved Nigerian women. The impact and the lived experience moved them to set up immediately strategic actions of intervention in Nigeria, such as:

- To sensitize all the members of the Conference of Religious and encourage them to open professional schools to offer alternatives.
- To inform the Episcopal Conference of the situation of exploitation and slavery, imported through Europe for the “sex industry”. The Bishops immediately wrote a pastoral letter which was read in all Christian communities during their Sunday services.
- Beginning in the city of Benin, where 90% of the Nigerian women come from, a “Committee upholding the Dignity of Woman,” was formed, with the objective of carrying out a wide **informative campaign** to prevent the “**exodus**” of so many young women from their families, schools, parishes to the “**promised land**”; **to find and protect** the families of the victims in Nigeria against the extortions and repercussions on the part of exploiters; **to shelter and accompany** the young women who decide to return home, to help them in their social reintegration.

Other positive experiences have been the preparation of a **Formation Kit**, a much appreciated educational manual for religious communities, seminaries, schools, parishes and other groups. Initially it has been written in 4 languages, prepared by a Justice and Peace Committee comprised of International Congregations (UISG/USG). Weekly visits are made by groups of religious of various nationalities to a **Center for Temporary Stay**, for the pastoral care of women who are awaiting expulsion due to the lack of proper documentation. Cloistered monasteries have become involved providing them with information with the aim of obtaining their support through prayer and to solicit funds for the projects.

9. CONCRETE PROPOSALS:

To create with all the International Congregations and with the Religious Conferences in the countries of origin, a veritable network of information and collaboration by means of:

- an *ad hoc* office with the presence of a religious responsible at the national level as a contact point and for the exchange of information and formation;
- the availability of religious communities in providing small facilities for shelter, social reinsertion programs for expelled women in need of protection;
- visits of religious personnel between the countries of origin and the destination points to better understand the problem and know how to manage it adequately;
- prepare educational programs that lead to a better understanding of the problem and its consequences for the young women, their families and society. Involve parents, educators and collaborators, in working together in address the issues of offer and demand;
- create a real and proper “network” of communication and collaboration in the sphere of the Congregations and of the educational institutions together;
- to motivate the Episcopal Conferences of the countries involved in “Trafficking” so that they can assume responsibility and strongly denounce this social plague;
- to involve male religious institutes, be it in the formation of youth, be it in the contact with and recuperation of consumers;
- to offer full cooperation with public and private forces, religious and lay, that work in this sector;
- to collaborate with mass media for precise information on the problem;
- to create professional schools in the countries of origin offering opportunities for education and work to youth, thus avoiding their falling prey to the trickery of traffickers.

10. CONCLUSION:

Let us heed the warning and the encouragement of the Holy Father in the Post-Synod Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Europa* (The Church in Europe): *The Church does not stop raising its voice to denounce the injustices and the violence perpetrated against women, in any place and circumstance in which they take place. This requires that the laws that protect women really be applied and efficacious means be put into practice against the humiliation of the feminine image in commercial propaganda and **against the flagellation of prostitution.***” (No. 43).

May Jeanne De Lestonnac, the strong and enterprising Woman, the Woman of great insights, who has lived her femininity and maternity in the fullness of grace and surrender, accompany us, consecrated women, as well as the other women, *-the strong and the weak, the rescued and those still being exploited,* - so that we may discover the great value of our femininity, identity, dignity and liberty, and to reconstruct together with all the forces that seek to build the Kingdom, the culture of true love, of life, of solidarity, of justice and of peace.

Rome, September 8, 2005 – Feast of the Nativity of Mary