

Women exploited by our life systems.

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 to which “the victims” are destined.

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Introduction:

The feminine religious communities, faithful to prophetic and charismatic intuitions of their Founders, have been throughout the history of recent centuries, shining examples for 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 sound emancipation which will return to them the dignity that is rightfully theirs, is without doubt a solid formation and instruction. Even today, many women live marginalized as they did four centuries ago—especially in developing countries . Then Jeanne de Lestonnac knew how to listen to and accept the cries for help of so many young women to transform the vacuum of their night into the light of day and of life through education.

After four centuries of dedication and experiences matured through the instruction of youth who were asking throughout the world for guidance to obtain a place in society, we find ourselves yet before great challenges due to radical changes. However, -- thanks be to God, -- there continues alive a charism so current, yet it has to face a constantly changing society that questions our values and our systems of life and education. This reality requires networking and bringing together all the forces who work in this field, to rediscover lost values and tend to 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 in great part coming from poor countries and living the experience of exploitation and night life is for us today, a great challenge that questions our own educational methods. Nowadays, there are still many persons who ask for and do not find an extended hand that will guide them towards the light. The same exploiters and consumers of sexing return for money are in need of being helped to break the chains of their slavery, of death and disorder in order to rediscover the true values upon which they may be able to rebuild their lives.

My search and sharing are not based on rhetoric nor on intellectual studies of a phenomenon in constant evolution, but they want to be the sisterly communication of an experience of 13 years lived in direct contact with the “world of the night”, first in Torino at a Center to Shelter Immigrant Women and later in Rome, from the beginning of the year 2000, as the person responsible for the sector concerning “Trafficking” in the USMI.

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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 seem, will we be able to plan and adopt adequate educational methods.

a) *The situation of women, today, in the world*

The face of poverty, of exclusion, of discrimination and exploitation in the world assumes nowadays above all, 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, because of the scarcity of water, because of the armed conflicts and tribal battles, because of the 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 in other countries the security and well-being for herself and her family;

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

The most humiliating for all women is above all, being “exploited”, sold and bought, in other words, feeling she is being used as merchandise. 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, according to the World Organization for Migrants. 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 its 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 ONU states that four million women are trafficked from one nation to another, or simply dealt with within a nation, while 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, and they are in Italy without documentation because these were taken away from them by the same exploiters, consequently, they are in hiding and it is difficult to have exact statistics.

The greater part of these women, having been seduced to situations of slavery, come from countries that have been evangelized by missionaries who have shared with them the struggles and sufferings as they tried to spread the Christian faith; the Faith that announces hope, and liberty, dignity and justice, solidarity and emancipation. It is a very big challenge for the missionary Church and for religious congregations which have as charism the specific attention to and education of women, above all that of exploited women.

b) Countries of Origin, Causes, and Categories

There is an articulate 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 and, consequently, do not have the opportunity and hope of a different future. In exploiting the economic and social situation, the new oppressors deceive these women and their families promising them a paid job, of course, not that of the street. Afterwards, as it usually happens with all victims of trafficking, the women are brought to Italy clandestinely in different ways, 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 traveling by plane or, as it now happens with the Nigerians, – across the Sahara Desert – they are not given their documents – which finally are almost always false – thus 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 happen almost always by means of the false boyfriend who supports them effectively, while as 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 risks of the street, for example, the bad treatment and abuses, accidents and homicides. Hundreds of young people, every year, suffer martyrdom on our streets caused by the clients, maniacs, or the same traffickers because of settling debts. And, who would be able to count the number of young people who die during the long tiring trips, by land, sea or simply disappearing with no one's knowledge?

There is also the risk of contracting AIDS and the unwanted pregnancy with 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 interruption of a beginning life, but the death of a culture. Many are they who end with mental disturbances, obsessed by the *voodoo* rites and the continuous threats and extortions perpetrated on their families although far away. On the streets, the prostitute completely loses her psychophysical identity, her personal dignity, her liberty of choice; she lives the experience of being only an object, a thing, a product; she has to live with her clandestine way and suffer the contempt and cultural and social rejection. Only one option remains: that of earning money selling her body, although she cannot keep anything, because she has to settle the contract agreement, made without her knowledge, with the traffickers, a debt that generally reaches 60 or 70,000 lira. To settle this debt, the young Nigerian will have to give herself to no less than 4,000 sexual services. In addition to the initial debt she must pay all the expenses of room and board.

Countries of destination, the demand favors the offering.

In the chain of the slaves of the third millennium, the consumer/client is one of the more 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 supported in their positions of dominion, power and search for pleasure. Frequently in the field of relationships, and affectivity they have preferred a quick shortcut with chauvinistic relations, inclusive because the woman does not interest him, he does not consider her a person but only an object for his pleasure, on which to vent his frustrations.

In this evolution sex has been trivialized: it is not considered a mutual gift, as interpersonal communication, affective relationship, but rather as a true economic commerce. In this state of affairs, the demand and the offering 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 conditions. 70% are married persons or who live together. Unfortunately, little is known or spoken about those who, every night, seek the "prostitute" woman, use her and then throw her away like trash or as nowadays our consumer society proposes: "use and throw". This phenomenon, more than considering it a female problem should be faced as a serious **masculine problem**, a problem that cracks and destroys the same social and familiar relations.

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

The chain is always the symbol of all slavery and as it is made up of many links, in like manner the chain of these new slaves of our century. The links have names and they are of the **victims** with their poverty, of the **exploiters** with their inconceivable gains, of the **clients** with their frustrations, of **society** with its opulence and lack of values, of **governments** with their systems of corruption, of the **Church** and of every Christian with indifference and silence.

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

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

On many occasions it has been seen how the feminine Religious Life, in spite of difficulties such as the decrease in numbers and others, has found strength to renew itself, revitalizing its own charisms, and placing itself in the service of new forms of poverty. A consistent number of religious women were the first to "read" the phenomenon and to develop a new Diakonia of Charity accepting in its own structures women "victims of trafficking" without fear of soiling their hands or of contamination.

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

The same has not happened in the masculine religious life, still absent in this ministry. There still is much resistance on the part of priests and religious men to getting close to the world of the night in order to comprehend 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 the reaching out to and recuperating the "*consumers*" and for the safeguarding of 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 interpersonal 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 structured groups, many of which were provided by the same congregations or by Caritas, collaborating with many other public or private forces, of 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 “*fantasy of charity*” which is also “*a prophetic intuition*” and fruit of “*feminine ingenuity*”.

The contacts with victims to offer alternatives to street life are done through:

Street Units – first contact with the victims carried out by street operators to offer information and alternate solutions to forced prostitution; **Green Number** – active 24 hours in all regions to give an immediate response to whomever asks for help: 800-290-290; **Listening Center** – of diocesan or parochial Caritas – to shelter 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 to shelter 6-8 persons for a period that varies from 6–12 months and also to offer programs of human, social, legal and spiritual formation and reintegration. Many Communities receive even mothers with their small children or pregnant women to protect them and take 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 which will take them 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” complex and in continual increase, includes all the countries of this “global village” that unites the two extreme poles: a great poverty on the one hand and comfort on the other. Poverty favors the offering and comfort the demand. Where there is demand the offering 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 the information and the formation in the families, in schools, in parishes, in youth groups, and above all with a 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 the natural networks which already exist in the entire world with the presence of so many religious communities, as efficacious means to inform

about the risks, to contrast with the phenomenon, to offer alternatives to the exodus and negotiate the actual emergency. So that this network can be efficacious, it should be constantly linked to and informed, conscious of its important role in defense and protection of the dignity of each woman.

It has been several years 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 points of reference and 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, with the hope to sensitize with relation to the problem and stimulate 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 to return to them, for justice and not for charity, that of which they have been deprived, but even more, they have the delicate task of offering information and formation to educate the citizens of all sectors and categories in order that they assume a correct mentality based on legality, respect, the dignity of each person, the parity of rights and equality between man and woman. This has to be given in the first place in the family, in school, in Christian communities, in youth groups, with programs proper 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 our means of social communication offer? What place does woman have in consumer society and how is she presented? These are important elements that we have to make stand out in the educational projects.

7. PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION OF RELIGIOUS AND LAY PERSONNEL

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

Courses for religious have been held in countries which have been principally hit by the phenomenon: Italy, Nigeria, Albania, Rumania, Thailand, and Santo Domingo, having as objective an adequate professional preparation to better understand and take steps in the countries of origin to run the work of prevention and reintegration of the victims.

The second phase of the project consists of encounters for evaluation and deepening in the program, always in the same countries.

8. EXPERIENCES ACCOMPLISHED

Many are the positive experiences lived through. One of the most efficient has been the creation of bridges of collaboration among religious of the different countries to respond immediately 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 have a look at the reality 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, for example:

- 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 with respect to the situation of exploitation and slavery, imported through Europe for the "industry of sex". The Bishops

immediately wrote a pastoral letter which was read in all Christian communities during their Sunday services.

- To begin in Benin City, from where 90% of the Nigerian women came, a “Committee to uphold the Dignity of Woman,” with the objective to carry 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, for a 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, in the beginning in 4 languages, prepared by a group of JPIC 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 for not having documents. Implication of cloistered monasteries by means of information, with the aim to obtain their support through prayer and to share help for the projects.

9. CONCRETE PROPOSALS:

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

- an office *ad hoc* with the presence of a religious responsible at the national level as point of reference for contacts and interchange of information and formation;
- the availability of religious communities for small structures to shelter, for projects of social reinsertion of expelled women in need of protection;
- interchange of visits of religious personnel between countries of origin and of destination to better understand the phenomenon and know how to manage it adequately;
- prepare educational programs that lead to the knowledge of the phenomenon and its consequences for the young women, their families and society. Implicate the parents, the educators and collaborators, in order to work better in the face of the reality of the offering and the demand;
- create a true and proper “network” of communication and collaboration in the sphere of the Congregations and of the educational institutions to act well together;
- to stimulate the Episcopal Conferences of the countries implicated in “Trafficking” so that they can assume their own responsibilities and strongly denounce this social plague;
- to involve masculine religious institutes be it in the formation of youth, be it in the contact with and recuperation of consumers;
- to offer full cooperation to public and private forces, religious and lay, that work in this sector;
- to collaborate with mass media for a correct information of the problem;
- to create professional schools in the countries of origin to offer opportunities of formation and work to youth, thus avoiding their falling prey to the trickery of traffickers.

10. CONCLUSION:

Let it be for us all the warning and the encouragement of the Holy Father by means of 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 humiliating feminine images in commercial propaganda and against the flagellation of prostitution.*” (No. 43).

May Jeanne De Lestonnac, the strong and enterprising Woman, the Woman of great intuitions, who has lived her femininity and maternity in fullness of grace and surrender, accompany us, consecrated women, as well as the other women, *-the strong and the weak, the rescued and those who are 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.