News
Trafficking



Sisters tie ribbons with the name of their country and a trafficking survivor with whom they have worked with Sept. 27 at the 10th anniversary gathering of Talitha Kum in Rome. Sisters later took a different ribbon with the intention of keeping that survivor in their prayers. (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)



by Soli Salgado

View Author Profile
ssalgado@ncronline.org

Join the Conversation

Rome — October 3, 2019

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Sr. Kathleen Bryant felt the effects of Talitha Kum firsthand from California when she got an email from a fellow Religious Sister of Charity who lives in Nigeria three weeks before the umbrella organization's Sept. 21-27 gathering in Rome.



"She had rescued three girls, but one of them was snatched and dragged to Ivory Coast" and later taken to Ghana, Bryant said. The sister in Nigeria, knowing Bryant was involved in anti-trafficking, asked if she could help.

Bryant reached out to Comboni Missionary Sr. Gabriella Bottani, the international coordinator of Talitha Kum, for a contact in Ghana. An umbrella network of networks, Talitha Kum unites sisters all around the world who are involved in anti-trafficking ministries.

Shortly after, the Daughter of Charity based in Ghana was able to locate the 15-year-old, who was then being sold at a local marketplace and is now in the process of being rescued. (Bryant, to her surprise, met the Ghanaian sister in Rome at the recent gathering celebrating 10 years of Talitha Kum.)

"We try to work with police agencies and forces and coalitions, [but it's a] slow process, working with these organizations," she said. "Whereas sisters are on the ground; they can look and find and act."

At the Talitha Kum gathering, sisters shared how they, indeed, look and find and act, rising to the occasion to combat trafficking in all its forms, illustrating how one vast continent or small country can contain so many complexities within its borders.



Sisters hug one another in gratitude of the anti-trafficking work they do Sept. 27, the last day of the Talitha Kum 10th anniversary gathering in Rome. (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)

Europe

Mercy Sr. Lynda Dearlove, founder and CEO of the charity Women at the Well, frequently spends time at King's Cross, the original red-light district of London. Dearlove's work providing services to women affected by prostitution enables them "to exit at their own speed in their own way."

The services the charity offers — including drug treatment, showers and laundry, counseling and access to job training, education and state benefits — are to "build up that resilience, enabling them to take the next step to move on," she said.

Yet Dearlove said her biggest work is in changing attitudes. "But to do that, you have to first change the law."

"I believe that the woman who is sold in prostitution should not be further victimized by a law that penalizes her for that very exploitation. But everything else should be criminal: those who purchase the women and use and abuse them, those who profit from, those who manage those situations."

Dearlove said her focus is on affecting the language used within the legal discussions on modern slavery and trafficking, and on working at the national level and with the Holy See and the United Nations.

"Unless we change those systems of oppression, it doesn't matter how many we rescue because there will be more women brought in," she said. "It is about supply and demand. If we don't do something to stop demand, the laws actually create a situation that the traffickers thrive from. ... If you traffic drugs, it's used once, whereas a woman trafficked into sexual exploitation gives again and again."

Almost 2,000 miles away in Malta, an island south of Italy that's become a port for African migrants, Good Shepherd Sr. Margaret Gonzi has spent the last few years learning about the ties trafficking shares with migration and domestic violence, her two areas of focus.



Good Shepherd Sr. Margaret Gonzi, who ministers in Malta (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)

Gonzi said the Maltese government has "always been welcoming" of migrants and would "do its best to help them and not send them back."

This year, with Gonzi's involvement, the government launched its first national anti-trafficking campaign, Human Like You, to raise awareness on the exploitation of foreign workers. Gonzi has worked to expand the anti-trafficking sphere of influence by speaking on radio stations, at large conferences, and to university students.

This month, her congregation will open a "second stage shelter" for women, Santa Bakhita, named for St. Josephine Bakhita. While the first shelter in Gonzi's convent has focused on immediate needs for women either vulnerable to trafficking or escaping it, she said the new shelter is more about empowerment: teaching life skills such as budgeting or job training, for example, or providing trauma care.

Africa

With a civil war dividing the English- and French-speaking regions of Cameroon, Sr. Mercy Muthoni last year felt it was time to formalize her relationships in anti-trafficking and begin a Cameroonian Talitha Kum network.

A Missionary Sister of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Muthoni works in the country's northwestern English-speaking region, "an area that is very poor, where farmers live hand to mouth," where the education system has been suffering since the war began, where houses are being burned down and refugees are on the move to Nigeria and neighboring countries, she said.

All of that has heightened the severity of trafficking, she added, particularly for children: "For three years, they have had no access to education, so they are on the streets," more vulnerable to being forced or lured into cheap labor.

When she arrived in Cameroon from Kenya in 2006, Muthoni worked with teenage mothers. Realizing that many children in the community didn't go to school, she started a youth group and choir, but "from time to time, a child would disappear. That struck me. I would visit their homes, and those children had been taken, but who takes them, there is no agreement."

She had also learned of a "mass exodus to the Middle East," with girls ending up in shelters throughout Kuwait or Lebanon. Those they were able to bring home with money from Talitha Kum or the International Organization for Migration returned with stories of sexual abuse, forced labor, and having been "sold and resold." Most come back without any of their documents, making reintegration a difficult task.

After sharing with her community and bishop, Muthoni formed a small group that was sponsored to do a nine-month program, enabling her to move to a diocese of 23 parishes to assess the scale of this problem.

"We didn't call it a network then," she said. "We were just friends sharing a ministry."

But now, with the war, "it has become more disturbing, because even movement has been restricted," Muthoni said, adding that her trip to Rome for the Talitha Kum gathering was a complicated endeavor. With roads sometimes only open for two days a week, "you don't travel far because you don't know what you will meet in the next village."

Within the country's French-speaking zone, she said, "children are taken like cheap labor," signing contracts agreeing to be paid at the end of two years. But at the end of their contracted time, they're instead thrown to the streets with no means to get home, many having been "beaten, burned, ironed, internally ripped."



Sr. Mercy Muthoni, a Missionary Sister of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary in Cameroon (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)

In the last year, Muthoni started connecting with Bottani to try to establish a shelter for victims in Cameroon, having received Talitha Kum's formal anti-trafficking training last year.

"Now the cry is so loud. People are really in danger," Muthoni said.

Some institutions are not to be trusted, Muthoni said. The police force, for example, profits off issuing passports for traffickers who need them, she said, and helps with smuggling through back doors in airports if necessary.

"It's a very tight network," Muthoni said.

While the country adopted a law against human trafficking in 2011, nobody has been prosecuted for the crime, she said. When Muthoni has turned in traffickers, they've been released two days later, and she's suffered threats and harassment as a consequence.

"I have to be very careful, because at the end of the day, they move very freely and continue with their business," she said.

Opting instead for a grassroots approach, Muthoni and fellow sisters go to schools, families and church groups to educate them on how to stay safe and avoid suspicious contracts or job offerings.

"I went to some villages where for 10 years, parents didn't know where their children had gone. Some have received their dead bodies in very bad shape, and how they have died or where they have died, nobody knows," she said.

"It's very tricky because it's like two countries in one, and it's become very dangerous."

On the southeast coast of Africa, Carmelite Sr. Annah Theresa Nyadombo focuses on awareness-raising throughout Zimbabwe.



Carmelite Sr. Annah Theresa Nyadambo from Zimbabwe (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)

Because some students travel 5 miles through rural land to reach the nearest school, Nyadombo teaches students the value of traveling in groups to avoid kidnapping. For parents, she stresses the necessity of visiting the university recruiting their child to avoid being lured to a nonexistent college in another country as a trap for trafficking.

With high inflation in the country, Nyadombo said, parents frequently cross the border to buy cheap goods — usually without their papers on hand — and find themselves roped into trafficking in another country without the documentation to come back home. Other times, they take jobs in neighboring countries like South Africa. When a child is left alone and the "family unit [is] already disrupted," the children become easy targets for traffickers, she said.

"Traffickers are very kind to you. They first become your friend, so it's necessary for us to educate people on how to identify a trafficker and ask, 'What is his or her interest?' Usually, it's not a stranger who comes to you; it's someone close from church or work or school."

"Being educated is a form of self-defense," she said.

The Americas

Guardian Angel Sr. Carmela Gibaja Izquierdo, the representative of Central America's regional Talitha Kum network, Red Ramá, describes herself as the "animator" for the sisters in El Salvador who work against trafficking.

Gibaja and her team prevent trafficking by educating children and young adults in school and parish groups. They also offer informative workshops in different parishes, emphasizing the link between migration and trafficking. (Gibaja said hundreds of migrants leave El Salvador every day because of the country's gangs.)

When she first got involved in Talitha Kum in 2012, she said, there was very little consciousness around trafficking; two years later, the country established a law against human trafficking where there was previously just a penal code.



Guardian Angel Sr. Carmela Gibaja Izquierdo, right, ministers in El Salvador and is a representative of Central America's regional Talitha Kum network, Red Ramá. (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)

"And as far as people who work with the migrant population, there's more awareness of human trafficking, and I have to say that in this area, we were incredibly influential," she said. "We were always the ones to make the connection between migration and trafficking."

In Peru, Sr. Ana Vilca said, trafficking has become more of a risk in the country's mining zones. "There are brothels in those areas, and it seems the women get younger and younger — in fact, it's more apt to say 'girls' than 'women.' Because mining tends to happen outside the cities, it's quite easy to take the girls out to those peripheries to be at the demand of the men who work and live there."

When Lima hosted the Pan-American games in July, the regional Talitha Kum network, Red Kawsay, partnered with different church and state organizations for a campaign against human trafficking, Play for Life.

"Trafficking networks target these great numbers of tourists who come for the tournaments, using them to get customers," said Vilca, a Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. "We reached a lot of people in our awareness-raising work. It was very successful."

Asia and Oceania

In Australia, the organization Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans has been focusing on labor exploitation, particularly with foreigners who come to work in agriculture, cleaning or hospitality.

More recently, the organization's work has focused on Catholic hospitals, helping them to detect signs of trafficking among patients admitted to the emergency room and to promote awareness regarding the products the hospital systems buy.

Christine Carolan, national executive officer of the organization (which includes laypeople), said they ask hospitals to look into slavery-free supply chains, advocating for them to be more conscious of the products they buy, such as rubber gloves, and the cheap labor used to make them.

When forced marriage was on the rise, Carolan said the group worked on legislation that banned it in 2013.

Advertisement

But the issue of forced marriage and bride trafficking remains a prevalent form of trafficking almost 5,000 miles away in India. Nearly 34,000 people were kidnapped for marriage in 2016, according to the National Crime Records Bureau.

"Government and police turn a blind eye to that because it's controlled by the mafia," Bethany Sr. Jyoti Pinto said.

And while this is more common in the northern region, different parts of India grapple with varying versions of trafficking, Pinto said.

In agrarian communities, child labor is a problem, as "land laws hold them for generations," she said. Organ trafficking occurs sporadically, which is "difficult to trace, but it's there," mainly for kidneys and eyes. And in the south, labor trafficking is most common, as agencies recruit Indians from the north with the promise of

good jobs in the south, where labor is expensive.

"Only once they land there do they know they have no way of coming home," she said.

In the larger cities and slums, girls (especially immigrants from Bangladesh and Nepal) are often victims of sex trafficking.

Pinto said because rescue operations are often too risky, sisters network with organizations that have the capacity to do them, though sisters in Mumbai occasionally go undercover on rescue missions with them. Sisters instead take in the girls at their shelters after they've been rescued and focus on reintegration. Other sisters help as lawyers, while some devote themselves to spreading awareness.

"India is a highly patriarchal society," said Good Shepherd Sr. Therese Meera Varickamackel. "What the man says is the rule of the day, and that's it. Women can't think twice, just listen. ... It is important for women to be economically dependent."

"The patriarchal mindset needs to be trashed, and only with gender equality and justice. Then we can accept and own up to what's taking place."

[Soli Salgado is a staff writer for Global Sisters Report. Her email address is ssalgado@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter: @soli_salgado.]

This story appears in the **Talitha Kum 2019** feature series. View the full series.