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Sr. Dorothy Chinyere Okoli at the Missionary Sisters of St John Paul II of Mary in Nkwelle Ezunaka, Anambra, Nigeria, in October. Her organization, Save Young Girls Motherhood Foundation, is providing free rehabilitation and counseling programs for young girls trapped in prostitution in hotels and brothels across the southeastern states of Nigeria. (GSR photo/Valentine Iwenwanne)



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NKWELLE EZUNAKA, Nigeria — November 16, 2021

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Since her work began earlier this year with a new ministry, Sr. Dorothy Chinyere Okoli of the [Missionary Sisters of St. John Paul II of Mary](#) — a new Catholic women religious institute she established in Nkwelle Ezunaka in Anambra, one of Nigeria's southeastern states — has dedicated much of her time visiting hotels to rehabilitate and counsel young women trapped in prostitution due to lack of care and assistance from their families, government and the society.

Born in the small town in Awka South, Anambra state, located in the southern corner of Nigeria in 1974 where her father sold men's shoes as a trader, Okoli is the second child of seven children in her family.

In 1988, when she was a student in high school at Onitsha, a city on the eastern bank of the Niger River in Anambra state, she and her parents attended a monthly crusade hosted by a renowned Catholic priest in the region, Fr. Emmanuel Edeh, commonly known as [Father Edeh](#), a Catholic priest of the Holy Ghost congregation and founder of the Center for Peace, Justice and Reconciliation, a religious organization.

Her desire to become a nun was influenced by one of Edeh's sermons about accepting Christ and living a religious life. From age 15, she nurtured the ambition but was turned down by a congregation she wanted to enter in 1993 because of her frequent illness from fever and abdominal pain. So, she prayerfully waited until 2010, when she joined the Trinitarian Sisters where she was called to a religious life of chastity and service.

She did her postulancy from 2010 to 2011, had her novitiate between 2011 and 2012 before the sickness started again. But she finally was healed after visiting the St. Thomas Cathedral Basilica and National Shrine of St. Thomas, a Roman Catholic minor basilica in Santhome, in the city of Chennai, India, by the help of Franciscan sisters.

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Before joining the Trinitarian Sisters, she graduated from the Nwafor Orizu College of Education in Nsugbe, Anambra, where she studied economics and Igbo language. She also had obtained a national certificate in education from Enugu State University of Technology where she studied guidance and counseling. She then earned her master's degree in English from Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University.

Okoli made her first vows in 2016 in her new ministry with the Missionary Sisters of St John Paul II of Mary, established same year. The ministry also cares for orphans and provides them with free education. She will make her final vows next year.

In July this year, she founded the Save Young Girls Motherhood Foundation, an apostolate established under her ministry to rehabilitate commercial sex workers.

### **GSR: As a nun, why are you visiting hotels to speak to young women?**

*Okoli:* Visiting hotels to speak to young girls wasn't something I believed would be part of my work. I started seeing the need to do this work when I began to have young women confide in me when they visited me here in the convent to share their problems, their experience of sufferings. They often narrate horrible experiences that they have had in life, how it affects their emotional, psychological and mental well-being.

Some even go as far as telling me that they are getting tempted to take to sleeping with men for money. Present-day young girls are suffering in the hands of men who take advantage of their vulnerability, they do all kinds of things with them with fat promises, thereby luring them into having sex with them.

Some of these girls have vocational skills but are faced with challenges of funding to set up their businesses, so these men make promises to them with conditions attached.

A lot of them are making efforts to be responsible daughters, but poverty and unemployment puts them under undue pressure and desperation for survival, which makes them susceptible to falling victim to men who want sex in return.

I had heart-wrenching discoveries after visiting hotels in both Anambra and Delta states. In September, I visited three hotels in Delta state, it was an eye opener and a



horrible sight for me. I discovered that [there are more] girls in those hotels than the ones I have met here in Anambra state.



Ada Okafor poses for photo in Anambra, Nigeria. She got trapped in the business of prostitution due to lack of care and assistance after losing her parents more than 10 years ago. She's caring for her 10-year-old child, whom she conceived while in junior secondary school in her village in Enugu State, and for her two younger siblings, too. She has been seeking help from Sr. Dorothy Chinyere Okoli and her organization, Save Young Girls Motherhood Foundation. (GSR photo/Valentine Iwenwanne)

Before embarking on that journey, I prayed and hoped for the best, and as God would have it, many of the girls were welcoming. They even came out and hugged me, some of them took my phone and started posing and taking photos with it.

The girls lamented sorrowfully, saying that they don't want to be there but found themselves in such a situation because of the terrible condition their families are in. One of the girls said she hopes to rent a shop and open a small tailoring business so she can sustain herself and siblings back home as soon as she gathers enough money. Hearing that was so touching for me.

They pay rent to the hotel owners on a daily basis. Sometimes when they get sick and unable to sleep with men, the hotel owners will ask them to pay even when they don't have any other means to get money. They have no place they call home except the hotel rooms where they live and sleep with men.

**Would you say that your work reflects the role of the Catholic Church in addressing problems of this kind?**

Yes, it does reflect the role of the Catholic Church in addressing societal decays and problems of this kind. I was inspired to establish a religious women institute called Missionary Sisters of St. John Paul II of Mary through the footsteps of Pope John Paul II, who we all know lived a simple life worth emulating. He traveled the whole world doing good to humanity, seeking souls for Christ, both Catholics and non-Catholics, Christians and non-Christians.

So, his lifestyle mirrors what I am doing, and I am following his footsteps, not just as a Catholic religious, but as a daughter of the most high God who I am called to serve, and our mother Mary.

**Aside from meeting these women and getting them off the streets, what are other challenges you encounter doing this work?**

The challenges are numerous, but the one that is affecting our work the most is lack of funding. We have many of the girls, and we hope to meet more of them who would be needing one assistance or the other.

When I visited a particular hotel here in Anambra, one of them rushed towards me immediately when she saw me and started recounting her needs, asking for help and saying that she doesn't like this place because it fetches her no money, and this disturbs my mind each time I recall her words to me.

They call me on the telephone to come and take them off the streets, but I do not have the required financial capacity and accommodation to help all of them.





Gift Gabriel in Anambra, Nigeria. She acquired sewing skills before losing her parents in 2018 and 2019. She couldn't establish the business due to lack of funding, so she took to prostitution to fend for her three younger sisters. Her uncle took over her parents' properties and sent she and her younger siblings out of the house after the death of her parents. She has been seeking help from Sr. Dorothy Chinyere Okoli and her organization, Save Young Girls Motherhood Foundation. (GSR photo/Valentine Iwenwanne)

**Are there programs that you have targeted at helping to rehabilitate them and help them rebuild their lives?**

The truth is, many of these girls are underprivileged in the sense that they don't have people to help or assist them achieve their dreams. Some of them are orphans who dropped out of school just to fend for their younger [siblings] who also have nobody to assist them. So, the first thing we recognize influencing their decision to

do this work is poverty and unemployment.

From my interaction from them, they wish to go home but have nothing to fall back upon. So, we try to help them by counseling them to help them decide to pull out from the trade and make them realize their worth in the society.

We provide them with skill acquisition programs like tailoring, hair dressing, trading and other skills that can put food on their table. We always try to find out what type of skills they desire to acquire. Some will even tell you that they have perfected one or two skills but have no funds to start up the business.

I always visit them with food, snacks and other gift items, and they are pleased with this gesture. That's one of the things that endear them to me and made it easy for me to speak to them, and they joyfully welcome me. I use that opportunity to explain my mission and reason for visiting them. We discuss like sisters and relations, and they open up to me on their problems and challenges.

Today, some of them have left the hotels and have gone back to their families' homes after my counseling without even waiting for more help. I wish to reintegrate them back into the society and to engage them with meaningful skills. For those who can do business, I wish to set up businesses of their choice, even if it's a small stall, but unavailability of funding makes it challenging.