News
Q&As



Sr. Abby Avelino, pictured here second from the right, participates in World Youth Day 2023 in Lisbon, Portugal, with Talitha Kum's international team and youth supporters. (Courtesy of Abby Avelino)



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Editor's note: *On Feb. 8, the Catholic Church recognizes the International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking, established in 2015 by Pope Francis on the feast day of St. Josephine Bakhita, the patron saint of Sudan and victims of human trafficking, whose story of slavery has become an inspiration to fight this modern-day exploitation. To participate in the International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking, click here.*

In 2022, Maryknoll Sr. Abby Avelino became the third international coordinator of Talitha Kum, the sister-led global network that targets human trafficking. It was a cause that called to her as a pastoral worker while missioned in Japan, where she met and accompanied many migrants from all over the world and, particularly, migrant women from the Philippines.

Avelino, who herself had immigrated to the United States from the Philippines with her family, worked in a multicultural parish as sister-in-charge at St. Ignatius Church in Tokyo and at the Kalakasan Migrant Women Empowerment Center. The center addresses the needs of migrant women who are domestically abused or exploited. There, Avelino met numerous women who had been deceived and exploited by traffickers.

"These encounters triggered something in me to become involved in the anti-trafficking ministry. We started Talitha Kum Japan in 2016, which aims to advocate for the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees. Then I served as Talitha Kum's regional coordinator for Asia, with a focus on understanding and responding to the needs of national networks in 16 countries," she said.



Sr. Abby Avelino (right) celebrates World Youth Day 2023 with a Talitha Kum member from Brazil. Talitha Kum's booth featured painted hands to advocate for the prevention of human trafficking. Avelino said her team met with hundreds of young people who participated in raising awareness against human trafficking. (Courtesy of Abby Avelino)

Economic instability caused by COVID-19 has made people more vulnerable to trafficking, she noted.

"We learned a lot during the pandemic. Using virtual technology, 17 monthly webinars were organized during that time, with an average of 250 participants every month," she said, adding the networks in Asia have expanded enormously, reaching many religious congregations, and a Youth Ambassadors program was initiated.

As Avelino, now based in Rome, took over the leadership role of Talitha Kum from Comboni Missionary Sr. Gabriella Bottani, they worked closely during the transition period.

"I learned a lot from her, particularly in strengthening the networking and collaboration among Talitha Kum with international organizations and agencies, Catholic and non-Catholic organizations, and others. This aspect of networking and collaboration is the key for Talitha Kum networks in the fight against this human trafficking phenomenon," she said.



In November 2023, Sr. Abby Avelino traveled to Nairobi to meet with sisters in Talitha Kum Kenya in recognition of their grassroots work. (Courtesy of Abby Avelino)

Talitha Kum marks its 15th anniversary this year and is initiating several new programs. It also is ramping up training for young ambassadors at the international, regional and local levels in anticipation of mobilizing its program for young people alongside the 2025 Jubilee. Avelino described these plans with Global Sisters Report and explained some of the challenges that lie ahead.

***GSR*: What are you excited about for Talitha Kum in 2024 and the coming years?**

Avelino: Talitha Kum welcomes 2024 with hope in journeying together in dignity. We continue the invitation to all people of goodwill to embark together in caring for and promoting human dignity and in the fight against human trafficking.

We hope to launch Talitha Kum's application "Walking in Dignity" at the beginning of this year. It is an invitation to all, particularly young people, to download the app, engage and "walk on this journey toward awareness of human trafficking and its prevention." It is designed to educate "about the people facing human trafficking and to care for, heal and empower survivors. This creative and innovative tool offers features such as a virtual journey for collecting tokens in tandem with real-life steps. Simultaneously, users can gain insights into various perspectives on human trafficking while earning steps."

Every year, Talitha Kum has coordinated with other partner organizations for the International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking. Since its establishment in 2015, the Holy Father endorsed this day to UISG/USG as the promoters, and the coordination has been entrusted to Talitha Kum International at international, regional and national levels together with partner organizations. It coincides with the feast of St. Josephine Bakhita on Feb. 8.

The theme of the 10th edition of International Day of Prayer and Awareness Against Human Trafficking, entitled "Journeying In Dignity: Listen, Dream, Act," was chosen by young people for their inspiring commitment to get involved in the fight against human trafficking. This year, the subtitle "Listen, Dream, Act," was added to materialize the "call to action" commitment by the international representatives of young people. It is an invitation from young people committed throughout the world to end human trafficking.

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During the week of Feb. 2-9, Talitha Kum's Youth Ambassadors and other young representatives from partner organizations coming from different parts of the world will meet for a weeklong gathering in Rome to get to know each other, share their realities, and call upon others to continue the journey in dignity started a year ago and promoted by Pope Francis.

The week will have three phases starting with sharing and listening to the realities of human trafficking. The dream phase begins with participating in the vigil of prayer in Rome on Feb. 6. Finally, the call for action through awareness-raising activities and praying together at the international online pilgrimage of prayer on Feb. 8, when Pope Francis' message will be aired and call upon people of goodwill to unite in prayer and awareness-raising on the realities of anti-trafficking from around the world.

February also marks the formation and establishment of the new network in the Pacific Islands region (Fiji, Samoa, Kiribati, Tonga and Vanuatu), along with other parts of the world like Angola, Malawi, Puerto Rico and the North African region.

Talitha Kum networks will gather in person on May 18-24 in Sacrofano in the northern part of Rome for the Talitha Kum Second General Assembly with the theme of "Journeying Together to End Human Trafficking: Compassion in Action for Transformation." We expect more than 200 delegates and participants.



During the fourth Talitha Kum leadership residential training course held in Kenya last year, new leaders within the organization gathered from all over the world. (Courtesy of Abby Avelino)

Talitha Kum continues to mobilize and sensitize the leadership formation and strengthen the network's priorities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as leadership training for the leaders of the regional and country-level networks.

Talitha Kum leaders training and members of the networks is ongoing. We plan to continue a hybrid program with residential training for the fifth edition. We also will mobilize the growing numbers of Youth Ambassadors Against Human Trafficking. As Pope Francis encourages young people to embark on this journey, "I encourage you to care for dignity, yours and that of every person you meet."

What have you learned since you began leading the organization?

I learned and continue to learn by exploring what structure will best facilitate the work of this network's needs and decisions. Strategic planning, in consultation with

regional coordinators, has initiated the formation of hubs in focus areas of the network and its members.

What do you enjoy most about your work and how is it rewarding for you?



Sr. Abby Avelino (center) and her co-team formators share a moment together during training in Kenya. (Courtesy of Abby Avelino)

The growing numbers of people of goodwill joining the network, including religious men, laity and other faith-based group collaborators, and young people, is

rewarding. I think the more people of goodwill join anti-trafficking networks, the more we can strategize to counteract the trafficking networks. The initiative of youth ambassadors, who intervene with their peers to help prevent trafficking, was initiated in Talitha Kum's networks in Asia and is now present in Africa and Latin America.

How have you seen Talitha Kum grow and evolve over the years?

Talitha Kum grows organically and maintains the strength of the network, which lies in its bottom-up, grassroots engagement. Knowing the context of human trafficking makes Talitha Kum network members desire to be involved and engage young people in awareness-raising initiatives by networking and collaborating with anti-human trafficking organizations and networks in general.

What challenges do you see in the coming years?

I believe that any challenge is also an opportunity to grow. We encounter challenges in some countries regarding the sustainability of the network, particularly resources. In other countries, discussions have been happening with a contact person to engage in the creation of a national network. In both cases, new and trained leaders work together to strengthen the network.

Furthermore, while human trafficking continues evolving and growing, Talitha Kum networks respond by enhancing the sharing of good practices and information. Talitha Kum's network continues and areas for action have been identified, such as advocacy, involvement of survivors, and research for Talitha Kum's mission and vision.

Another issue is that many women religious congregations continue to face declining membership, thus resulting in a challenge in their active participation and involvement within Talitha Kum networks. In spite of the challenges we have witnessed, members continue to respond to our call to action by caring, healing, empowering and being involved with the lives of victims and survivors, and populations that are at risk of trafficking and exploitation.