News
Trafficking



Sr. Philomena Okwu, of the Daughter of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, is pictured in an undated photo (Courtesy of Talitha Kum)



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Sr. Philomena Okwu, of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, was presented an award of excellence for her outstanding dedication to victims of human trafficking and contribution to anti-human trafficking efforts by Nigeria's Network Against Child Trafficking, Abuse and Labour, or NACTAL, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations united to uphold human rights, children's welfare and to end human trafficking.

Nigeria is one of Africa's sources of human trafficking, specifically trafficking of girls and women to Europe for sexual exploitation, according to a 2023 report on human trafficking by the U.S. Department of State. Trafficking remains particularly challenging for the Nigerian government, despite efforts to combat human trafficking through government agencies like the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons, or NCFRMI, and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons, or NAPTIP, and nongovernmental agencies like NACTAL. These efforts have been lauded by U.N. agencies, however factors like poverty and insecurity are still contributors to human trafficking in Nigeria.

Okwu has been involved in anti-human trafficking efforts since 1999 when she was among the major superiors who founded the Committee for the Support of the Dignity of Women, or COSUDOW, based in southern Nigeria's Benin City, Edo state. It is among the Nigeria Conference of Women Religious projects, an umbrella of sisters hailing from congregations across Nigeria, which she chairs alongside COSUDOW.

Through the projects, she has ramped up focus and activism on the prevention of human trafficking through public sensitization, protection and care of victims through rehabilitation and reintegration of victims of human trafficking, especially women and children, and prosecution of perpetrators of the vice and traffickers, through collaboration with government agencies and stakeholders.

Okwu, a member of Talitha Kum, particularly fights for returnees who are rescued by humanitarian organizations or forced back to Nigeria by the countries they were smuggled to. These victims are often traumatized, stigmatized by their communities, and lack jobs and access to medical care.

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