Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking: The Greatest Violence Against Women

Joint Workshop of the PAS and the Global Freedom Network

The estimates of prostitution and human trafficking are staggering. Precise statistics are impossible, given the hidden and criminal nature of these abuses but it is estimated that globally, despite the Palermo Protocol, there are about 21 million men, women, children tricked, sold, coerced or subjected to conditions of slavery in various forms and in various sectors: construction, maquilas,[1] agriculture, domestic service, prostitution, pornography, sex tourism, forced marriage, child soldiers, organ trafficking, sale of children, etc. An annual increase of around three million people must be added to this figure.[2]

It is obvious that women, girls and children are the most affected by violence and discrimination in education and – through occupational segregation – in the workplace and are disproportionately represented in the informal sectors of employment. This makes them especially vulnerable and subjected to huge economic uncertainty and, therefore, more likely to migrate, usually irregularly, despite the risks and implications entailed. The sectors where “female demand” is traditionally available are largely informal, unregulated and poorly protected, making them more dependent on networks of intermediaries, be it pimps, traffickers or smugglers. These factors, among others, are more likely to cause women to fall prey to prostitution, trafficking and exploitation worldwide.

Those who suffer repeated acts of physical or psychological aggression generally fall into a state of depression, loss of self-esteem or situations of extreme vulnerability that put them at greater risk of becoming victims of abuse, mistreatment, cruel or degrading behaviour, prostitution or

human trafficking, particularly in the case of children or adolescents. Technological progress has enabled us to comprehend the extent of these problems and the many forms they take globally. The following topics are often addressed by the media and available on the Internet:

- Women exploited in specific sectors such as domestic work or the sex industry.
- Women attracted by alleged profitable work contracts who end up in brothels or nightclubs all over the world, selling their bodies for petty cash and forced into a living hell from which it is very difficult to escape.
- Women and girls from rural areas sold and coerced to meet the demand for sex tourism.
- Girls deceived by alleged boyfriends promising marriage and a family who turn out to be accomplices of the traffickers and force them into prostitution.
- Tourist listings and special offers describing exotic women and girls that are easily accessible via all-inclusive charter flights.

Prostitution and trafficking of women and girls all over the world, although seemingly sizeable at the domestic level, also respond to a vast international demand. Traditionally, the most active recruitment centres used to be located in poor countries, but recruitment is becoming widespread even in neighbourhoods and schools in big cities like London, Madrid, Paris, etc., often through social networking websites.

We must also take into account the significant portion of people who are victims of these new forms of slavery despite having some kind of paperwork and legitimate jobs. The sponsorship system in place in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, UAE, Qatar, and Oman means that workers have to rely on their employers' endorsement to obtain their work visas. There are locals who have turned this sponsorship into a business for which they charge foreigners a percentage of their wages. Even without resorting to that, employers are entitled to keep the passports of their employees, leaving them unable to travel or quit their jobs without their permission. In the hands of the less scrupulous, it is a tool for blackmail. It is not unusual for employees to have to sign settlements far below what they deserve in order to get their passports and their freedom back. The situation of domestic workers, mostly women, is especially appalling. These brave women and girls who leave their home countries and their families often end up in situations of violence, exploitation and abuse. Sexual abuse is an even trickier topic. A recent report by Human Rights Watch shows that these people are often victims of "physical and verbal abuse, sexual harassment and rape".[3]

In addressing this complex problem, empowerment, awareness-raising, and the training and development and/or strengthening of young people's networks are crucial to:

- Condemn prostitution as a human rights violation and trafficking in persons as a crime against humanity around the world, beyond the particularities that each country adopts.
- Strengthen the visibility and/or promote actions aiming at prevention adopted as an instrument of rights recognition and defence.

- Strengthen family structures as an anchor and support of a world of possibilities and opportunities for all, to build a more just, equitable and inclusive society.
- Empowering young people to play a leading role within the State and civil society to change the paradigm and imagine a world without violence and prostitution, free of human trafficking.

As Pope Francis told the young people gathered in Rio de Janeiro's Cathedral last year, "I hope there will be noise. Here there will be noise, I'm quite sure. Here in Rio there will be plenty of noise, no doubt about that. But I want you to make yourselves heard in your dioceses, I want the noise to go out, I want the Church to go out onto the streets, I want us to resist everything worldly, everything static, everything comfortable, everything to do with clericalism, everything that might make us closed in on ourselves". And when they asked him, "So what must we do, Father?", Francis replied "Look, read the Beatitudes: that will do you good. If you want to know what you actually have to do, read Matthew Chapter 25, which is the standard by which we will be judged. With these two things you have the action plan: the Beatitudes and Matthew 25. You do not need to read anything else. I ask you this with all my heart".[4]

Footnotes:

[1] A manufacturing operation in a Free Trade Zone (FTZ), where factories import material and equipment on a duty-free and tariff-free basis for assembly, processing, or manufacturing and then export the assembled, processed and/or manufactured products, sometimes back to the raw materials' country of origin. Source: Wikipedia.

[2] International Labor Organization, Profits and Poverty: The Economics of Forced Labour, Geneva, 2014. However, the latest edition of the Global Slavery Index, released in October by the Walk Free Foundation, put the figure at almost 30 million for a broader category including forced labor, trafficking, and other forms of servitude such as child marriage.

[3] Human Rights Watch, the International Domestic Workers Network, and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Claiming Rights. Domestic Workers' Movements and Global Advances for Labor Reform, 28 October 2013, 33 pages.

[4] Apostolic Journey to Rio de Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day, Meeting With Young People From Argentina, Address Of Holy Father Francis, 25 July 2013.

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