



Women Religious Unite To Eradicate Trafficking

By SR. ANNE VICTORY, HM, RN, MSN, and SR. ANN OESTREICH, IHM

The history of women's religious congregations is a history of addressing unmet needs. The founders and foundresses of our communities read the signs of their times and gathered women together to serve God and God's most vulnerable people. When the Second Vatican Council invited us to re-examine our founding charisms in light of the needs of our times, we rediscovered our own preferential option for those who are poor, often with a special care for women and children. While we continued to engage in traditional ministries serving the people of God without distinction, we expanded our outreach through social services, pastoral ministries and work for social justice and systemic change.

As sisters, our constant challenge — to remain open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and faithfully live out our charisms — has led us to engage many of the most difficult issues in contemporary society: poverty, climate change, nuclear disarmament, human rights for LGBTQ people, affordable health care for all, comprehensive immigration reform and human trafficking. At the root of all these issues, alienation from one another and a culture of violence are the common threads.

Amid the many horrific stories of violence reported daily in the media, one particularly heinous crime — human trafficking — is gaining more attention. Human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery. Its complexity and scope create challenges for understanding the issue; for believing that it is really happening because it often is hidden; and for determining effective ways to raise awareness, prevent the crime and serve victims globally as well as locally.

Human trafficking affects women, men and children, U.S. citizens as well as people who are foreign born. The crime involves commercial sex acts and forced labor. It occurs in every city, town

and neighborhood. The traffickers' methods of force, fraud and coercion trap those who are victimized. Victims experience rapes, beatings, confinement, drug addiction, gun violence and other forms of abuse and torture; often they are frightened into silence and held captive by psychological chains much stronger than any physical bonds.

Human trafficking is a global industry in which unscrupulous individuals and organizations prey upon victims for financial gain. The International Labour Organization estimates trafficking generates \$150 billion annually and affects more than 20.9 million people.¹ It is not a faceless form of violence; in fact, most of those exploited throughout the world are women and children, many of whom are suffering the effects of poverty, discrimination and other vulnerabilities.

Until very recently, especially in the United States, much human trafficking has gone unnoticed, making it possible for victims to be hidden in plain sight because people never dreamed trafficking could be happening right next door or down the street. As more information — and news of arrests — has become available, public health and community organizations and law enforce-



ment have circulated descriptions of “red flags” that might indicate someone is a trafficking victim, along with toll-free numbers to call for help.

Forced labor is particularly challenging to identify and address due to the diverse forms it can take in a variety of industries. Labor traffickers, including recruiters, contractors and employers, use lies, threats, violence, debt bondage and other forms of coercion to exploit people to work against their will. Trafficked workers may be men, women or children; U.S. citizens or foreign born. They may have been recruited with the promise

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of an educational opportunity or a good job, only to find they are forced to work long hours for little to no pay. Often they are threatened and abused, told they must work to repay a debt, or have had their identity documents and money taken away. Victims feel trapped and helpless — some don’t speak English.

Common forms of labor trafficking in the United States include people forced to work in homes as domestic servants, in factories under inhumane conditions, in restaurants, door-to-door sales, construction, agriculture and nail salons, among many others. Ordinary citizens may encounter labor trafficking victims but never recognize their plight, lacking knowledge of the crime and its prevalence in our country.²

ADELE’S STORY

Fortunately for “Adele,” a young woman who thought she was coming to the U.S. for an education but who was trafficked for six years as a domestic servant, a neighbor *did* recognize the signs of labor trafficking. Adele was confined to her trafficker’s house and required to do all of the housekeeping and child care, working from 5 a.m. through midnight each day. She was required to eat her meals on the floor, not at a table like the family members she served.

One day, a small boy she cared for ran out of the house, and Adele ran outside after him. A neighbor happened to see her and spoke to her very briefly. The neighbor had been observing the house for a while because she felt that something there was not quite right.

On subsequent, rare occasions when Adele was briefly outdoors, the neighbor again spoke to her, very deliberately and carefully gaining Adele’s confidence. Eventually she gave Adele her phone number and a cell phone to use if an opportunity arose to escape.

Adele’s trafficker began to feel that something might be going on, and he moved Adele to another location, away from the concerned neighbor. One day, however, Adele was left alone, and she used the cell phone to call her former neighbor. The woman got in touch with an anti-trafficking organization, and Adele was rescued and taken to a short-term safe house provided by Catholic sisters. From there, Adele was moved to a long-term safe house provided by LifeWay Network, an organization based in New York that provides safe housing for women who are trafficking victims and that works to educate the public about trafficking.³ Adele lived in the safe house for a year, receiving the services and support she needed to resume a life of dignity and freedom.

Sr. Joan Dawber, SC, executive director of LifeWay Network, reports that Adele worked to prosecute her trafficker and now reconnects with her friends at LifeWay Network each year at Thanksgiving.

HEALTH CARE MINISTRY’S ROLE

For those working in health care ministries, it is especially important to recognize signs that a patient may be a trafficking victim and under someone else’s control. We in health care must be prepared to respond to the deep wounds — physical, psychological, social and spiritual — that the violence of human trafficking inflicts on those who come to our hospitals, emergency rooms, urgent care facilities and offices every day. Yet a 2014 study published in the journal *Annals of Health Law* revealed that among approximately 100 women and girls who were survivors of sex trafficking in the United States, 88 percent had interacted with health care providers and were not identified as sex trafficking victims.⁴

How are health care professionals, including those in Catholic-sponsored health systems,



SUFFERING VIOLENCE

addressing this enormous challenge? To raise awareness among clinicians, administrators and support staff, many health care systems across the U.S. are implementing guidelines to address the complex needs of suspected victims of both commercial sex and labor trafficking. For example, Via Christi Health System, based in Wichita, Kansas, Dignity Health, headquartered in San Francisco and Catholic Health Initiatives, based in Englewood, Colorado, all have instituted protocols within their respective systems to better identify and serve suspected victims. Other health systems are working collaboratively with local health providers, social service agencies and law enforcement to address these needs.

In many cases, Catholic sisters are intimately involved in efforts to address the violence that is trafficking. In fact, 15 women religious from across the United States who work on the issue decided in 2013 to connect their individual congregations' anti-trafficking efforts and become a united, national voice addressing the complexities of human trafficking.

The membership of the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking now includes more than 80 congregations and coalitions of sisters, along with several individual partners who share in and support this work. This new, not-for-profit organization's mission is to help people recognize the faces of human trafficking and to develop education and advocacy strategies to eradicate it. Central to the organization's work is linking members' actions to the church's call to affirm the dignity of every human person. The group also is a member of *Talitha Kum*, based in Rome and formed in 2009 as an international "network of networks" of women and men religious in 70 countries who are working on the issue around the world.⁵

SISTERS AT WORK

None of the apostolic works of women religious ever has been done in isolation. Sisters always have relied on the generosity of the wider community for support, advice and the sharing of expertise for the sake of the mission in education, health care, social services and other endeavors. The same is true as we address the complex issue of human trafficking. Sisters are building upon skills learned from our founders' and foundresses' vision, courage, scope of influence and networking strategies as we create and expand partnerships with those who share a common vision of

eradicating trafficking. The focus is the mission, the concern for upholding the dignity of each individual who may be victimized, providing comprehensive, holistic, trauma-informed care, ongoing support services and prevention of the crime.

Sisters are partnering with others throughout the U.S. and around the world to provide such care and services. A few of the many examples within the United States: Dawn's Place in Philadelphia, Lifeway Network in New York City, Sisters in Shelter located in Tiffin, Ohio, and CAST-LA in Los Angeles.

Those of us who are professionals in the fields of social work and counseling are using our skills to offer compassionate, trauma-based interventions to support victims at all stages of their recovery. We also are using our influence to explore ways for universities to offer educational grants for victims as they recover from the trauma of having been trafficked. Some religious congregations are offering employment opportunities for survivors at their sponsored ministries.

Since many of our sisters spent their lives educating young people, a number of us are now engaged in creating values-based educational materials to be used by teachers in both elemen-

TAKE A QUIZ. YOU MIGHT BE SHOCKED.

In essence, almost everyone in developed countries is complicit with labor trafficking to some extent, because ours is a culture of consumerism. Most of us are attracted by bargains, but we seldom stop to think about how products we purchase are being made, who is making them, and the real cost of the item in terms of human labor. Slavery Footprint is an Oakland, California-based nonprofit organization whose goal is to raise awareness about human trafficking, forced labor and slavery. The group, seed-funded by the U.S. Department of State, created an interactive app to help people calculate — and understand — the source of consumer goods they regularly use.

Taking the "How Many Slaves Work for You?" survey at www.slaveryfootprint.org is a graphic way to determine how many slaves it takes to maintain one's current lifestyle. It can be humbling to take the quiz, as well as challenging and motivating to make some changes in daily choices.

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tary grades and high school classrooms. Many are working to integrate the topic of human trafficking into the curricula of such disciplines as nursing, medicine, social work and law. Still others of us are collaborating with retreat and spiritual directors to offer retreat experiences for survivors and for those who care for survivors.

A number of our sisters with backgrounds in the health professions are actively involved in the creation of guidelines to help professional colleagues recognize and address the needs of victims they may encounter in the course of their daily work. This endeavor relies on strong relationships and the creation and nurturing of alliances beyond the walls of the health system with social service providers, alcohol and drug treatment services and the law enforcement community.

Some of our sisters with degrees in law are navigating the complexities of immigration issues, criminal concerns because of convictions for crimes committed while being trafficked, and advocacy for victims of the crime that often leaves them feeling voiceless and abandoned. Still others of our sisters counsel victims prior to court appearances and may accompany them as advocates.

Many of our sisters are engaged in advocacy for the needs of human trafficking victims and for creation and enforcement of laws that address both forced labor and commercial sex trafficking at national, state and local levels. We engage with members of Congress and with our state and local officials to educate them about the importance of the issue and petition for their support of legislation addressing various aspects of the crime.

Ever faithful to the mandate of Vatican II, women religious continue to respond wholeheartedly to the needs of these times. Learning from the past and relying on the wisdom and grace of our charisms, we forge ahead with many others to heal the violence exacted on victims of human trafficking and strengthen the systems with whom we work, making the vision of a slave-free world a reality.

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NOTES

1. International Labour Organization, *Profits and Poverty: The Economics of Forced Labour* (Geneva: International Labour Office, 2014).
2. The Polaris Project website, www.polarisproject.org.
3. LifeWay Network website, www.lifewaynetwork.org.
4. Laura J. Lederer and Christopher A. Wetzel, "Health Care Consequences of Sex Trafficking and Their Implications for Identifying Victims in Healthcare Facilities," *Annals of Health Law* 23, no. 1 (2014): 61-91.
5. *Talitha Kum* website, www.talithakum.info.

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