

Women's religious orders vow to extend anti-human trafficking programs

VATICAN CITY - With the global financial crisis and the increased desperation of the poor, human trafficking appears to be on the increase and the International Union of Superiors General is committed to extending its networks to fight the problem.

The international organization of superiors of Catholic orders of women is sponsoring a conference in Rome June 15-18 to evaluate what has been accomplished and identify ways to strengthen international cooperation among the hundreds of women's orders in the world.

The sisters also are putting pressure on Catholic orders of men to get involved in the day-to-day work to prevent trafficking for sexual exploitation, for slave-like labor or for harvesting organs for transplant, said Salesian Sister Bernadette Sangma.

"The logic of the market tells us that there is no supply without demand," said Sister Sangma, who coordinates the anti-trafficking project of the International Union of Superiors General. She spoke June 12 at a Vatican press conference.

"Without the collaboration of the men's congregations and diocesan clergy, we cannot reach a very significant category of persons involved (in trafficking): that is men," who frequent the prostitutes who are the victims of human trafficking, Sister Sangma said.

Through their ministry as pastors, confessors, preachers and teachers, priests have an opportunity to help men and boys see not only the sinfulness of having sex with a prostitute, but the deep violation of the God-given dignity of the women and children trafficked for sexual purposes, she said.

"The participation of religious congregations of men is urgent for beginning a process of educating boys and men to a different view of women and girls, one that does not reduce them to objects of pleasure, exploitation abuse," she said.

The June conference is being financed by the U.S. State Department and conducted in collaboration with the International Organization for Migration; both agencies have been working with the superiors of women's orders over the past five years to train sisters to identify and assist victims and potential victims of trafficking.

Stefano Volpicelli, an International Organization for Migration official who has been working with the sisters, said the fact that human trafficking often is controlled by sophisticated international criminal organizations and increasingly relies on the ever-changing routes of clandestine immigration means there are no firm figures on the number of victims.

The U.S. State Department has estimated 800,000 women, children and men are trafficked each year, while the European Union's justice commission puts the figure at 2.5 million people, he said.

Carmela Godeau, assistant director of the migration organization's Rome office, said, "We have seen an increase in the number of people who arrive in another country illegally and who, after being interviewed, we believe are victims of trafficking. Obviously, in the midst of an economic crisis, it becomes more difficult to migrate legally as countries close their borders. But that does not mean people are not crossing borders."

As an example, she said that her organization identified 160 Nigerian women in Italy as victims of trafficking in 2007; in 2008, they identified 1,800 Nigerian women as victims.

Volpicelli said that since 2004 the joint project of his organization and the superiors general has established 15 networks of women religious from 252 different orders in 36 countries to combat trafficking. The religious educate and warn potential victims, work to combat the poverty that feeds the trade in human beings, rescue and provide shelter and rehabilitation for the victims and assist them in returning home if that is what they desire, he said.