



Youth Activation and Prevention as an Immunizer Against Human Trafficking

Mariana Ruenes

SinTrata, Mexico

Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

Casina Pio IV

Vatican City, 15-16 November 2014 Mariana Ruenes

I would like to start by saying why I am here.

My name is Mariana, and I am very thankful for having the opportunity to be here, it is a real honor. I am here because four years ago I met Susy, a survivor of sex trafficking. Susy radically changed my way of seeing the world. She started telling me her story. She never met her father, and her mother was an alcoholic, but she was not allowed to drink because of her brothers. Susy was desperately looking for a job, and her older brothers decided she could sacrifice her studies in order to support her family financially. Susy found a job that seemed wonderful, that would enable her to earn 800,000 Mexican pesos. She considered it a unique opportunity, so she accepted.

Meeting Susy changed my life, because it made me understand that I could have been her, and that the only thing that separated me from her was vulnerability. I did not experience that vulnerability because I had other opportunities, other chances. After meeting Susy, however, I started working more on trafficking, and reading about it and studying it and learning. And I started working in two of the four high security centers in Mexico for the rehabilitation of trafficking victims. First I met Susy and then I saw hundreds of cases, from girls aged 6 to 7 to women up to 30 years old, all of whom had been abused and trafficked. At the beginning, I probably did not even understand the scale of the problem. But after meeting many survivors and studying everything I could lay my hands on – because there was little available to learn in my country – my approach changed. I really started to understand what living as a slave and being trafficked mean, and the difference between being able to choose what you want to do with your life, your relationships, your body, and the opposite. In 2014, we continue to have slaves. Some time went by. I was 17 years old when I met Susy. At first I thought, “I will never be able to do anything to change this situation”.

Time went by, and one day I realized that what was astonishing to me was the indifference that is generated by ignorance. There is a sentence I like very much which is, “The first and foremost problem with trafficking is that it is not recognized as a social problem”. People do not even know what it is, they are ignorant of it. If we really did understand what trafficking is, if we really could deal with it and understand it, I think we would all be willing to do something. If we as a society understood what trafficking really is, we would be acquire accountability, responsibility, we would start asking the authorities to do something. And if the authorities understood what human trafficking is, what happens now in Mexico, when a victim goes to report a crime and they tell her or him to stop being so sentimental because she or he likes it, would not happen. If our authorities really understood what trafficking meant there would be more cases of people saved than of stolen cars or drug related crimes. And if consumers understood what trafficking was, if they really understood that there is the risk that people in slavery contributed to the production of certain clothes; if consumers asked themselves ‘what do I think of human life? Am I ready to run the risk to finance these people who are exploiting people who could be enslaved, who have no choice?’ If consumers were aware that slavery is a matter of supply and demand; if consumers were aware that even when they ask and try to educate themselves, they cannot know whether a person is enslaved or not; if we really did understand that we are all equal, and our lives all have the same value, whatever the color of our skin, our face, our nationality or economic situation – if we really understood then we would not be so indifferent. If we really understood the value of human life and all that it means, we would be ready to do for those people who are being exploited what we would do for ourselves or for someone we deeply care about. I will repeat this: If we really understood the value of human life and all that it means, we would be ready to do for those people who are being exploited what we would do for ourselves or for someone we deeply care about.

I remember when I joined the organization *SinTrata* there were hundreds of young people from very different areas working there, and at the beginning I really thought that we would not be able to have a real impact but today we have joined together and I have realized that we have done a lot. Today we can lobby for changes in public policies in our country. Today, we can ask for a law that will prevent or repress human trafficking in our country. Today, we start to see people who are trafficking other human beings go to jail. We are creating consensus and prevention, we are going to schools and teaching children about how traffickers deceive their victims, and we help them not to be vulnerable to that. And we are working on the rehabilitation of 163 survivors – because that is what they are, they are survivors of trafficking. When we think that many who are here are 17, 18 – I am 22 – we could be thinking that there is nothing we can do. But then, when we start working, we see we can do so much more that we would have ever imagined... Let me go back to what I think are the three main recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

First, preventing human trafficking means addressing the indifference in our countries.

My second recommendation is that prevention means empowering the victims and the survivors, empowering young people so that they become active, and empowering possible victims to make sure they do not become victims. I used to hate speaking in public. I still don't find it very easy, but back then I used to break out in a sweat. However, it was so important for me to say what I had to say in my country that I overcame my difficulties. I did not think I could make a difference. But then I realized that I had the potential to save human lives, not as an individual speaking about myself, that is not the point, but I had that potential as a human being who can really reflect together with others and understand that we do have the possibility of saving human lives. And this is a lesson that we can teach young people. Young people have to realize that we have in our hands the power to save human lives. If we really believed it, I think we would all be ready to do it. And then we would understand not only what the problem is, but also that we could be the solution. It is an honor to be here to speak to you because I know that many of you know what being committed to this fight means and many of you know that it is tiring and dangerous. It can be really difficult to work in this field, and I would like to acknowledge the great work you do.

The third way we can prevent human trafficking is to join our efforts and multiply them, not working separately but joining together – this way our efforts will reach many more areas and we will be able to achieve so much more than we thought. My country has lots of problems – genocides, violence, corruption, kidnapping, extortion – we have so many problems in Mexico. But if there is one good example in Mexico now, it is the campaign against human trafficking. This campaign was led by about ten people who were deeply committed and who started influencing more and more people – but it all started with ten! And today, joining their efforts, and working for the value of every human being, they have set an example: Mexico really is one of the leading countries for campaigns against human trafficking. We've had over 163 sentences and we have more than 2,000 preliminary inquiries, we have more than 180 survivors that have been saved. But we could have had many more, because we think there are about 80,000 children, boys and girls, who have been sexually exploited. 80% of them are between 10 and 17 years of age. But if only 10 people who started working together were able to achieve so much, how much more could we achieve if we were to work in our countries, in our communities, and learn from what has been done elsewhere? And so that is what I would like us to do, this is my third recommendation: to unite to overcome the differences. I want to know all about other projects so that we can do the same in Mexico.

I think it is also very important today to say that we must always remember the real reason why we are here today. We need to remind ourselves of what it was that first led us to start working on this and return to it when we get tired or discouraged, and those are the survivors. All the people who are here... They are doing a great job and deserve our respect, our honor. I have been working with survivors for years, and we will hear some of their stories today, and let me say this once again to all the girls I have travelled with today that I have known for many years and all of the other survivors who are here today, let me say that our commitment to you is a commitment to human life. There are no obstacles. Today we are working for you. Today we are working for the survivors – our super survivors who are an example for us all and point the way.

My name is Mariana Ruenes.

Thank you.