



Victim rehabilitation from a spiritual point of view

Sr Stanka Oršoli#

Congregation of Notre Dame Sisters, Zagreb, Croatia

Young People Against Prostitution and Human Trafficking:

The Greatest Violence Against Human Beings

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Every person wants to be free, to be free physically, psychologically and spiritually. Every person expects salvation; we want to be saved from others who bring us insecurity, political or economic oppression, we want to be saved from sin and from death. Every person desires and deserves to be happy and loved. Nowadays, unfortunately we are faced with so much suffering in the peoples all around the world that these ideals seems far away from most humankind. In these hard times, we can see the God's merciful hand which led us here today to find the ways how to help the victims of trafficking, who are suffering and who are mostly need to be free, to be saved, to be happy, to be loved. Therefore everyone of us try to be faithful to the call and mission of Jesus who heals the broken hearted and proclaim liberty to captives and setting the oppressed free (Luke 4, 18).

Here I would like to share with you some reflections of victim rehabilitation from the spiritual point of view which are based on the personal experience of working with the victims of trafficking in London.

Last year, after I took my master's degree in theology, I was occupied by the terms of mission and modern *Areopagus*, the modern area where the joy of Gospel needs to be proclaimed. I do not have idea what I am going to do concretely in the society as a theologian. My Mother Superior suggested me to travel to London and to volunteer in the Medaille Trust organization. After experience of volunteering and working with the victims of trafficking I found the mission and the modern *Areopagus*: to tackle the problem of human trafficking. That opportunity I read as a sign of God.

I didn't know almost anything about human trafficking. I was astonished with the true stories about the victims of human trafficking and I wished to get involved and to help them. I just went in that adventure and I didn't feel fear, because I believed that God is going to help me and be with me all the time as he always was. I believed that the Holy Spirit grants the courage to proclaim the newness of the Gospel with boldness in every time and place, even when it meets with opposition (Evangelii Gaudium 259). Pope Francis encouraged me, saying that we need to have a sense of mission in the world, and to be engaged in transforming this world of suffering. For that hard mission we do not need be afraid of the newness that the Holy Spirit works in us because we cannot ignore the masses of people who find themselves excluded and marginalised: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape, only left to the violence and poverty (EG 53). He invited us to live our human life to the fullest and to meet every challenge as a leaven of Gospel witness in every culture and in every city will make us better Christians (EG 75).

So I came to London in the end of October and remained until middle of December 2013. In that couple of weeks I was a volunteer of the Medaille Trust organisation in the safe house where women and children victims of trafficking lived. The founders of the Medaille Trust choose a very nice meaning: a parable of hope in a world of exploitation. The Medaille Trust is a Charity, founded in 2006 by Catholic religious congregations to work for the eradication of human trafficking and to offer support to those who have been trafficked: to women, young men and children. They provide safe housing and specialist services for rehabilitation and raise awareness of these modern forms of slavery: sexual, economic and labour exploitation. Their vision and mission are found in the root of Gospel: to believe in the intrinsic dignity and worth of each individual; to defend the right of each individual to live in freedom and make autonomous choices and decisions; to acknowledge that each person is worthy of respect at all times; to accept each person for who they are, irrespective of race, religion, gender or cultural background; to reject the idea that any human being should be bought or sold; to conduct all business in trust based on the principle of justice for all people; they are committed to demonstrating compassion and support for each person; they are striving to offer hope for all those they serve and to help empower each one to fulfil his or her unique potential.

To be faithful to the mission of the Medaille Trust, there were lots of things to do and every day was different. From the very beginning I felt that I was in the right place at the right time and that I am going to be useful there and I accepted that new challenge in my life. I was happy that I was socially engaged, I did see acutely problems in our society, I was concerned about everyone, and I tried to find a way to help, to do something for the common good, and be less selfish. This was one of my purposes and I felt change in my own life. After I read lots of documents and files of victims of trafficking, I noticed that the women victims of trafficking passed through three traumatic and complex phases in their life.

Firstly, the victims of trafficking need to face with their past experiences in the family and in their environment (village, city, country, and continent), and they need to face with the situation of trafficking. Chief of the Frontier Service at Cahul (city in Moldova), Colonel A. Goritse, captured the crux of the problem saying: "Our girls are running, everyone is running, and not for a better life, but escaping from a difficult one". (V. Mo#neaga – T. Echim). They are running because they met a false lover; beaten; tortured; frightened of being stoned to death; raped; homeless; attend suicide; forcibly married; forcibly taken away childhood, betrayed and deceived by their own family. They are running because they have been exposed to childhood sexual abuse, prostitution, sexual harassment, sexual violence in peer groups and gangs, abusive pregnancy, debt bondage, drugs, alcohol, physical and mental ill health, domestic violence, labour exploitation, death threats. Lots of things about their traumatized past were spoken out, but still there are lots of questions which only they can and should answer. It would be truly relief for them if they could say that their past experience was really over.

One of the ladies survived several of these causes of running only because she fights for women rights against the regime in her country; she raised her voice for the right to be educated, right to choose her husband, to be free from wishes of her family about her future life. The result was that she was accused and could not continue her studies. She ran away and was exploited in several countries. She was very intelligent, but deeply traumatized and often very silent because she wants to study but she couldn't remember well. She decorated with me a Christmas tree for the first time in her life, and she was delighted. We spoke about Christmas and the progress was that she spoke much more than usually. In the end of our work she was very happy and proud that she had done a very nice job for all the women in the house who thanked and admired her. On the next day her life changed, she got the decision to move in another accommodation and one lady who was a key worker and I accompanied her. She was frightened to death and in panic. We needed to comfort her because she needed to be independent and live on her own. We helped her, prayed for her and in a couple a days she was well. She was very thankful and modest.

Secondly, the victims of trafficking need to pass through the rehabilitation program. Period of the 45 days is often short so there is a demand to increase the period so that the victim of trafficking has time enough to heal and perhaps become empowered to denounce the trafficker. There is also a possibility of extension of the recovery period. The fact is that process of recovery goes in many cases very slowly, hard and sometimes unsuccessful. Some of the women hardly realised what truly happened to them, stay silent, stay closeted, insincere and in solitary. Each of them was victim in their way and every of them needed special approach. They had lots of needs apart from food, drink, and accommodation, still medical and psychological treatment, legal and social assistance, and a status in the country, responsibility in the safe house, and an education for later possible employment. After all their appointments, they were exhausted telling their painfully stories, sometimes they were very angry because they want to forget the past experiences.

All the time spent with victims I asked myself whether they have any spiritual need. I could see that they can't bear the burden of problems, psychologically and physically, that they have had or been through, such as: desperation, depression, loneliness, deep unhappiness, meaninglessness, desolate spirit which remains a dreadful emptiness, deep and intensive sadness, and feeling of abandonment after their escaping a disastrous marriage, family or friends. They long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill their heads and hands to occupy their thoughts; often wondering what they came into the cruel world for; thoughts of how to survive another day and some of them have no reason to live their life anymore; asking us why God permits that the bad things happen to them.

Because of the constant presence of the burden of their past, it was very hard to animate women for the cultural or spiritual events. Some of the ladies attended a Sunday mass and sung in the parish chorus. One lady sung when she was cheerful a beautiful African melody and filled the house with the joy.

In very stressful moments ladies cried and prayed to God for help, for strength, I believe that personal prayer gave them strength because God cares and hears their cry. One lady venerated a Blessed Virgin Mary and talked about the times when she felt that Virgin Mary protected her.

I tried to support and to help them often through silence, in which I saw an importance of silent presence. Also having compassion was very helpful in their hard moments because woman needed some time to stop thinking

in order to express them. Almost every day I accompanied women to their appointments to hospital, services, organizations and stations. Those were hard moments. Sometimes all I did was to just sit next to a woman, looking at her and asking her: "Are you OK?" I constantly prayed to God for all of them, and sometimes they told me to pray for their needs, for their unsecure future, for their recovery. I saw many tears in most beautiful eyes in women who suffered, but I could also feel their strength and see hope in the moments of their weakness. For me it was amazing to see how they struggle to get education. They made a decision to learn something, they had desire to be worthy members of this society. They also had positive impact on each other. I heard and read all their life stories, stories that I had never heard and read before. Sometimes it was difficult to believe that everywhere in the world so much evil in the people exists and the fact that that evil is so strong and lives deeply in people's hearts.

There was a touching endeavour by women to appear better, to talk, and to look cheerful. They have a right to have a dream, a right to happiness, right to work, right to live their precious life.

It was extraordinary that any of them was able to do anything at all after such painful experience. Most women have hope and a motive to go on, and when they succeed, they demonstrate that they can do something good, something different in their life. We admired the strength of their will because in the end women deserved respect and admiration, better treatment and opportunity in the society, acknowledgement that someone feels proud about their courage. One lady attended college and she wanted to become a cook. She had been through the worst forms of exploitation and she was very sick, but she managed to finish the college and became a cook. She often cried because she suffered pains, sometimes she couldn't concentrate and couldn't learn, and she was unhappy because of that. Finally she succeeded and her dream came true.

Once after I went shopping for welcome packs for new ladies and prepared rooms for them, a new lady came from hospital where she had run away from an abusive trafficker. She did not have anything, only tears in her beautiful eyes and the baby in her womb. She was frightened, and when we asked her anything about the baby, she started crying, she wasn't sure whether she wants her baby. She stayed only overnight and left us because a new accommodation was found for her.

The other lady found in her pregnancy a sign from God that she should keep the baby and she told the doctor that she doesn't want to abort the child. After she found out that she was pregnant, she runaway from her trafficker. A new life in her gave her hope, faith in future, reason to live and to fight, strength to face difficulties. While we arranged nativity for Christmas, she told her baby the story of the baby Jesus.

I also organised a workshop making crafts and decorated a house together with women for Christmas and for our party. In those ordinary jobs was all the magic of common life, which I thought was helpful and had therapeutic and profound impact on everyone. In the happiest time in year, in the Christmas time I saw a joy and the happiness as another new good step further in their lives. The smile on their faces made it all worthwhile.

Thirdly, the victims of trafficking need to continue to live and to integrate in the society. The process of reintegration is also painful and long. Victims of trafficking are often shamed, stigmatized and discriminated by society, their communities, and their families. They are again in the new begging and vulnerable. It often happens that they fall in bad relationships with the wrong men. There is a problem of a second victimization. Here I saw a spiritual need as a key in a process of recovery. If they are spiritually strong, they faced the future more carefully and with wisdom they evaluate better the attention of others. While there's life there's hope, is a proverb, which can be applied to victims of human trafficking. The fact is that women, who have been through such humiliations, regain their spirits and through that experience, they make the society more humane.

In my work, I described the examples of good practice achieved by the staff members who served others in a very relaxed manner. Their ideas are valuable and useful and they were very tolerant and amiable. Performing their work they need to be patient and have so much heart because of the sensitive circumstances. At the traditional Christmas party were all the women, volunteers and the staff and very touching was the moment of finding a secret Angel and giving her a little gift because everyone felt special as an Angel and grateful for having an Angel. On my last working day it was a very quiet afternoon in the house. I hung the angels we made, and before I closed the door, I looked once more at the angels and said to myself a little prayer that God may send all his angels to take care for them and never live them alone and unprotected. I am proud for serving in the Medaille Trust organisation, which has a remarkable role in society helping the victims of human trafficking to raise their spirits, take them out of this dark and desolate reality to a happier and safer region, giving them the opportunity to recover and prepare themselves for independent living.

After volunteering, I became a member of Religious in Europe networking against Trafficking and Exploitation (RENATE) which has a important role in the anti-trafficking field. RENATE was established in 2009 by a group of Religious in Europe representing several different Congregations working against Human Trafficking. Currently, RENATE comprises eighteen countries from East, West and Central Europe. RENATE is supporting victims in

shelters taking direct preventive action, doing training, awareness-raising, advocacy, networking, research and cross-cultural exploration. We believe in a world where everyone has the right to human dignity. We respond to the issue of trafficking of women, children and men, in the light of Gospel Values. Being one voice, one heart and one passion enables the group to work not only in solidarity but also to think together strategically and to study the roots of trafficking. "Yes, we can!" – is our motto, so we believe that we can make a difference. The work of RENATE is consisted of common campaigns and new initiatives, implementation of social teaching of the Church, social media, cross-cultural experience, meetings and trainings for members and cooperation with the UISG and with the civil society. Our president, Sr Imelda Poole once said: *I experience God as directing me, nudging me on in so many difficult situations. The power and love of God is a passion in my heart which gives me courage and picks me up in failure and when things seem too hard.* I am a very proud and thankful member of the RENATE, because they proposed and supported me to come here.

Recommendations how to prevent youth from being victims of sexual exploitation and human trafficking

All authors agree that effective responses to problem of human trafficking will require holistic, interdisciplinary and long-term approaches which address each aspect of the trafficking or smuggling cycle. How can we make a difference? Here are some recommendations which could be seen as avant-garde ideas.

- Problem: Equality between women and men

Objectives: Promoting awareness of the equality of women and men from multiple points of view

Activities: Projects, conferences, media, public lectures, round table discuss, publishing, workshops, Religious education, Bibliodrama, perform a play, art colony

Examples of good practices:

- 87th Social Week in France, Paris, 2012: "Men and Women: the new Deal"
- High school section for Literature and Language "The world of the words", Velika Plana, Serbia

Problem: Discrimination against women

Discrimination against women has been widely identified as a root cause of trafficking and as a factor aggravating existing vulnerabilities (A. Gallagher).

Objectives: Raising awareness to youth about discrimination and violence

Activities: Projects, campaigns, media, public lectures, round table discuss, publishing, workshops, perform a play, art colony, prayer service and reflections for victims of human trafficking, Religious education

Documents:

- **CEDAW:** Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979)
- **Istanbul Convention:** Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2011)
- *Example:* Campaign in Croatia

Problem: Objectification of women's bodies

Human trafficking is an extreme form of objectification. The customers do not ask about the origin of objects of lust, they just experiencing own power which is of excessive violence, and society allows it, because all the nudges and happens every day. Moral rebellion is missing. It is necessary to help women who have been made invisible to seize their visibility. (M. Becka)

Objectives: Changing the concept of women's dignity and women's role in society

Activities: Projects, media, public lectures, round table discuss, publishing, workshops, Religious education

Example: Project: "Raising awareness of religious communities in Croatia for the issue of human trafficking (especially women)" which will be implemented in 9 different religious communities (Roman Catholic parishes, Orthodox communities, the Islamic community, Lutheran community and Baptist community) in the city of Zagreb.

Whom is concerned?

- Include: Church, archdioceses, dioceses, and parishes, religious organizations and orders (example: RENATE, Talitha Cum) and cooperate with other religions and denominations;

- Include: CARITAS on national, archdiocesan, diocesan, parish level;
- Cooperate with organizations, associations, institutions, special centres and groups, and cultural and social initiatives for young people in archdiocesan, diocesan and parish which have mission to work and to help persons affected by social inequality, exploitation, discrimination and poverty (example: Franciscan Secular Order);
- Cooperate with the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour, local community and schools.