



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations and Other International Organizations in Geneva at the 18th Session of the Human Rights Council – Item 3: Contemporary Slavery
Geneva, 14 September 2011

Madam Chairperson,

The trade in human beings, especially of women and minors, has become a powerful global business involving many countries of origin, transit and destination. The victims of trafficking in persons are estimated at almost three million a year, a lucrative trade that generates an annual income of over thirty billion U.S. dollars. After a risky journey, these women and minors become bonded to their masters as slaves with passports and personal documents seized and a sense of identity destroyed. What is new is the globalization of this trade, the development of a global market which exploits the extreme poverty and vulnerability of many women and minors who try to escape intolerable conditions of misery and violence. The consequences of this enslavement are a loss of psycho-physical identity, of personal dignity and freedom. In this systemic violation of human rights, in particular, a woman comes to consider herself as an object, a thing, a piece of merchandise and is forced to live as an illegal, a social and cultural outcast, emptied by sexual abuse of her deepest values, her femininity, self-esteem and her concept of love and life. Such degradation stifles any dream of a bright future

The international community and national legislations have enacted several good measures directed at preventing the exploitation of people and at providing remedy for the victims of trafficking. The trade in human beings, however, does not tend to diminish and only takes on new forms. Endemic poverty and arm conflicts affect women and children in greater part. Corruption is another cause that favors the exploitation of more vulnerable persons. Then, the ignorance and lack of experience of the victims themselves allow for their deception and subjugation as tools for easy gains. Laws and conventions need to be adequately applied if trafficking is to be stopped and its victims protected. Indeed, legal provisions point in some constructive directions.

First, prevention has to be prioritized. Programs of information and formation in the countries of origin, often generously provided by faith-based communities, intend to prevent the exodus toward richer countries. But a more effective prevention can and must be exercised by eliminating the demand of sexual services and the creation of a new culture where interpersonal relations between a man and a woman are based on reciprocal respect and not on merchandizing the body.

Second, concrete initiatives are indicated for the protection and social re-integration of the victims of trafficking, in particular for those that ask for help to exit their context of exploitation and enslavement. Thousands of young women, for example, have been welcomed into family-like homes established to host them as they escaped from their exploiters. The young women find in these homes' protection, guidance and a friendly environment that sustain their return to a more human, normal and even spiritual and legal situation. They are helped to heal the wounds caused by their exploitation and to become again protagonist of their future. Existing good practices, for example, carried out by women religious who network among countries for an effective action, could become a standard answer to this huge problem of trafficking.

Third, the prosecution of traffickers has to be strengthened through a fair and effective application of legislation. Traffickers have earned much money that they use to evade the law and even the sentences received and their quick exit from prison places their victims once more at risk together with their families in the countries of origin.

Madam Chairperson,

To counteract the scourge of trafficking of women and children with greater determination and more concrete results, a convergence of efforts is necessary: a mentality that is centred on the unique dignity of every person, a sure punishment of traffickers, fight against corruption, a correct teaching in schools of the mutual relations between man and woman, the fairness of mass media in reporting the damages created by trafficking. Finally, collaboration among the various organisms concerned with this problem is critical. In fact, while legislation should be continuously adjusted and adapted to the evolution of the phenomenon of trafficking, the working together of public and private institutions and the contribution of volunteers will guarantee that no person may be bought or sold in violation of his/her dignity and fundamental human rights because he/she is created free and in God's image and not to be treated as a slave.

Thank you, Madame President!