News
Trafficking



Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary Sr. Rupika Perera is pictured with the Apostolic Carmel Sr. Dayalini Maria, coordinator of the Talitha Kum network in Sri Lanka. Congregations in Sri Lanka have come together to address human trafficking. (Courtesy of Sr. Rupika Perera)



by Thomas Scaria

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Colombo, Sri Lanka — August 1, 2024
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Twelve women religious congregations in Sri Lanka have come together to address human trafficking, unsafe migration and exploitation of women and children in the island nation.

"Sri Lankans started mass migration to other countries during the civil war [1983-2009], but now it has become organized human trafficking," says Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Dayalini, who coordinates an inter-congregational movement against this organized crime.

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, seven among 10 human trafficking victims are women and girls. "We target this vulnerable section through our prevention and protection programs," Dayalini told Global Sisters Report.

The network functions under the Conference of Major Religious Superiors of Sri Lanka, and is monitored by an advisory board comprising four major superiors.

Related: Sisters across the globe work to eradicate human trafficking

Besides the Apostolic Carmel nuns, the network has the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Sisters of Holy Cross Menzingen, Holy Angel Sisters, Claretian Missionary Sisters, Dominican Sisters of Malta, Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, Sisters of the Divine Savior, Sisters of the Cross of Chavanod, Missionaries of Charity and Comboni Missionary Sisters.

Dayalini says they try to create awareness about the menace among people, train and promote youth ambassadors to reach out to those at risk, provide vocational skills for women and youth and offer psychological support to the human trafficking victims.

The network mainly tries to sensitize and empower rural girls and women who are ignorant of the dangers of unsafe migration, she added.



The 96-year-old heritage building of Caritas Convent at Nuwereliya, Sri Lanka, is where Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary carry out a project against human trafficking among tea plantation workers. (Thomas Scaria)

The United Nations defines human trafficking as "the recruitment, transport, transfer, harboring or receipt of a person by such means as threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud or deception for the purpose of exploitation."

The United States Department of State points out that more than 27 million people are trafficked worldwide at any given time.

Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Sr. Nilanthi Ranasinghe, who has been involved in anti-human trafficking activities, initiated the network in Sri Lanka in 2009 as a unit of Talitha Kum, an international movement of women religious against trafficking.

Ranasinghe says although the Sri Lankan nuns started the ministry under the Asian Movement of Women Religious Against Human Trafficking in 2009, the inter-

congregational network took off only 10 years later. Initially, the Apostolic Carmel and the Good Shepherd nuns worked together on this mission during that period, she said.

The civil war and uncertainties forced many women to "willingly" work as house maids, construction workers, garment workers or other jobs in the Middle East countries.

The U.S. Embassy in Colombo's 2022 report on trafficking, noted that around 1.5 million Sri Lankans worked in the Middle East countries, Japan, and South Korea, mostly in construction and domestic sectors.



St. Sebastian's Church, Katuwapitiya in Negombo, Sri Lanka, played a positive role in bringing together various women congregations after it was hit by a suicide bomb attack on Easter Sunday in 2019. (Thomas Scaria)

Ranasinghe says almost 70% of the migrant workers were women and girls and several of them faced exploitation and sexual abuse as they had no legal protection

in those countries.

She said the 12 women congregations came together after the 2019 Easter bombings that targeted churches and luxury hotels.

"We formed the network against trafficking as the country was in a turmoil after the bombings that triggered tension between religious groups," the Franciscan nun said.

Good Shepherd Sr. Madonna Wimaladasa, the network secretary, told GSR that the congregations joined the network without compromising on their charism.

The network collaborates with the International Office for Migration under the United Nations and Sri Lankan government departments that deal with employment and foreign migration.

The pandemic and economic breakdown in 2020 forced rural youth to flee to cities and even to other countries, Ranasinghe said.



A counselor of the Nuwereliya regional forum conducts a group activity among female students of a rural school on the dangers of unsafe migration and human trafficking. (Courtesy of Sr. Rupika Perera)

The network functioned during the pandemic and lockdowns through virtual meetings, workshops and online training programs.

Along with prevention programs, the nuns attended to the victims' psychological healing through counseling, treatment and rehabilitation services. "Those requiring long-term care and treatment were referred to centers managed by the member congregations," Ranasinghe, a psychologist, pointed out.

She found the victims, especially those sexually exploited, suffering from anxiety, stress, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal tendencies and substance abuse.

The network has succeeded in preventing unsafe migration from villages after the nuns educated mothers about migration.

"Our main strategy was to spread awareness about the dangers of migration and equip women with vocational skills to earn locally," said Ranasinghe, who was part of several such programs.

The network members visit homes and found that young children left behind by mothers working overseas were vulnerable.

"These children are targeted by the traffickers for sex tourism within the country that earns from tourism," she explained.



After the awareness session, Sr. Rupika Perera and her teacher counselors pose with students at a rural school. (Courtesy of Sr. Rupika Perera)

According to Sri Lanka's tourism department, the country recorded 1.5 million international tourist arrivals in 2023. Its target for 2024 is 2.3 million.

Wimaladasa says several rural women and children who come to cities for jobs end up as sex slaves in massage parlors, brothels, hotels and resorts. "There is a powerful mafia behind this menace and it can be controlled only if the government implements strict policies," she explained.

The network has managed to rescue some women and bring them back to Sri Lanka with the help of their congregations in those countries.

Wimaladasa says some men religious also have shown interest to team up with the all-women network. The presence of men will strengthen the network, she says.

The network also works among the tea plantation workers in the central district of Nuwereliya, a source of several victims of human trafficking.

Sr. Rupika Perera of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, who coordinates the program there, says poor wages, low education, loans from money lenders, and alcoholism among men have forced women to seek jobs outside. They fall prey to

job recruiters and traffickers easily.



Students of a rural school in Nuwereliya pose with Sr. Rupika Perera of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary after a life-skills program. (Courtesy of Sr. Rupika Perera)

She has traveled to remote villages with a counselor and spoken to students, teachers and parents on human trafficking and exploitation.

"In some villages, many families are left with no mothers, and their children live in unsafe conditions," she told GSR.

She too has found that these children become easy prey to sexual exploitation or get lured to child sex tourism in beaches. Perera and her team have trained several girls in vocational skills and helped them settle with good jobs.

"Education and women empowerment are the key to end trafficking, exploitation and abuse," said Perera.

Some students have benefited from the training she offered with funds from Talitha Kum. One of them, Shirod Fernando, who learned candle making, has opened a unit that supplies candles to her parish as well as other churches. She also provides jobs for others.

"When people light my candles and pray to God, I get my blessings indirectly too," Fernando told GSR.

Another helped by Perera is Roshanthi (single name), who developed skills to run a jewelry unit. "I order jewelries from various countries at competitive rates through online platforms and sell it directly to customers, including tourists," said the 25-year-old woman from Nuwereliya.



Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary Sr. Rupika Perera, who coordinates the prevention of human trafficking among tea plantation workers poses, in front of her Caritas convent at Nuwereliya. (Thomas Scaria)

She thanks the nuns for helping her find "a dignified job" in her country and saving her from migrating to other countries like her relatives.

The network trains youth ambassadors who help the nuns identify those at risk, besides assisting them to organize programs in communities.

Mahesh Christine Kishona, one of the nine ambassadors, helps the network secretariat plan and conduct programs among young people. "This is my privilege and challenge to protect the victims of human trafficking," she told GSR over the phone.

"Each ambassador has a youth group that is attached to the parish," she added.

Advertisement

Some women, who were repatriated to Sri Lanka with the help of Talitha Kum members in other countries, spoke to GSR on condition of anonymity.

One of them, in her early 50s, said she got a second lease of life "as the sisters helped me come out of my trauma and depression" after six years of bondage in Lebanon.

Another Sri Lankan woman was rescued from Malaysia a few months ago. The network members not only received her at the Colombo airport, but provided psychological counseling before sending her home.

Claretian Missionary Sr. Geraldin Eusabius, a network member since the beginning, says the congregations merged their charisms for a common cause, which continued as a working mechanism for various social ministries eventually.

"I take it as my prophetic mission to liberate victims of human trafficking and restore their dignity as a human being," Eusabius told GSR.

Related: Women congregations empower Sri Lanka's exploited tea plantation workers