



GSR in the Classroom: **TRAFFICKING**

LESSON – FIGHTING TRAFFICKING ACROSS WESTERN HEMISPHERE

BEFORE YOU READ: Think of some of the biggest problems that challenge our world today. Alone or with a partner, consider:

1. Are these problems isolated to particular nations or regions, or do they happen all over the world?
2. Will individual responses or the combined efforts of people working in groups and networks be more effective in solving these problems?

Keep in mind while you read:

Human trafficking happens all around the world. In the article you're about to read, more than a dozen nations are mentioned by name. Trafficking happens in Ohio and New York and all around the United States as well. Think about the benefits sisters get from gathering with others who share in the same struggle.



DURING THE CONFERENCE IN CLEVELAND ON ANTI-TRAFFICKING MINISTRIES, SISTERS REFLECT ON SIMILARITIES OR DIFFERENCES BETWEEN EXPERIENCES SHARED DURING A PRESENTATION AND THEIR EXPERIENCES BACK HOME. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)

A HEMISPHERE OF NETWORKS NETWORK ABOUT ANTI-TRAFFICKING EFFORTS

BY SOLI SALGADO

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After Sr. Angélica Segoviano, an Oblate of the Most Holy Redeemer, wakes up at 5 a.m. and gets dressed for the day in Guatemala City, she goes to the chapel for an hour of silence. Here is where she restores her mind and heart, she says, a form of self-care and preparation for what awaits her that day.

Then she visits the **brothels**.

Introducing herself to the man in charge as a social worker, Segoviano



DISPLAYS FROM EVERY COUNTRY AND NETWORK PROVIDED BROCHURES AND CONTACT INFORMATION THROUGHOUT THE ANTI-TRAFFICKING CONFERENCE IN CLEVELAND. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)

VOCABULARY

brothels: buildings in which prostitutes are available

combatants: people engaged in fighting during a war, including child soldiers

pasties: small round coverings for a woman's nipples

underpinning: basis or support for an organization or effort

is able to visit the women who are prostituted, gaining their trust before they open up to her about their lives and worries. They often ask her to pray with them so that they get clients that day, which to them means being able to feed their children or care for a sick mother.

“They give me the money and say, ‘Buy medicine for my son, buy his diapers, buy him milk,’” Segoviano says. “And I say, ‘What about for you?’ ‘No, nothing. For my children. Take it, please.’”

Though Segoviano’s typical daily ministry is done solo, the Central American anti-trafficking network of women religious, Red Ramá, provides her and other sisters with training and formation. This includes news and information on trafficking in her region.

Similar networks of women religious combating human trafficking dot the globe, united under the umbrella of Talitha Kum, a 10-year-old network of networks that facilitates collaboration between congregations of consecrated men and women in 77 countries.

At a Cleveland retreat center Oct. 24-27, the U.S. Catholic Sisters Against Human Trafficking network brought together women religious throughout the Western Hemisphere to connect on their shared ministry. Presentations from all the networks, talks by survivors, virtual classes and group reflections allowed participants to share best practices and strengthen connections across borders.

“You can talk to them on the phone, that’s one thing,” said Margaret Nacke, a Sister of St. Joseph of Concordia and a co-sponsor of the U.S. network. “But what this has given us is a flavor, to look at who we are together in this hemisphere and how we can help one another.”

CROSSING BORDERS, IN THE SAME ROOM

Sisters and guests took the fabric butterflies on their tables and clipped them in their hair, on sweaters and nametags — a symbol of crossing borders to engage with one another. Headphones were linked to interpreters to bridge the four languages spoken by those present: English, Spanish, Portuguese and French.

Every network shared the realities from their regions — their efforts, their resources and approaches. A common theme among all, from Canada to Argentina, was the tie between trafficking and migration. Having about 60 sisters in one room meant those from neighboring countries could brainstorm ways their networks could collaborate.

“The trafficking networks are extremely well-organized, so we have to maintain our connections and work in networks. Otherwise we won’t get anywhere,” said Joanne Pundyk, a Sister of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary. Pundyk ministers in Masao, Brazil, a country whose border spans 10,500 miles along 10 countries. The border winds through an Amazonian forest with few people, let alone policing, making it more susceptible to trafficking, she said. Brazil’s anti-



DURING THE CULTURAL CELEBRATION ON THE CONFERENCE'S FINAL NIGHT, SR. JOANNE PUNDYK OF THE HOLY NAMES OF JESUS AND MARY DANCES THE "QUADRILHA" FROM THE NORTHEASTERN REGION OF BRAZIL, WHERE SHE MINISTERS. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)

trafficking network is Um Grito Pela Vida (A Cry for Life).

And with Brazil's new far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro, whose pro-torture and bigoted stances concern human rights advocates, Pundyk anticipates a "harder time getting our work done." She is particularly concerned about his antagonization of women and indigenous and LGBT people, who are most vulnerable to trafficking, she said.

"Some who are trans[gender] and want to have an operation to have physical changes, they're often lured, they're trafficked," she said. "They're being told they can earn a lot of money and have an operation, and when they get there, they're put into prostitution."

Sisters in Brazil and Colombia are both witnessing an influx of Venezuelan migrants crossing their borders and becoming easy targets for traffickers. Divine Savior Sr. Sandra Hernández, who ministers in Bogotá, Colombia, said this is one of the biggest challenges for Red Tamar, the country's network. It works to absorb into civil society the thousands of ex-combatants who, before the 2017 Colombian peace accord, lived in forests and jungles.

"There aren't favorable conditions within education or health care because those resources were instead directed to weapons and state violence, exacerbating our social problems and especially for migrants and ex-soldiers," she said. "We have double the task."

Hernández said human trafficking is easily manifested in institutions for education, with children being high-risk targets due to frequent teacher strikes and protests that put students on the streets.

With the risks of trafficking increasing "within a migratory context," she said, her network has been focusing on the new arrivals from Venezuela. They come with health problems, injuries or unmet basic needs, "as they're usually led into prostitution that's masked as opportunity."

But labor trafficking remains a prime concern when it comes to Venezuelan migrants, who are often paid half the Colombian minimum wage. "It's a challenging job because we're dealing with a number of forms of human trafficking that can be as invisible as the extraction of human organs or as contentious as the rehabilitation of children soldiers, who we consider victims of trafficking."

Ministering in El Salvador, Guardian Angel Sr. Carmela Gibaja Izquierdo said that one challenge is maintaining the connection between all the countries that belong to Red Ramá. This is because they're all countries of origin, transit and destination for traffickers. And while parishes and bishops' offices are involved in the issue of migration, she said trafficking "is still secondary" and has "not yet been deeply penetrated" as a problem.

Adopting an approach to tackling human trafficking that brings together congregations and institutions, Gibaja said, "is the only way to respond to the complex problems; the response can't be simple."



WITH FOUR LANGUAGES SPOKEN BY THOSE IN THE ROOM, SISTERS USED INTERPRETERS AND HEADSETS FOR ALL THE PRESENTATIONS. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)



PARTICIPANTS WROTE DOWN THEIR REFLECTIONS FOLLOWING PRESENTATIONS BY NETWORKS, THEN DISPLAYED THEM FOR EVERYONE TO READ THROUGHOUT THE THREE DAYS. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)

A three-year project in Uruguay provided training and awareness-raising among locals, with the help of Red Kawsay, the network that includes Argentina, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. “The idea was to generate trained actors to be able to respond to the situation,” said Oblate of the Holy Redeemer Sr. Sandra Ortiz. The network’s goals in the coming year are to tackle borders and provide more service to victims, she said.

“Participating in [this conference] helps strengthen what’s being done in our networks, whether we’re few or many,” she said. “It’s important to listen to different experiences and to be able to think about where one is and how we approach our realities, even if other places seem much more advanced than us or have different opportunities. It always helps to share.”

Sometimes the network can feel like “a tiny little dot in a country so big” as Argentina, said Missionary Social Service Sr. María Silvia Olivera. Partnering with lay and civil institutions can be a way of covering more ground — an approach she was keen on learning while at the conference. “Maybe we can’t copy exact prescriptions, but it helps to be exposed to how others do things.”

The sisters in Canada, who belong to the network CATHII, are considering adopting what the U.S. sisters shared in a presentation on training doctors and medical attendants to identify signs common among trafficking victims.

“I think with CATHII we could do something like that,” said Holy Names of Jesus and Mary Sr. Lise Gagnon. “Just as we already visit hotels, maybe we can visit emergency rooms, too.”

WHY THE SISTERS DO WHAT THEY DO

When she was 14, Marlene Carson’s middle-class family in Columbus, Ohio, welcomed a new couple moving into their neighborhood. Fully trusted by their neighbors, the couple’s house became a hangout for kids after school; they’d invite Carson and her friends on little field trips, with each outing getting farther and farther from Columbus. When they invited the girls to New York City, Carson’s mother said no, multiple times, until she finally gave in, distracted by a family tragedy.

“We sang Christian songs all the way to New York City,” Carson recalled of the drive.

After a day of shopping and tourism in the city, the girls were told to be back at the hotel at 8 p.m. to get dressed for a Broadway show. But instead, they were greeted with racks of see-through lace dresses, **pasties** and thongs.

When one of them protested, the man smacked her. That’s when it dawned on 15-year-old Carson that they had gotten into something beyond their comprehension.

“That weekend, I was sold 27 times as a virgin girl raised in the church,” she said. “That very first act, every dream, every desire, everything in me died that day. I never thought I’d be standing here telling anyone how great God is when something like this happens.”

Carson and her friends were trafficked on the streets, in brothels and at professional sporting events.



SISTERS VISIT WITH MARLENE CARSON, CENTER, FOR PICTURES AND HUGS. CARSON SPOKE DURING THE ANTI-TRAFFICKING CONFERENCE OF HER EXPERIENCE BEING PROSTITUTED AS A YOUNG TEENAGER. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)

Since escaping, Carson founded Rahab's Hideaway, a restorative housing program for victims of human trafficking.



FLOR MOLINA SHARES HER STORY OF SURVIVING LABOR TRAFFICKING ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER, WHERE SHE WAS FORCED TO LIVE IN A SEWING FACTORY. SHE HAS SINCE WORKED WITH THE SISTERS TO PASS LEGISLATION REGARDING THIS ISSUE. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)

All participants who spoke with GSR said the highlights of the conference were talks by Carson and Flor Molina, a victim of labor trafficking who now works with sisters on this issue. It was a reminder of why they do what they do, they said, particularly in a field where people doesn't necessarily see the fruits of their work or happy outcomes.

For Kathleen Bryant, a Religious Sister of Charity who was on the event's planning committee, the gathering helped the group become "sisters among sisters in the hemisphere."

"What I love is the recognition that we're all about the same mission and we're angry about what's happened to children, to women, to boys, to men in labor trafficking, and that we really are convinced that we can make things different and create change," Bryant said.

The fact that just two sisters from Mexico pioneered Red Rahamim and were able to organize on this front reminded Bryant that "as Americans, sometimes we think we have to have everything first organized with a mission statement and the budget and all the

rest." As one Mexican sister emphasized during their presentation, creating and sustaining Red Rahamim with little **underpinning** was possible because it was an "obsession."

The international coordinator of Talitha Kum, Comboni Missionary Sr. Gabriella Bottani, said that networks are also important for "bringing joy to a dark topic," as their respective communities tend to be unaware of the harsh realities these sisters witness in their ministry.

She noted that a crucial advantage in their coming together was "to recognize the diversity of charisms, to trust in one another [so we] can really share our experiences and our challenges and our suffering in these activities," she said. "But at the same time, [sharing] the hope and the ideas we have and the projects we're developing, supporting each other."

The last night of the Cleveland gathering was a cultural celebration, with every sister or group of sisters representing their country with food, costumes, trinkets and demonstrations of local dances or songs.

Bottani, however, was the sole sister from Italy, so she called on every attendee to dance with her as she demonstrated basic footwork and established a rhythm for all to follow. Her dance was emblematic of the network she leads, bringing together sisters who moved together with her guidance, as laughs, stumbles and improvisations punctuated their efforts.



THE FINAL NIGHT OF THE GATHERING WAS A CULTURAL CELEBRATION. HERE, MEXICAN SISTERS — MANY OF WHOM WORK IN OTHER COUNTRIES — SING TOGETHER. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)



ATTENDEES DANCE TOGETHER AS THE INTERNATIONAL COORDINATOR OF TALITHA KUM, COMBONI MISSIONARY SR. GABRIELLA BOTTANI, GIVES INSTRUCTIONS. (GSR PHOTO / SOLI SALGADO)

“We are writing the story of Talitha Kum together because we are many stories,” she said.



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AFTER YOU READ: Alone or with a partner, discuss:

1. What practical value did the sisters find in this gathering?
2. What spiritual or emotional benefits did the event create?
3. Why were the stories of the two survivors so significant to the sisters?

SCRIPTURE SPOTLIGHT: A man asked Jesus to heal his daughter, who was gravely ill. She died before Jesus reached her home. Jesus reassured her father, telling him, “Do not be afraid; just have faith.” Ignoring those who doubted or ridiculed him, Jesus entered the room where the girl was. Mark’s gospel says:

“He took the child by the hand and said to her, “Talitha koum,” which means, “Little girl, I say to you, arise!” The girl, a child of twelve, arose immediately and walked around. [At that] they were utterly astounded.”

Mark 5:41-42. [Click here to read the entire passage.](#)

Consider and discuss, alone or with a partner, these insights and questions:

1. The man had great faith, first that Jesus could cure his daughter, then that he might restore her to life. Why might people have faith that there are solutions to human trafficking?
2. People of every age and gender are among the millions of human trafficking victims around the world. Why do you think an international organization of sisters chose “Talitha Kum” for its name?

THE CHURCH'S CALL

Pope Francis has said he appreciates the “enormous and often silent efforts” of religious congregations, especially women’s congregations, in support of trafficking victims. In 2017, a bishop representing the pope shared this insight at a United Nations forum on human trafficking:

“The reality is that many trafficking survivors struggle to trust law enforcement, making their liberation and the prosecution of their traffickers much more difficult. Experience has shown that it is much easier for them to grow to trust religious sisters, and other Church personnel, who can build up their trust in the legal process and provide them safe haven and other forms of assistance.”

Bishop Paul R. Gallagher, Intervention on the Protection of and Assistance to Victims

1. Why do you think trafficking victims find it hard to trust law enforcement officials?

2. What attributes and skills do religious sisters have that help them reach out to trafficking victims?

SYNERGY WITH SISTERS

Ten years ago, the Catholic Church created a network of religious sisters throughout the world to combat human trafficking. “Talitha Kum” spans 77 countries and involves more than 2,000 nuns who have devoted their lives to the victims and the survivors of human trafficking. They focus on prevention, protection and social rehabilitation.

Pope Francis launched the Nuns Healing Hearts campaign in 2019 to celebrate Talitha Kum’s 10th anniversary. The campaign’s goals include training 600 women religious to identify and combat trafficking in their communities, as well as increasing the number of Talitha Kum networks by 20 percent over the next five years. Click [here](#) to see photos of sisters fighting trafficking in six different nations and discover how you can support the campaign.

ACT

Flor Molina, one of the survivors who spoke to the sisters’ gathering, escaped after 40 days of forced labor as a seamstress. It’s often hard to tell whether the food, clothes and other items we buy are made with slave labor. Consider these actions to become a more responsible consumer and avoid becoming a trafficking victim yourself:

- Check out End Slavery Now’s “Buy Slave Free” page to discover ways to shop smart, learn about your Slavery Footprint and write letters to your favorite brands.
- Take the Human Thread Campaign’s pledge to learn more about our role in human trafficking within the clothing industry and how we can make a difference.
- Explore how you can support the work of Talitha Kum [here](#). Start by following them on social media.
- Volunteer with the Human Thread Foundation, whose work includes the photos of the Nuns Healing Heart campaign.
- Explore ways that you and your friends can avoid becoming human trafficking victims, which include being cautious with your use of social media.

PRAY

Lord, you made it sound so easy...

“Little girl, get up!”

It’s not easy to lift up the lives of so many who are deadened by human trafficking. Strengthen us, Lord, for this challenge.

In a special way, fortify the sisters who give and risk so much to reach the victims.

Raise us all to a freer life in you.

Amen.