

Religious Organizations as Partners in the Global and Local Fight Against Human Trafficking

■ Mary Graw Leary | 6 January 2018

Summary

This paper explores the role of religious organizations as effective partners in the fight to end modern day slavery. As a crime with both global and local dimensions, trafficking must be combatted with tools that are both global and local. Such tools include the world's religions and religious organizations. They have been addressing human trafficking for decades, and through their work with the poor, immigrants, and sexually exploited, they possess significant knowledge of the manifestations of this form of exploitation and can be important stakeholders in combating it. The paper concludes by offering several recommendations for how policymakers can deepen their anti-trafficking collaborations with religious organizations.

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In the year 2000, nations from all corners of the globe joined together to publicly recognize and begin developing a comprehensive response to a 'new' form of exploitation surfacing throughout the world: human trafficking. This international effort produced the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children ('Palermo Protocol'). Coinciding with the passage in the United States of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the Protocol and related documents called on all signatories to acknowledge this crime, prevent it, protect its victims, prosecute its offenders, and partner with each other to globally condemn what is also known as modern-day slavery. These documents also recognized the limited knowledge governments and law enforcement then possessed about the contours of human trafficking and demanded that nations learn more about the many forms of this crime and respond accordingly.

The result was both definitional and responsive. For the first time the international community defined human trafficking broadly. While each nation may adjust the parameters of their domestic legal definition to meet statutory norms, the signatories through Article 3(a) of the Protocol agreed that "trafficking in persons" includes:

[T]he recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services,

slavery or practices similar to slavery servitude or the removal of organs.¹

As important as recognizing and defining human trafficking was, the Palermo Protocol went beyond definition. It endorsed the aforementioned 'Four P's' approach to combating human trafficking: prevention, protection, prosecution, and partnership. The first wave of response focused on prosecution and protection—encouraging nations to develop the necessary criminal laws to hold offenders accountable for their crimes and protect victims from exploitation, forced labor, and sex trafficking.

In the intervening years, two important milestones have been achieved. First, the world has seen significant progress in the enactment of criminal laws forbidding human trafficking in nearly 170 nations. Second, the world's collective knowledge about the various forms and causes of human trafficking has grown significantly.² These two achievements have revealed human trafficking to be a complex criminal endeavor with many different and troubling manifestations from labor trafficking on fishing vessels in Southeast Asia, to domestic servitude in the Middle East, to sex trafficking in major European cities, and trafficking in the agriculture sector of the United States. In the wake of these laws and increased knowledge, it has become apparent that the passage of laws is only one step, albeit a crucial one, in the fight against human trafficking. Consequently, more recent efforts to combat human trafficking in this second wave have continued to concentrate on effective prosecution while increasing attention to prevention, particularly through a focus on demand.

The contours of human trafficking have proven to be highly paradoxical. On the one hand, the crime is global in nature, transcending geopolitical borders. Yet, at the same time, it is also

local in execution — at times morphing to meet the needs of the local economy or manifesting as a culturally embedded norm. This ‘paradox of human trafficking’ is further complicated by the understanding that throughout the world the causes of human trafficking seem to be universal: poverty, natural disasters, migration, destabilization, corruption, and a devaluing of the human being to a commodity.

This article explores the role of religious organizations as effective partners in the fight to end modern day slavery. As a crime with both global and local dimensions, trafficking must be combated with tools that are both global and local. Such tools include the world’s religions and religious organizations. They have been addressing human trafficking since well before 2000, and through their work with the poor, immigrants, and sexually exploited, they possess significant knowledge of the manifestations of this form of exploitation and can be important stakeholders in combating it. To be clear, this article recognizes that religion has certainly often been misused to exploit vulnerable people; religious groups have, in some contexts, been deeply complicit or even directly engaged in the problem of human trafficking. Further, this article does not contend that every anti-trafficking initiative by faith-based groups is helpful or successful. Some interventions may be counterproductive. While mindful of the complexities surrounding religion and trafficking, this article will focus on the positive potential and practice of religiously-inspired efforts to combat modern slavery.

Paradox of Human Trafficking: Global in Scope, Local in Impact

Human Trafficking as Global

All numbers attempting to measure human trafficking are admittedly flawed, as an accurate measure of the full scope of trafficking in persons is impossible due to the underground nature of the crime.³ However, there can be no dispute as to the vast size of this criminal enterprise. The International Labour Organization (ILO) reports that approximately 25 million people work under conditions of forced labor throughout the world.⁴ The United Nations characterizes human trafficking as the fastest growing criminal

industry.⁵ This has been attributed to the perception among traffickers and organized criminal organizations that trafficking poses more potential profit and less risk than other criminal endeavors. The United States Department of Labor lists 139 major products from 75 countries likely produced by child or forced labor.⁶ These include common products used throughout the world, such as coffee, chocolate, cotton, gold, carpets, and seafood. By any measure, more people in the world are enslaved today than at the height of the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century.⁷

It is axiomatic that globalization has changed the face of the world. The free flow of goods and services has had economic costs and benefits for all sectors. As an economic as well as criminal enterprise, human trafficking is no exception. Traffickers can move people domestically and globally with a level of ease not previously experienced. As a result, the ability of trafficking entities to transport their ‘product’ of people to the construction sites of Dubai, the brothels of Western Europe, the streets of India, or the large tomato farms of the United States is unprecedented. Similarly, the purchasers of people also utilize open borders and borderless digital communication platforms to obtain human organs, engage in child sex tourism, or recruit victims from economically desperate situations with promises of wealth and stability. Finally, complex supply chains have allowed for the routine use of sub-contractors to produce component parts of products in various nations. This results in complicated supply chains at times rife with forced labor, often unbeknownst to the brand manufacturer. This global aspect of trafficking can hamper law enforcement efforts because no one nation has the global jurisdiction necessary to respond.

Human Trafficking is Local

While the scope of human trafficking as a global crisis cannot be understated, its expression as a local problem is also clear. The various forms of human trafficking in local jurisdictions are manifestations of the economic forces and cultural landscape unique to each region. Child begging on the streets of India, debt bondage in Bolivia, forced prostitution of Cambodians in Thailand, and trafficking of Eritrean refugees all involve uniquely

local forces.⁸ Layered on top of the local nature of trafficking are the local cultural characteristics that contribute to acceptance of certain forms of trafficking, or indifference by government and law enforcement. These cultural realities can be obstacles to condemning forms of trafficking such as child sex trafficking, forced marriages,⁹ or child labor.

Similarly, in countries without functioning governments or law enforcement, victims do not, or cannot, report this form of victimization. As such, the trafficking flourishes often without a lifeline between victims and entities able to protect them on the local level. In this space, religion can play a major role in response.

Contributing Causes of Human Trafficking are Universal

Many of the causes of human trafficking are universal. Although each region of the world has uniquely local manifestations, research on these various types of trafficking has found certain common risk factors. The push factors include poverty, economic disparity, marginalization, discrimination, instability, conflict, and a lack of viable employment.¹⁰ The pull factors include a demand for cheap labor and goods, the possibility of higher living standards, and the hope for a better life. Whether due to Haitian poverty after an earthquake or the violence and economic despair in the Philippines, people unable to subsist are susceptible to force, fraud, or coercion into trafficking. These situations alone, or when aggravated by the lack of basic governmental structures due to conflict or weak governance, also fuel the supply of trafficked people. Finally, corruption on every level facilitates trafficking. Regardless of whether it is the medical professionals who participate in organ trafficking, police who are paid to turn a blind eye to sex trafficking (or are indeed traffickers themselves), or the border agents who allow the free flow of individuals across international borders, corruption is rampant where trafficking has taken hold. When this reality combines with social attitudes that deny certain segments of the population their basic human rights because of their age, caste, gender, nationality, or other marginalizing characteristics, the most vulnerable of people are exploited with impunity.

Religions: Global, Local, and Working with the Vulnerable

These very characteristics of trafficking—global, local, and caused by universal realities of poverty, marginalization, and corruption—make it such a challenging form of exploitation to defeat. Just as globalization has increased legal economic activity, so too has it made illegal economic activity relatively easy to pursue. Many traffickers can do so with impunity because law enforcement is limited by geopolitical and jurisdictional boundaries, but criminal actors are not. Similarly, some of the most well-funded enforcement bodies such as Interpol and other task forces are unable to garner the informational assets of local people either to anticipate criminal activity or to respond to it after it has occurred. Today there are faith-based organizations fighting trafficking that number among the very few organizations capable of moving as nimbly as the criminal organizations do on both the global and local stages.

Religions and Religious Organizations are Global

A word is necessary here about definitions. This paper uses ‘religion’ to refer to an organized group of people joined by a common set of beliefs, values, and spiritual faith. These can be highly structured religions such as the Roman Catholic or Anglican churches. These can also include other worldwide religions that lack a centralized structure such as Buddhism or Judaism, as well as more regional or smaller faiths. The term ‘religious organizations’ can have a very broad meaning, but for purposes of this paper it includes social justice arms of particular denominations, religious orders, faith based non-profit organizations and religiously affiliated coalitions and institutions such as educational, medical, social service, and missionary institutions.

Just as criminal organizations are adaptable and nimble, transcending geopolitical boundaries, so too are many faith-based organizations and their affiliates. Unlike governments or law enforcement entities, religions are not limited by international boundaries. Therefore, they are uniquely situated to respond to global crises. For example, Talitha Kum is a worldwide Catholic network of men and women in consecrated life who combat trafficking

in over 70 countries.¹¹ Caritas Internationalis is a coalition of Catholic grassroots organizations on every continent on the globe serving the poor and victims of trafficking.¹² Similarly, COATNET is an ecumenical network of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox affiliate organizations who have come together to combat human trafficking on every continent.¹³ The faith-based International Justice Mission is the world's largest anti-slavery organization, with an annual budget of over \$50 million and more than 750 employees globally. These organizations can quickly ascertain information, distribute best practices, and mobilize service providers.

The reach of these organizations exceeds most governmental entities. Although religious groups are not charged with investigating and prosecuting human traffickers, they are very capable of assisting law enforcement in such work. Of course, this is not always an ideal alliance, as law enforcement may not share the same goals as do religious organizations. For example, law enforcement may have policies—such as arresting victims of prostitution, arresting minors, or deporting illegal immigrants—that are antithetical to a religious point of view and be an obstacle to a productive alliance. When, however, the two entities have shared priorities, religions and their affiliate organizations are essential to the P's of prevention, protection, and partnership in the anti-human trafficking framework outlined by the United Nations.¹⁴ These organizations protect victims as they have been working with these marginalized poor and enslaved persons for decades, long preceding the Palermo Protocol. They have developed an expertise among many of the populations frequently trafficked. For example, although Christianity is a minority religion in most of Southeast Asia, it accounts for the majority of anti-trafficking programming in many countries.¹⁵ Similarly, the Global Freedom Network, an organization dedicated to eradicating modern slavery by engaging faith leaders to take action, assembled over 39 senior leaders to sign the Declaration of Religious Leaders Against Slavery.¹⁶ Signatories included Patriarch Bartholomew (Orthodox), Grand Imam of Al-Azhar (Muslim), Datuk K. Sri Dhammaratana (Buddhist), Chief Rabbi David Rosen (Jewish), and Pope Francis (Roman Catholic). This declaration covers religions across the globe.

Religions and their affiliates can and do respond to global trafficking on a global scale through both the delivery of services and prevention efforts. They do so not only with their own international reach, but they also increase their influence and abilities by forming coalitions to advocate or serve. For example, the Central Conference of American Rabbis resolved to not only educate their own members about the realities of human trafficking, but also to “work with local state/provincial police and prosecutorial entities to prosecute the traffickers and protect victims.”¹⁷ Similarly, Churches Together in England has created an anti-trafficking information center to disperse information and assistance on human trafficking through all of its many membership institutions.¹⁸ Such efforts extend the influence of these entities more deeply into their respective communities and more globally in their reach.

Organizations can form coalitions focused on more narrow forms of trafficking. These can be powerful because they manage to marshal the force of hundreds of professionals working in certain sectors throughout a region. For example, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office of Migration formed the Coalition of Organizations and Ministries Promoting the Abolition of Slavery At Sea (COMPASS). This coalition was able to nimbly respond to the growing problem of trafficking workers in the fishing industry. This population is inherently isolated and without protection, but COMPASS moved quickly “to strengthen the coordination, collaboration, and capacity of the worldwide Catholic response to maritime trafficking, especially in its ministries at sea and ports” and “to maximize Catholic and non-Catholic actors' effectiveness and consistency in...identifying, screening, and responding to victims of maritime trafficking globally.”¹⁹ Similarly, Chab Dai, a Christian anti-trafficking organization that began in the grass roots of Cambodia, grew to become an entity that currently works with coalitions in over 20 countries.²⁰ This highly successful effort could not have been achieved on a global scale by any one government.

Regarding prevention, a word must be said about education. Religious organizations often form the educational bedrock of the poorest communities. For example, Catholic education is the largest non-governmental educational system

in the world with over 130,000 primary and secondary schools. This places a great deal of potential influence on society within such institutions. It must be recognized that educational institutions have a mixed history here that includes being places of abuse and exploitation of vulnerable children. That being said, they also can be facilitators of great positive social change. Such institutions are in a unique position to respond to human trafficking because of their preferential option for the poor, education regarding the dignity of the person, high success rates, and provision of education to girls. Thus, they can educate potential victims on the dangers facing them, as well as provide counter-trafficking messages to the whole of those communities.

Religions Are Local

While religions and religious organizations are fortunate to be able to respond with increased speed and transnational reach, they can also bring an ability to connect to local communities as well. This ability allows them to know the reality ‘on the ground’ and what social forces allow human trafficking to occur. While religions are capable of “top down” programming, they are also deeply embedded in grass roots efforts to respond to human trafficking.

When it comes to serving the most marginalized in society, religions and religious organizations have been at the forefront for centuries. They often have not only earned a place of trust within many of these communities, they are also familiar with the social and economic forces plaguing these populations and influencing their values. As such, they are able to educate people, act as a conduit between the victim community and law enforcement where needed, and challenge outside institutions who fail to protect the community.²¹

This local strength emerges in a number of manifestations around the Four P construct. First, as first responders, the social safety net provided or supplemented by religious organizations often is a primary source of service and protection to victims of human trafficking. Additionally, however, in many areas of the world religions are part of—or indeed central to—the daily fabric of the community. Thus, they stand in a unique position to protect potential victims on the local level by

educating them about the risks of trafficking. They also are able to challenge culturally embedded forms of exploitation. Some traffickers hijack cultural and religious norms as an excuse or justification for certain forms of trafficking. Religious leaders can partner with other social pillars to counter those messages. For instance, many Muslims leaders have repeatedly condemned trafficking by militants as violations of Islamic teachings.²² A partnership of laypersons and Catholic sisters in Nigeria founded the organization Slaves No More, which provides services attending to the needs of prostituted women, facilitating their reintegration into society.²³ The faith-based organization Shared Hope International has recognized the influence of local churches and faith communities with their annual JuST Faith Summit. The conference to bring faith leaders from all communities together to learn from experts “critical information to prevent sex trafficking and ways to assist in restoration efforts and justice initiatives on behalf of survivors,”²⁴ and then bring that information back to local communities.

The Strength of Being Both Global and Local

Religions can combine these features of both an international reach and a local expertise, to be a formidable partner in combating human trafficking. Being so closely connected with the segments of society victimized by crime, these social service entities are often aware of events occurring in the criminal realm. This has been recognized by the Santa Marta Group, an international coalition of police chiefs, religious orders, and civil society leaders who have come together to fight human trafficking. At the core of this movement is the recognition that many victims turn to trusted religious figures working within the community because of an ongoing service relationship or faith-based relationship they do not have with law enforcement. By partnering with religious communities, law enforcement benefits from that trusted relationship and accesses information about ongoing criminal activity. With members in 30 countries, the Santa Marta Group has convened meetings across Europe, Asia, and Latin America, sharing best practices and showcasing religious organizations as essential partners with law enforcement to bridge gaps

between the population and the police by providing information and even accompanying police to provide services to victims. For example, Scotland Yard has developed a program where it brings Catholic sisters from a Spanish order primarily from South America, India, and Spain on police operations to work with the trafficking victims whom police encounter.²⁵ Caritas Nepal has partnered with lawyers, social activists, and Radio Nepal to raise awareness, prevent child trafficking, and assist families in locating and rescuing their trafficked children even when trafficked outside the country.²⁶ Such collaboration is becoming more common and is essential in reaching all parts of the community.

An example of the utilization of this global/local strength is the 2017 World Congress: Child Dignity in the Digital World. The Centre for Child Protection of the Pontifical Gregorian University collaborated with the WePROTECT Global Alliance and SOS Il Telefono Azzurro Onlus to gather many of the world's leading researchers, scholars, business leaders, and religious leaders to discuss and plan a world where children and vulnerable adults are safe from exploitation. This collaboration utilized the global strength of the Catholic Church, but also its academic institutions, and its local reach to help identify some of the critical figures throughout the world. It produced both the Declaration of Rome and an action plan to implement this declaration in a real and tangible manner. The mission of this World Congress underscores the need for such collaboration:

To grow a global coalition of representatives from religions, government, international organizations, the technology industry, academia and research community, civil society, and elsewhere working together toward a common objective: defending the dignity of minors and vulnerable adults.²⁷

Furthermore, by calling on the "leaders of the world's great religions to inform and mobilize members of every faith to join in a global movement to protect the world's children," the resulting Declaration of Rome emphasizes the obligations of the world's religions to harness these strengths and take an active role in combating exploitation and trafficking.²⁸

Religious Groups Address the Universal Causes of Trafficking

Throughout the world, religions and their affiliates have been working in the space of the very social issues that have been recognized as the main causes of human trafficking. They do so in two ways. First, many religious entities provide frontline assistance to those in most need. Secondly, many of these same institutions have been outspoken on the very issues that plague humanity, deny people their inherent dignity, and contribute to the growth of human trafficking.

As first line service providers, the world's religious service entities work in the midst of poverty, migration, oppression, and war zones. Consequently, they are valuable stakeholders in eliminating these causes of human trafficking by being immersed in the reality of them. Indeed, in some parts of the developing world, these faith-based organizations are the only civil society actors present. As such, they have valuable insight into the context of these social ills, the reality for the people who live them, and the possible solutions for ending them.

Similarly, many religious leaders and organizations have led the public fight against these social ills. Religious organizations have called and worked for an end to poverty, an end to the causes of mass migration, and the reassertion of the value of all human life. In the 18th and early 19th centuries, even as some religious actors supported or turned a blind eye to slavery, William Wilberforce was motivated by his Christian faith to successfully campaign for the end of Britain's participation in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Today, many religious leaders continue to stand against all forms of slavery. They offer valuable tools against human trafficking, as this social ill will not be abolished without addressing its underlying social causes.

Partnering with religious groups to help build trust between victims and law enforcement is essential to the success of utilizing new anti-trafficking laws. In the words of the former Detective Inspector for Scotland Yard's Human Trafficking Unit, collaboration between law enforcement and religious actors "is actually quite a natural fit because the church reaches out to the

most vulnerable, offers that extended arm and support, and the police are there to actually remove the threat of those committing the crime.”²⁹

Recommendations

Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should partner with the religious organizations already working with populations at risk of trafficking. Britain’s Bakhita Initiative is an example of a program to be replicated elsewhere. Women religious orders and the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales have developed a formal relationship to work with the government and to respond to human trafficking with their respective strengths.³⁰ This initiative aims to harness the gifts of the religious representatives to serve victims, assist law enforcement to strengthen investigation, and work with the community to educate, prevent, and condemn trafficking.

Governments should also utilize these partnerships to extend their investigations to areas of the world they cannot normally reach. Religious denominations and faith-based organizations have vast networks in remote or difficult places that are largely inaccessible to Western government officials. For example, the Holy See has a unique set of religious and diplomatic connections around the world, including in many countries that have strained diplomatic relations with Western states. Utilizing the reach of the Holy See to investigate trafficking in those areas can be critical to stopping transnational criminal networks.

Partnerships should be proactive as well as reactive. As the anti-slavery movement continues to evolve from a focus primarily on prosecution to one that includes prevention, religious communities and their affiliates can play another important role. What has emerged in this second wave of activism is the obvious realization that human trafficking is not a form of exploitation that the world can escape solely through the passage of criminal laws. Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, noted that “in order to be effective we need multi-stakeholder response...cooperation between Government, law enforcement, civil society...as well as representatives from faith communities.”³¹ Recent years have made it

apparent that, while arrest and prosecution of traffickers are essential, human trafficking is more than a crime. It is also an economic activity that relies upon consumers to survive. The current wave of the movement capitalizes on the role citizens can play in combating trafficking by focusing on demand. It is here that religious organizations can truly be a voice for social transformation. The benefits are not limited by geopolitical boundaries. For example, UNACT partnered with Chab Dai to create the Freedom Registry. This is an online platform for anti-trafficking organization to collaborate and connect throughout the world.³² It is necessary to educate the public, stigmatize, and discourage the demand for human trafficking. For example, Caritas Pakistan identified trafficking of camel jockeys and worked with the Children’s Protection Bureau to create a comprehensive research study of the problem.³³ This effort increased awareness and provided education for children to avoid trafficking into this industry. Whether it is denouncing those who purchase sex from a trafficked person or those who financially benefit from trafficking or forced labor in their supply chains, the focus on demand is gaining significant momentum. The social forces present in the lives of ordinary men and women thus have heightened importance. By tying demand for trafficked persons to morally condemnable behavior, religions can contribute to stemming the demand for trafficked goods.

Governments should work with the coalitions of religious groups organizing anti-demand campaigns. Such partnerships involve sharing information to ensure that the anti-demand messaging is complementary and informed. For example, the Nordic model continues to grow in implementation throughout the world. While some religions may disagree with the decriminalization of commercial sex, none opposes the stigmatizing against buying another for sex. Also of pressing concern is the migration crisis. Religions and their affiliates are on the frontlines of serving migrant populations who are at extreme risk of all forms of human trafficking. For example, hundreds of women religious orders throughout the world have opened their communities to house and serve migrants crossing the Mediterranean.³⁴ These religious entities will be essential partners in

combating human trafficking and responding to it when prevention and education fail.

Paying particular attention to the religious organizations working with migrant communities is essential. For instance, a strong relationship between governments and the local affiliates of the Catholic Bishop's Migration and Refugee Services or the various Caritas organizations throughout the world facilitate law enforcement being promptly alerted to emerging trafficking incidents and trends.

Conclusion

The features of modern day slavery—global, local, and universal in cause—require an opponent with equally strong global and local ties, as well as a deep presence and longstanding work on the issues that cause human trafficking. Religions, religious leaders, and their affiliated entities can be such a force. Throughout the world, many have played an active role in combating human trafficking and represent a fruitful partner with whom governments can engage in their efforts to end this terrible trade.

Notes

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¹² See the Who We Are page of the Caritas website, <https://www.caritas.org/who-we-are/>.

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¹⁴ See for instance the remarks of UN Deputy Secretary General Asha Rose Migior, *Add Partnership to United Nations Three P Agenda to End Human Trafficking Protocol*, June 3, 2008, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2008/dsgsm397.doc.htm>.

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¹⁸ Churches Together in England, http://www.cte.org.uk/Groups/270278/Home/Resources/Anti_Slavery_CCMS/Anti_Slavery_CCMS.aspx.

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²⁰ Chab Dai, chabdai.org.

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