

Trafficking in women: A challenge for the churches in Europe

Response by the Conference of European Churches through its Working Group on Trafficking in Women and its Women's Desk

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From 2001 to 2003, a working group of the Conference of European Churches has been involved in preparing a workbook for the churches on the issue of trafficking in women. The group responded to a demand from CEC's ground breaking consultation on the issue which took place in Driebergen/Holland in 1999, the year declared by the European Parliament as the International Year of Combating Violence against Women. At Driebergen, 70 participants from 27 countries challenged the churches and CEC

- "to support and promote a document setting out the background to the issue of trafficking in women, its root causes and the social and theological thinking on it, giving suggestions for action and providing information about networks that exist, relating it to the broader issues of violence against women, poverty, slavery, human rights and criminal activity",
- and "to promote understanding of the responsibility of churches within Europe for drawing attention to the injustices emerging from new political and economic configurations, in particular the unequal wealth relations within Europe, which are a primary cause of growth in trafficking in women."

(Driebergen Declaration, p. 3)¹

Now "Churches in Europe against Trafficking in Women" is available as a workbook for use throughout the churches of CEC. There are examples of practical church engagement, guidance for networking and a wide range of background information on the problems which surround this international trade.

The aim of the book is to enable churches and church communities to gain insight into this Europe wide problem, relate it to theological reflection, and share it in their work context, in their church life and neighborhoods. In this way a new generation of activists will emerge to resist and deconstruct this twentyfirst century slave trade.

The objectives:

The workbook starts the process of reflection on the problem from the churches' context. The practical ideas and models of action offered in its pages will encourage churches to look at their own needs and opportunities for engagement. The book is designed to lower the fear threshold of this threatening and discomfoting area, to address directly some of the prejudices and taboos related to sexuality and prostitution which are part of the sex trafficking world. It will enable the reader to join the growing movement of people engaged in counteracting the trafficking in women for commodified sex both in civil society and the churches. A comprehensive list of NGOs involved in counter-trafficking strategies in Europe at national and some

¹ The documentation of this consultation has been published by CEC under the title "Trafficking in Women in Europe. Papers from an international consultation held in Driebergen, Netherlands, 27 November - 1 December, 1999. It can be ordered in English, German and Russian at CEC's Women's Desk, 150 route de Ferney, CH- 1211 Geneva 2, Tel. +41 22 791 62 34, e-mail: thp@cec-kek.org

regional levels is included which we believe will develop networking and fruitful cross sector co-operation with others.

Methods:

The material is narrative, visual and creative. CEC's vision is to be a network of churches providing spaces for personal encounter and sharing among the churches and peoples of Europe. This is the way which we believe the vital processes of reconciliation and healing can be encouraged, and Christians enabled to develop across boundaries of denomination and national/regional borders their commitment for a sustainable Europe working for a just world. This requires personal encounter in safe environments, with the meeting resourced by challenging and professional material, including "speaking" layouts and "moving" texts.

The combination of information, stories and liturgical material, will touch not only the intellect of our congregations and church leaders, but the lives of people of faith as they are moved by the affective dimensions of the material – in poetry, song, and powerful personal narrative.

The result is an integrated, profound engagement which will facilitate a deeper encounter between those who read and the people in and behind the texts.

Trafficking in women is a critical issue for the church and for Christian community. Both victims and clients of prostitution, sometimes even traffickers and pimps, belong to Christian churches. In many regions, especially in rural areas, the churches are the only institutions which reach down to the broad population. The churches have a potential to raise awareness among their communities as well as to protect and support victims. The task to call perpetrators, including clients of prostitution, to their ethical and moral responsibility is a challenging one, but one from which we are not to shirk.

Contents

- basic information about the social-economic context of trafficking
- three sections with information from regions of origin where trafficked women are recruited,
- case histories,
- theological paradigms to inform educational work amongst congregations
- liturgical material
- reflections on the responsibility of clients and their peers
- examples of good practice
- practical guidance on developing a contextual response for churches and concerned groups

The launch

The workbook was launched at the first regional CEC workshop in Brno/Czech Republic where representatives from churches and Christian NGOs from 4 countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary) and from the CAT network (Christians Together Against Trafficking in Women) came together. The participants at this workshop tested the workbook and departed with their commitment deepened to work in their respective churches and ecumenical contexts . The workbook was

subsequently presented to the delegates at the 12th Assembly of CEC in Trondheim/Norway (June 25 - July 2, 2003), at the hearing on trafficking in women to a warm and positive response.

For 2004, more workshops are being planned. They will be organised in co-operation with a variety of churches, CCME and the CAT project. Special attention is being paid to churches and Christian organisations in Central and Eastern Europe where the awareness of the problem is still low, whilst the prevalence of the problem is significant. These regions are the main region in Europe for the recruitment of women into the criminalised world of trafficking.

Women's desk exhibition

Alongside the development of the workbook and the calling of workshops, the issue of trafficking in women is now profiled in the new exhibition "We care for life. Reconciling, Healing, Defending the Earth. Witnesses of Women in Europe". Developed by the CEC Women's Desk the exhibition expounds in pictures and words, three years of encounters and work with women. The issue of trafficking in women is related to the broader issues of violence against women and a range of slavery into which they are enmeshed. The injustices which are emerging from the new political and economic configurations of Europe and globalisation, the high level of female unemployment and the world-wide feminisation of poverty are named as a primary cause of growth in trafficking in women.

The exhibition can be rented for use in churches and in associated organisations. An accompanying booklet is in preparation which will work as a resource for group work and school exploitation of the exhibition.

Other publications²

Amongst a wide range of thought provoking and relevant publications from CEC's Solidarity Desk are:

- "Working together for Sustainable Life. Experiences from Diaconia in Europe" a collection from the Diaconal Forum in Järvenpää/Finland, 2001. The booklet shares case studies and brief introductions into key concerns for diaconia in Europe. One contribution from The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe CCME speaks about the the boat people in the Mediterranean and the situation of women trafficked to Italy.
- The booklet "Jesus Christ heals. Witnesses from Women in Europe" is a collection of texts which address the theme of "healing" from female, existential perspectives. It is experience-focussed and transformational. From Russia comes the perspective of the dream of a better future abroad which encourages young women into traffickers' networks. It also addresses the issue of "human rights defense" as a theme for us to wrestle with and understand.

² The workbook as well as the other material presented here can be ordered at CEC's Women's and Solidarity Desk at the above given address. Through the CAT/CEC process we have a network of 'ambassadors' across Europe who would be able to supply you with booklets, or bring a talk or exhibition to your churches about this troubling area. You are very welcome to contact us.

The CEC Solidarity Desk has the advantage of being an integral part of the women's and diaconal networks in Europe. We are now developing a flyer inviting churches and individuals to participate in this new effort to strengthen the network across different groups and churches in Europe. We pray that this will serve as a much needed tool to advertise the material available and bring the searing issue of domestic violence and trafficking in women to the awareness of a broader constituency.