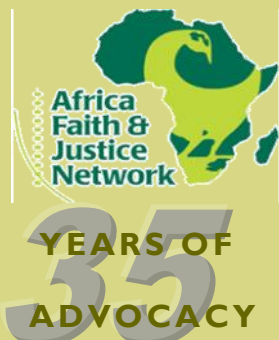


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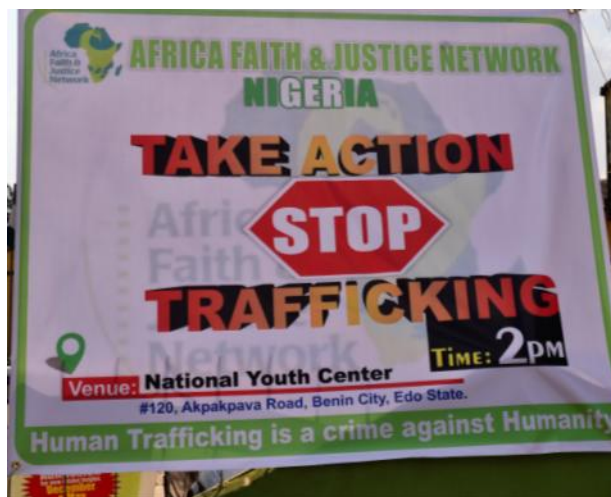
The Africa Faith and Justice Network, inspired by the Gospel and informed by Catholic Social Teaching, seeks to educate and advocate for just relations with Africa and to work in partnership with African peoples as they engage in the struggle for justice, peace, and the integrity of creation.

A BRIEF HISTORY

Moved to action by their personal experiences in Africa, three Catholic missionary congregations namely the Missionaries of Africa, the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritains), and the Society of African Missions, founded the Africa Faith and Justice Network (AFJN) in 1983 to transform United States policy towards Africa and her people. Since that time, membership has grown and remains committed in faith to advocate in Washington, DC for U.S. relations with Africa that foster justice and peace, and to educate the public across the United States on the truth about Africa.

Building Broader Support in the Fight against Human Trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria

by Sister Eucharika Madweke, SND-N



From November 22 to December 1, 2017, Catholic religious Sisters in Nigeria, under the umbrella of the Africa Faith & Justice Network - Nigeria, left their convents and chapels to fight human trafficking in Edo State, Nigeria. For five full days, the AFJN-N Sisters took to the roads of the cities and villages because they were incensed that the dignity of the human person, especially of women and children, continues

to be violated through human trafficking and other forms of violence in the state. As one of them said, *“The elder must not be at home while a nanny goat in tether delivers her young. The adult must ensure that the goat is unleashed, or else the elder is an irresponsible adult in the community.”*

The Sisters are responsible elders in the community and therefore could not remain in their comfort zones while human dignity continues to be compromised through human trafficking and violence. They must act, or else they fail to be responsible elders.

Despite the kidnapping of six Sisters in the state during the month of November and the general insecurity and lack of protection for anyone in the country, they were not deterred from publicly denouncing the evil of trafficking, and they did not shy away from calling out those in power to use their position to curb this inhumanity to humans.

Human Trafficking in Nigeria

Nigeria is one of Africa’s largest departure points for human trafficking, and Edo State, the heartbeat of Nigeria, is the hub of the country’s trafficking, with more than 10,000 indigenous people trafficked in 2016, of whom 3,000 died on the journey. Victims trafficked through Edo are mostly young people, both male and female, who have migrated for various reasons, especially socio-economic. The victims are often moved by public transportation through northern Nigeria

to Niger and Libya, where they are trafficked to various parts of Europe. Before the journey, the victims are required to pay as much as \$1,500. Those unable to pay full fees before the journey are allowed to pay something to travel but must complete their payment on arrival in Libya. Failing to complete payment, say trafficked victims, leads the individuals to be victimized, abused, and auctioned out for as little as \$400 at the Libya slave market.

Victims have also told how female migrants are sexually exploited en route and are forced to become sex workers upon failing to complete their payment in Libya. Because victims have agreed to pay for the journey, some would say they are “willing victims.” Nonetheless, they are *ignorant* willing victims, because they had little or no information about what they would face on the way to Libya and to Europe.

Sisters’ Prior Advocacy in Edo State

Before the November and December advocacy events, the Sisters had conducted Town Hall meetings in two rural communities of the state where underage girls were being held in brothels and used as sex workers. In these communities, the Sisters held an awareness campaign to educate about trafficking and related evils against women and children. During the gatherings, they helped people understand how currently youth illegal migration to foreign countries fuels trafficking and why citizens, regardless of religion and social status, should work together to end illegal migration and trafficking. Through these interactions, the Sisters learned that over 95% of families in these communities have someone who has migrated to Italy or other parts of Europe via Libya. The villagers also told the Sisters that of all the young people who have travelled, less than 10% are in contact with their families. No one knows the whereabouts of the rest, as nothing has been heard from them in years.



Picture with the Deputy Governor of Edo State (Third from right)

During these days, the Sisters also visited the newly elected Governor of Edo State, His Excellency Godwin Obaseki, asking him to take seriously the issue of trafficking and violence against women and children in his state, even though he had not campaigned on these issues. They also confronted a brothel owner in Ujiagba village, reporting him to the Chief of the State Police. Since it was not in their power to arrest the brothel owner, close down the brothel, and rescue the girls trapped there, the Sisters demanded immediate action from the State Police against the brothel owner and the rescue of the girls.

November/ December AFJN-N Sisters Advocacy Activities

This advocacy event was a follow-up of the Sisters’ previous advocacy events in the State. It was held at the time when the country was mourning 26 Nigerian teenage girls found dead in the Mediterranean Sea. The purpose of these events included: (1) expressing publicly their dissatisfaction over the general complacency and lack of serious commitment of law enforcement agents in the



fight against trafficking; (2) strengthening previous advocacy work in the two villages; (3) holding the State Police accountable for failing to act on the Sisters' previous report to its office; and (4) developing new partnerships and reaching out to new audiences in order to mobilize broader support for their advocacy against trafficking and violence.

From across the country, over 30 Sisters of various religious communities and ministries

converged at the Medical Missionary Sisters' Retreat and Conference Center in Benin City, the capital of Edo State, to continue their advocacy efforts against trafficking. The Sisters chose this center because of its location in Benin City, which has a long history of human trafficking activities.

Meeting with the Archbishop of Benin City



Most Rev. Dr. Augustine Obiora Akubeze, the Catholic Archbishop of Benin City in the middle

The advocacy event was kicked off with a visit to the Most Rev. Dr. Augustine Obiora Akubeze, the Catholic Archbishop of Benin City, to inform him of the presence of the Sisters in the Archdiocese and to request the Church's sustained advocacy against trafficking in the state. The Archbishop welcomed the Sisters graciously and praised their courage in giving public witness against the evil of trafficking. He loaned the sisters an archdiocesan bus for transportation during their advocacy campaign.

Meeting with the State Commissioner of Police



The AFJN-N Sisters' advocacy group also visited the State Commissioner of Police, Mr. Johnson Babatunde Kokumo, to express dissatisfaction with the complacent attitude of the police towards ensuring the end of human trafficking and other forms of violence against the vulnerable in the state. The visit aimed also at articulating disappointment over the way the Commissioner's office handled the case of the brothel owner whom the Sisters reported during their previous visit. Mr. Kokumo extended a hand of partnership with the Sisters by thanking them for bringing their moral voice to bear on human trafficking issues. He recognized that public advocacy against trafficking in an unsafe environment could be dangerous; he provided the Sisters with police protection throughout their stay in the state. Further, he invited the Sisters to come to a gathering of the State Police to carry out an awareness campaign. The Sisters gladly accepted the invitation, which offered an opportunity to educate the police and to voice their grievances against the lack of commitment of the police towards fighting trafficking in Nigeria.



Sisters and the State Police on Trafficking

The meeting with the State Police group was scheduled for the next day at the State Police Mess, where monthly meetings usually take place. More than two hundred police officers gathered to meet the Sisters, who again challenged them to use their good office to protect the most vulnerable in the society

from trafficking, sexual exploitation, and all forms of violence. They detailed the moral, economic, and social impact of human trafficking and violence against women and children, and decried the police force's lack of political will and apparent lack of commitment to fighting these vices. The Sisters also demanded that the case of the brothel owner be revisited. In response, the Police spokesperson thanked the Sisters for their courage in speaking out against trafficking and the complacency of the Police. He asked that the Sisters also direct their advocacy effort at other stakeholders in the state. Finally, the Commissioner of Police promised to revisit the case of the brothel owner.

Visit with the Minister of Youth and Special Duties



Before engaging with the youth, the Sisters first visited the Edo State Minister of Youth. The Minister, his staff members, and the Sisters held a long conversation on human trafficking, illegal migration, and the importance of capacity-building among the youth in the state. The Minister affirmed the importance of educating youth about trafficking. Happy that the Sisters were ready to hold an enlightenment program for the youth, he quickly promised to mobilize the youth and he authorized free use of the National Youth Center for the program. He acknowledged the moral power of the Sisters and thanked them for using that power to protect young people from violence. *At the end of the meeting, he asked that the Sisters join hands with the state government to mobilize support for the passing of an anti-trafficking law in the state, and he provided the Sisters with a draft of such a law for evaluation.*

Event with the National Youth Center

In partnership with the Edo State Minister for Youth and Special Duties, the Sisters held a sensitization program that attracted more than one thousand youth, thanks to the Minister's mobilizing. The advocacy event sought to educate the youth about the real dangers and terrors of illegal migration and human trafficking and show why migration is not the solution to the socio-economic problems they



face. To drive the message home, four victims of human trafficking shared their experiences as victims. They reported how trafficking had made them even poorer, as the traffickers and their “pushermen” took their money and their bodies and broke their spirits.

The Sisters urged the youth to value their own lives and the lives of others as a special gift from God that must not be compromised. Acknowledging that economic empowerment will certainly make the youth less vulnerable to trafficking, the Sisters encouraged them to take advantage of skill-training centers offered by the State and the Church.

At the end of the program, the youth leader and the Edo State Attorney General / Commissioner of Justice welcomed the initiative and expressed their gratitude for the enlightenment. They requested a partnership and collaboration with the Sisters in the areas of continuing education and rehabilitation of trafficked victims.

Community Outreach

Convinced that local communities are the key to ending illegal migration, human trafficking, and other forms of violence against women and children, the Sisters held an awareness campaign in three of these, including two communities visited before (Ogwa, Ujiagba, and Ugbogui). The aim was to educate, to strengthen gains, and to monitor the progress.

The Sisters often expose community members’ vulnerability to trafficking by asking attendees, “Who would like to travel overseas *by any means?*” Both young and old always respond in the positive, saying migration will improve their socio-economic situations. By the end of each session, the same question elicits many negative responses, indicating how little people have been aware of the consequences of illegal migration and human trafficking.

Follow Up Visits



The Sisters were well received in Ogwa and Ujiagba, where they had visited before. In Ogwa, the traditional chief and his cabinet told the Sisters how their initial visit had prepared the community to stand together to fight a potential human trafficker and close down his brothel, where young girls are used for commercial sex and are coaxed into embarking on illegal migration. They indeed worked together to close down the brothel and to expel the owner from the community. In the pre-

vious visit, the Sisters had talked about the power of the local community and the importance of working together to combat evil.

The Sisters' visit to Ujiagba proved to be a show of solidarity with the community, particularly with the chief and his cabinet. At the Sisters' initial visit, they had confronted a potential trafficker and a brothel owner who, though later called in by the State Police, was eventually left to return to the community. On returning, he began harassing the chief and his cabinet, even accusing the chief of a local murder. Despite this accusation, the chief and the community would not give up their fight against the evil the brothel owner is perpetuating in the locality. The community members were pleased to see the Sisters return as they had promised at their initial visit. In the end, the Sisters urged the community to stand strong and assured them of constant support in their fight for human dignity.

The solidarity among the people and their boldness in tackling trafficking at home confirm to the Sisters the importance of community empowerment as well as the power of the traditional chiefs in stopping human trafficking and other social ills. The Sisters are currently planning an awareness-raising campaign for over 76 traditional chiefs in the Esan South area of Edo to mobilize their political will to fight human trafficking and other violence against women and children. The Sisters believe that once the chiefs are mobilized, they will in turn mobilize their communities to fight trafficking.

Media Outreach



In order to educate a wider audience about human trafficking and its consequences, and to push for the respect of the dignity of the person, the Sisters engaged local, national, and international media to accompany them at their events. They also distributed fact sheets and they created radio and television jingles to communicate to the public the depth of trafficking in the state. Moreover, they

continue speak out publicly to urge the government to alleviate youth poverty by providing more opportunities for youth employment. The anti-trafficking jingles have been circulated around the country and beyond through Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media outlets

Conclusion

Human trafficking, one of the greatest evils of the century, has particularly heightened violence against women and children. Trafficking has been the lot of the many young people of Edo State who migrate illegally to Europe and other parts of the world in hopes of a better socio-economic life. It is because ignorance has helped intensify trafficking and illegal migration that the AFJN-N Sisters advocacy group has undertaken this mass campaign to enlighten and educate the populace. As advocates, the Sisters are striving to develop partnership with all stakeholders in the fight against human trafficking and other forms of violence against women and children in Edo State.

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