

On the 14th November 2014, young people from all backgrounds and faiths across the world, met for the first time under the initiative of the Pope to take part in the Anti-Trafficking Youth Symposium at the Vatican City.

Attendees represented an impressive spread in the AHT movement, from workers in prevention, protection, awareness raising, law enforcement, advocacy, care and support for victims as well as past survivors of human trafficking. I found this weekend incredibly inspiring due to the people I met, and my discovery that there is a global movement taking place and we are not in this alone. The weekend commenced with an opening speech from the Right Reverend the Bishop of Argentina, who implored us to find the best practises among us to stop slavery and to help our generation understand the problem, and over the course of two, very busy 12 hour days, we heard from 30 youth speakers.



One of the main focuses of the weekend was the urgency to eliminate the patriarchal society, the 'macho' culture that creates the demand for trafficked women. Piero Picatto, just 18 years old, is the coordinator of masculinity workshops in Argentina which aim to eradicate the devastating effect of 'Macho' pressures when growing up, and the devastating effect this has on gender equality and resulting human trafficking crisis in South America.

An overwhelming outcome of the weekend was the group's agreement that there is a fine line, if no line at all, between prostitution and human trafficking. In the case of prostitution, poverty is playing the role of the trafficker and prostitution cannot be regarded as a real occupation

that people aspire to be part of. We should not accept the blatant degradation of human life for means of profit in any circumstance.

I presented a paper on 'mapping the trafficking situation in Albania', as a reflection of the time I spent in Albania during the summer where I wrote a report for RENATE about the present situation of trafficking. I spoke on the unique situation of the Roma community in Albania, their extreme poverty and problems faced that leave them wide open for traffickers who exploit their vulnerable position. This aspect of my talk was taken with interest by the symposium, especially by representatives from countries with large Roma communities, where we discussed possible solutions to the challenges faced by these groups. One of the recommendations we concurred from this was the need to abolish the widespread discrimination against these groups that keeps them on the edge of society, in reach of traffickers, and out of reach of our help. This specific discussion was also applied to marginal



communities from all over the world that we heard from, for example the Aoreo community in Bolivia, whereby through deforestation and loss of their habitat, the indigenous tribes are forced into the cities where they find themselves in extreme poverty and situations where they are highly vulnerable to trafficking. As we were all invited to make 3 recommendations about how to solve this crime, I presented the 3 solutions of; equality, networks and security to combat this global devastation. On the topic of increasing security, an alarming theme from the weekend was the realisation that the State, especially the Police, are not playing their part and that the NGO's burdening this responsibility on their own. In few countries does there exist the proper legislation, and where it does appear, levels of corruption and low standards of training mean that there is little or no implementation of the law which lead to frustrating results. Recommendations from Ana Villagomez explained that we must demand our policy makers play their part, for civil servants to start serving their countries, and for government to plug resources in NGOs and declare a global alert against human trafficking.

A disheartening large number of accounts, especially from past survivors, portrayed the Police as an organisation who are not to be trusted, a force who have little idea about trafficking and do not have the knowledge nor drive to combat this crime in many countries, particularly in South America and the developing countries. Robert Colvin, from the UK, demonstrated that if we want to reduce corruption, then we need to view the Police not as an impenetrable force, but as human individuals who can be reached and educated.



The weekend culminated with a visit from Pope Francis, who spent time with each of us. He gave an inspirational speech that involved ham and cheese sandwiches, one which implored us to give our lives for the cause and thanked us for all the work that had been achieved so far. It was an incredible honour to be given the opportunity to speak to him.

Our discussions over the two days culminated in the creation of a declaration signed by members of the conference, which is available to view here:

http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2014/11/18/young_activists_issue_declaration_against_human_trafficking/1111501

The two days of the conference were deeply moving, and in many cases quite difficult to hear what monstrous activities humans are capable of carrying out. The weekend however was incredibly hopeful. It's easy to feel like you are alone in tackling this overwhelming crime, to lose faith that you, a tiny drop in the ocean can have any impact; but to witness the incredible works of so many across the globe I was left with drive and ambition for a better future that is within our reach. Finally, Marianna Ruenes of Mexico left us with the powerful message that 'Our worst enemy is indifference, and one that is generated by ignorance'. And from Ixchel; we don't want to just be the hope for the future, we want to be the change today!

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