

RENATE members welcomed by Sr. Valeria Gandini, cms, at her support centre for victims of trafficking, in Palermo, Sicily.

“Hope is the currency which traffickers use.” With these arresting words, Sr. Valeria Gandini, cms, began her address to RENATE Core Group members gathered at the centre which Sr. Valeria and her Sisters run in Palermo, Sicily. The sisters are joined in their ministry to trafficked persons by Fr. Laurence, a Franciscan Friar, Fr. Lorenzo, a Salesian priest and a team of lay people which includes Maggie Neil, a Fulbright Scholar from Yale University in the United States of America.



Located in the convent grounds, right in the heart of one of the most notorious migrant districts in Palermo, Sr. Valeria and her colleagues courageously and calmly tend to those who are on the margins of society, because of prostitution and because of their status as illegal migrants. Sr. Valeria went on to give a

comprehensive account of the work of anti-trafficking in Sicily.

Conscious that Sicily is the first point of welcome to migrants and refugees who have survived the crossing of the Mediterranean, Sr. Valeria emphasises the importance of hospitality and care being meted out to those who arrive, cold, wet, afraid, wounded and traumatised on their journeys.

The centre works with civil society and State offices to provide as much support as possible to those in need. A viewing of a video on the work of Dr. Pietro Bartosova, Director, Lampedusa Hospital, clearly conveyed the extent of needs presented by those arriving on the island. It also conveyed the potentially overwhelming situation for the teams of professionals who encounter refugees and victims of human trafficking when they first arrive. The sheer volume of people trying to arrive in Lampedusa was captured on video by the National Maritime rescue co-ordination centre when answering a distress call to the centre. It tugged at our heart strings to see the staff struggling to keep up with the demands. While the migrants and refugees are relieved to have reached a safe haven, according to Dr. Pietro, “Despite fleeing war and strife in their homelands, the real hell begins here.” Sr. Valeria and her team are at the frontline, to minimise hellish experiences and further hardships.

A member of the local IOM staff, Francesca (not her real name), presented on her anti-trafficking work and efforts to counter Human Trafficking at the ports where migrants and refugees arrive. Crammed into unseaworthy vessels, asylum seekers, economic migrants, unaccompanied minors and trafficked persons do what it takes to survive at sea and will continue to do what it takes to survive and remain in Europe, their ‘Mecca.’ According to the statistics, there has been an explosion in the numbers of arrivals. In 2013, 433 Nigerian women arrived at Lampedusa. In 2014, 1,454 Nigerian women arrived and by 2016, that number had swollen to 11,000. The average age ranged between 14 and 25 but most of the arrivals are minors who serve the demands for sex-slavery, street begging and petty crime.





The IOM personnel work in the Primary and Secondary assistance centres (see *Perspectives on a recent visit by RENATE to a Primary centre for migrants*, latest news, RENATE), with authorisation from the Italian government, in providing both general information to all who arrive and then specific information to those whom they suspect have been trafficked. Early intervention is critical, before the women make contact with their traffickers who are expecting that call. Some of the women do not even realise or understand that they have been trafficked. There is always an alertness to distinguish the trafficked from those who are smuggled. Usually, those who have been trafficked are young, travelling alone, claim they have a family member they must get to or state that a family member paid for their travel. Sometimes, the girls travel in a small group of three or four, accompanied by an older woman (a possible madame), whilst other girls may say they are with their husbands, which presents a particular complexity to the authorities as they try to discern between fake and genuine husbands. In any case, the support personnel at the ports provide those arriving with telephone numbers, hoping the girls will eventually call for help.

Many of the women fear their traffickers may harm their families in Nigeria and so are forever at the mercy of their traffickers. These trafficked persons carry enormous emotional burdens and guilt and when these are added to the traumas experienced during their flight from Africa, it is clear that a long, long road of counselling and support lies ahead if these women are to recover and assimilate into society.

It became apparent that there is a lack of protective shelters available now, due to the ever-increasing numbers arriving, which worries Francesca, who shared the opinion that "Traffickers exploit 'needs' and 'wants,' which drive so many people to choose a life which they would not normally choose if they had options." Thus, imparting information is an important support being offered; it empowers the women and girls to make informed choices, probably for the first time in their lives. It is not always easy or timely to share information at the ports of arrival, as the mini-buses departing the ports with the new arrivals are often followed by men on motorbikes, who can then identify the location where the girls will be housed and notify traffickers who then come along and lure the girls away

We were also introduced to 'Erica,' (not her real name), a co-ordinator at one of the SPRAR Centres for people requesting asylum. SPRAR Centres are usually located in urban areas and are known as secondary centres, funded and monitored by the State and resourced with many inter-related support personnel. SPRAR Centres primarily cater to small numbers of families and unaccompanied minors, where the individual is at the heart of all their work. It is a model structure which should be replicated throughout Europe but sadly, is not. An example of the sheer scale of needs is evidenced in the largest migrant camp in Europe, where 4,000 migrants are located in Catania, Sicily.



By the time the refugees and migrants are transferred to SPRAR Centres, they will have been provided with new identity papers and are now transitioning to Italian society. Those at the SPRAR Centres enjoy freedom of movement to walk and spend time amongst the local community. But such freedom brings with it certain risks, as

migrants and refugees in these Secondary Centres are especially vulnerable to being tempted away with false promises.

School attendance is obligatory for those at the SPRAR Centres and Erica and her colleagues liaise with the wider community to see if locals can offer the migrants accommodation for a later stage, possible employment, funding or whatever supports are necessary to assist the migrants and refugees participate and contribute to their new communities. This is not easy as the economic and employment crisis in Italy impacts greatly on the possibilities for migrants to gain work experience, internships or even voluntary work opportunities.

The catch-phrase “Look, we have fresh ‘meat,’” clashes with our sensibilities as ‘Jennifer’, a Cultural Mediator who works with Sr. Valeria’s weekly Street Mission (1 morning & 1 evening), shared about her work, mainly at night, to support women in prostitution.



Jennifer notices a marked increase in the numbers of younger girls and the distinction between girls trafficked from Africa and girls trafficked from eastern Europe. The African girls tend to be more easily intimidated by Madames and ju-ju practices, whereas girls trafficked from eastern Europe find themselves in their situation because of ‘lover boys,’ who control the girls and either sell or pimp them for the sex trade.

Jennifer offers a friendly face and a listening ear, as she encounters the girls on the streets at night, but she does not see change happening anytime soon, stating “If there is Human Trafficking, it is our fault.” Meeting an ever-growing ‘demand,’ traffickers are cunning and swift to move, often moving quicker than the IOM, who find that by the time they get on top of a case, the traffickers will have moved the girls on to a new and secret destination.

Trying to keep one step ahead of traffickers may be the greatest challenge, but as national leaders, non-profits and advocacy organisations worldwide continue to speak up and speak out against the injustice of human trafficking, it is heartening that more and more people are becoming aware and motivated to engage in prevention and direct service work.

For those who work with Sr. Valeria, increased resourcing would make a significant impact, but the greatest impact of all would be improved legislation and better prosecution of perpetrators which might help end demand, and then caring for survivors can more fully take place.

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01/02/2017.