

RENATE Training in Freising, April 30th – May 4th

SOLWODI is an acronym; it stands for **S**olidarity with **W**omen in **D**istress. Sr. Lea, the foundress of SOLWODI, was sent to Mombasa/Kenya in 1985. Mombasa attracts many tourists from all over the world it is a very beautiful place. Sr. Lea realized that there was (and still is) great poverty and misery behind the beautiful scenery. Especially women, single mothers, were affected. They tried to earn the living for themselves and their children in prostitution. They didn't see any other way; because of their poverty they did not have the chance to go to school and to receive a professional training. And the tourists did not mind to exploit these women and even children sexually for little money.

What Sr. Lea observed urged her to act. She started to visit the women, to talk to them about their problems and to develop together with them ideas how to bring about a change and so to improve their lives and that of their children. It was a small beginning without funds or equipment, just with the strong will and determination to help. But it empowered the women to break out of this vicious circle of poverty, lack of education, disrespect, violence, segregation. To see human misery and to offer help is in accord with the Gospel (Mt 25:40 "Whatever you did to one of my brothers or sisters you did for me"; Lk 10:25-27 "Go and do likewise"). By now, we have in Kenya counseling centers in Mombasa, Malindi and Western Kenya as well as a vocational center to train women in hairdressing, tailoring, shoe making, creating jewellery and so on. There are also agricultural projects. A number of women has a little business and support others. For children we started ECD schools (condition to attend primary school). Quite important is the water project (boreholes, cisterns, water tanks at schools) which allows girls to attend school instead of fetching water. The girls we take care of are very enthusiastic

when it comes to football – by now we have over 60 football teams in Kenya.

In 1987, Sr. Lea came back to Germany. Here too, she found women as victims of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, forced marriages, marriage trading and all kinds of violence and injustice. That was the beginning of SOLWODI in Germany. Now we have 18 counseling centers and seven shelters. The number of women who contact SOLWODI the first time is growing: In 2017 almost 2,500 women from 109 countries sought our help. They came with a wide range of reasons. Usually, each woman has more than one problem. But all of them experienced violence: in the family, in close relationships, on the way to Europe, in common shelters, in prostitution. These women (and their children) suffered so much and are badly traumatized. They need people who listen to them, find out about their problems, give them a safe place, support them when they apply for asylum, help them with appointments with doctors, police, lawyers ... It is a long process for our clients until they can cope with daily life. There is so much the women have to learn in a foreign country: different mentality, language, culture, manners, social roles, food and so on.

A big problem in Germany is the liberalization of prostitution with the act of 2002 which acknowledged prostitution as a “profession” as any other. Germany became the “brothel of Europe”. The numbers in human trafficking increased, connected with that, are other crimes like drug dealing and money laundering. The great winners are the traffickers, brothel owners and pimps; the women lose everything: their dignity, their reputation, their freedom, their self esteem, social contacts. That is another important area of work for SOLWODI. With the new act of 2017 (protection of prostitutes), there won't be much improvement. (There has to be registration which causes fear that families find out what is

going on. The affected people have to go for counseling in health and social matters and so on.) SOLWODI prefers the so called “Nordic Model” which focuses on the clients and not the women and brings an enormous change in the society.

We also offer help when a woman wants to return to her home country or when she is about to be deported. Our colleagues in the returnee program make sure that she has a real chance to get settled again and to have an existence.

You will learn more about our work in the course of this week.

We are also partners in international projects. PRIMSA (about prevention and intervention in case of human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation) was in collaboration with Vechta University and other universities in Germany and Austria, Federal Police Office Germany and federal ministries of Germany and Austria. The results of this project were presented in September 2017.

In January 2017 started the research about exploitation of children and youth in Germany, Romania and Bulgaria. Children and youth are a very vulnerable group in the field of human trafficking (for the purposes of sexual exploitation, forced labour, begging, crimes, trading in organs).

This is a project in collaboration with the Federal Police Office, supported by the EU.

With all the tasks, networking is ever so important and absolutely necessary.

SOLWODI has become an international organization; I mentioned Kenya and Germany. There is also SOLWODI Romania, SOLWODI Austria and SOLWODI Hungary. This development of SOLWODI would not have been possible without the initiative and the engagement of religious sisters from various congregations. In Germany too, sisters took action in

different towns to start SOLWODI counseling centers. That is something special and it is typical for women religious. Looking at the church history of the 19th century in Germany, I see that within about 50 years many congregations have been established by women who saw the need and misery of their contemporaries – long before Pope Leo XIII published his encyclical “Rerum novarum” in 1891. What was described as new was not new anymore. Obviously, women are more attentive and act accordingly. When we live with open hearts and minds, we can move a lot.

Thank you.

Sr. Annemarie Pitzl PHJC