The impact of Covid-19 on human trafficking.

The Covid-19 is like a lens which amplifies injustices, an engine that accelerates processes!

Sr. Gabriella Bottani, smc - Rome, May 12, 2020

Worldwide attention is focused on the pandemic caused by covid-19, which has produced, along with disease and death, so much insecurity, chaos and fear. The daily habits and the way of relating with family and friends have suddenly changed. Many have started new ways of working, too many have lost it and are in a situation of extreme poverty. Covid-19 has entered our lives with violence and, like so many situations of disaster, has caused individual and social trauma, for which we are not yet able to evaluate all the consequences in the medium and long term.

The pandemic worked like a lens that magnified and worsened the injustices and vulnerabilities of billions of people around the world. It has accelerated processes, triggering a disruptive effect that requires us to combine more commitment to the care of the environment and the person (LS 48), promoting real paths of conversion and change.

In this time the leaders of the networks of Talitha Kum exchanged information, created spaces for sharing, to learn, to reflect and guide the commitment against trafficking, in this time of emergency.

This text weaves the results of this work woven by the 7 sisters who are part of the International Coordination Committee of Talitha Kum representatives of all continents.

The questions that have accompanied us, arise from the *mission of Talitha Kum that is summarized in #endhumantrafficking.*

How did the Covid-19 affect human trafficking? What has changed?

The first data reported by all networks is the visible worsening of vulnerabilities and exponential increase of people made vulnerable by conditions of extreme poverty. Among the main groups reported are women, children, ethnic minorities, foreign citizens - especially those who are without papers and indigenous peoples, as reported by the network in the Amazonia. The groups identified by the networks correspond to those indicated by the World Health Organization among the most vulnerable to covid-19 (WHO - Protecting the vulnerable CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) UPDATE NO. 25 - 8 May 2020).

The main factor which, together with the spread of the virus, contributed to this vulnerability is the **job loss** in various sectors of production and services: the servants, those who care for the elderly, catering, tourism, the manufacturing industry and in particular the informal jobs of the subsistence economy. There has also been an increase in the prices of essential goods. All this has caused hunger, housing insecurity, debt and so much human mobility. These vulnerabilities are exploited quickly: the US network, for example, reported that women are being forced into prostitution by their bosses to pay their rent.

There are discrepancies in the information on the increase or decrease in trafficking. In some sectors, such as prostitution, where demand has been drastically reduced, there has been a corresponding reduction in the exploitation and abandonment of people to their fate, who have found themselves in a situation of serious poverty. The opposite trend is for indoor and online exploitation, including domestic violence, which have increased. The increase in sexual exploitation of children, women and adolescents online is alarming.

Domestic violence, especially towards women, children and LGBT groups, is one of the reasons of trafficking, forcing people to - the same way as those seeking job opportunities for a better life - to accept any proposal to escape from violence, towards a place dreamed of as certainly better.

The demand and supply of pornography has increased. The increase was fostered by the offer of free access promoted by some websites, making access possible to the general public. Worldwide, only one of the most popular pornographic sites has caused a global increase in access of 11.6%[1], recording some peaks such as 57%[2] in Italy , and 95%[3] in India.

The increase in hours that children and adolescents and young people spend surfing the internet, to participate in school lessons is growing all over the world. Many parents, schools and teachers have had to *improvise* distance lessons, many of them do not have specific training to guide students and families to protect themselves from unwanted interferences and the possibility of online recruitment by traffickers.

The shift of exploitation from public to private (indoor) places is making it more difficult for pastoral agents to identify and approach victims, this is a concern presented by all networks, and feel the need to change the strategy of action.

We have received little news of the activities of human traffickers. Crime continues active despite the Covid-19. The network in Mexico reported that human traffickers are repatriating women exploited in prostitution in the United States to continue exploitation in Mexico. From the Amazonia, however, we have received the communication that criminal organizations are continuing undisturbed to illegally seize lands, to exploit slave labor, and prostitution. All this happens in one of the areas of Brazil most affected by covid-19, where information and society is committed to fighting the virus and those who are in favour of human and environmental rights are confined in their homes, reducing the possibility of identifying victims of trafficking. Measures to contain the virus have generally caused more difficulties for trafficked people to ask for help and to denounce their situation.

The measures of social and health policies implemented at a global level to contain Covid-19 have had an impact on the populations of migrants, especially those without papers and without residence permits. Among these are many trafficked people.

In West Africa, one of our networks has been contacted to ask for help from migrants who are victims of trafficking, stopped at the borders. This information highlights the impact of the closing of borders. Also from Europe and Latin America communications have arrived of similar and difficult situations of invisible migrants, many of whom have been trafficked, and stopped due to the closure of borders.

From Asia we received the communication of migrants abandoned to their fate after losing their jobs, mobilizing masses of internal migrants. Also in Asia,

situations of frightened migrants have been identified because the loss of work means the loss of visas, thus becoming invisible, without any rights.

The information gathered suggests that in the short and medium term there will be an increase in human trafficking inside a country.

What has changed in the anti-trafficking commitment carried out by the networks of Talitha Kum?

Services for persons released from trafficking:

The religious sisters continue their service in the houses of welcome where Covid-19 has increased anxiety, insecurity and instability. In this context, we seek to restore and maintain a space of hope and care for all. The reorganization of life is important, new protocols of hygiene and social distance have been introduced. With creativity the empty spaces left by the absence of volunteers are filled and we try to cope with the excessive increase in expenses, against a reduction in offers.

There have been reported, although in small numbers, cases of infection from covid-19 in the houses of welcome for people released from trafficking. Along with the contagion came the disease, fear and anxiety, which caused traumatic situations that affect everyone: religious sisters, people who are welcomed and workers. Furthermore, the houses of welcome for people released from trafficking, have not been provided with the necessary material for the implementation of the protective measures required by governments such as masks, gloves and coveralls, including material for the sanitization of environments, causing insecurity and an increase in unplanned operating costs.

In some African countries, governments have asked the people to leave the houses of welcome to ensure social distancing, in other cases they have asked all the people they welcome to leave the protected facilities. This was a painful experience both for those who had to abruptly leave the process of care and social reintegration, and for the responsible religious sisters who from one day to another had to rethink and organize their service of accompaniment. It would be interesting to know the reason that led to these choices.

In several cases, sewing machines in the houses of welcome have become laboratories for the production of masks, both for internal needs and for distribution to vulnerable groups, along with packages of food and information on hygiene measures to be taken. Despite the difficulties and risks, there are

several religious sisters who have joined other groups to foster the distribution of food parcels and economic support to those who have been abandoned to their fate, even by traffickers. Others have become available to psychosocial and spiritual accompaniment offered by telephone, learning to use online communication platforms.

At this time the main services for those who are accompanied in the context of semi-autonomy outside the houses of welcome offered by the networks are:

• material aid such as financial support for rent and school fees, food and sanitary equipment.

• psychosocial and spiritual accompaniment offered by telephone or using online communication platforms.

This type of aid is an unforeseen additional expenditure due to the loss of work. This population, in fact, was for the most part employed in the sectors affected by the break-in of Covid-19.

Prevention of human trafficking and Advocacy

Most networks have announced that they have temporarily postponed all activities of prevention and formation, they are committed to meet the basic needs of distribution of food and masks in this moment. Others have begun to think of alternative ways. This experiment has started for now almost exclusively in countries where it has been possible to limit the contagion, such as Australia, where it has already started to think and prepare material to be distributed in schools to continue the work of prevention.

Final reflection on:

Finally, the information gathered highlights some needs. They are simple traces that we hope will open new paths of solidarity and freedom for everybody :

• To support the houses of welcome for released people so that they can cope with unforeseen extraordinary expenses.

• To offer qualified support to leaders to promote groups of reflection “workshops of ideas" to prepare for something new;

• To facilitate self-help groups and group supervision to integrate the individual and social trauma suffered by all, including "*caregivers*" and to exchange good practices for service management;

• To find different ways to prevent trafficking, using the tools offered by internet communication technology.

• to support and promote safe migration pathways and the regularization of paperless migrants, who have the right to be protected from both the pandemic and the vulnerability easily exploited by traffickers.

The covid-19 pandemic introduced a change that will certainly not be solved in the short term, this requires everyone, especially those who play leadership roles, to take some time to re-imagine the present and the future. This is a privileged time to *prepare for* something new. For this reason it is urgent to redefine (reframing) what we are living, to find an interpretation that opens to the different, to the original, to the new, without fear. This is the hope to which we are called.

This will be possible only by remaining together, with the lit lamp, continuing slowly, but with perseverance and courage, through uncertainty, pain and chaos, towards what we have contemplated: the sweetness of freedom, that is possible only when the dignity of every person is recognized!

https://www.pornhub.com/insights/corona-virus

[2] (https://www.statista.com/statistics/1106614/change-in-pornhub-hourly-traffic-due-to-coronavirus-outbreak-in-italy/ accesso il giorno 11 maggio 2020)

[3] https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/pornography-gets-a-pandemic-boost-india-reports-95-per-cent-rise-in-viewing-1665940-2020-04-11