Columns
Social Justice
Trafficking



(Dreamstime/Tinnakorn Jorruang)



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Pope Francis gave a message on New Year's Day centered around the theme of motherhood and women. Since mothers bestow life and keep the world together, he urged the end of violence against women. He said:

> Let us all make greater efforts to promote mothers and to protect women. How much violence is directed against women! Enough! To hurt a woman is to insult God, who from a woman took on our humanity. He did not do it through an angel; nor did he come directly; he did it through a woman.

I think the worst form of violence against women is sexual slavery. Feb. 8 is the day of prayer in honor of St. Josephine Margaret Bakhita, a Sudanese-Italian Canossian Daughter of Charity. As a slave in Sudan in the 1880s, she was sold to an Italian family where her life changed for the better. She lived in Italy for 45 years and entered religious life. Her life is an inspiration, though the 144 scars on her body reminded her of her life as a slave.

I had the opportunity to listen to Nadia Murad, a Yazidi woman from northern Iraq, who spoke at a United Nations meeting organized by the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime. On Aug. 15, 2014, when she was just 21 years old, Islamic State militants carried out a massacre on Yazidis in Kocho, a small village in northern Iraq.

Six of her brothers were shot and her mother was killed, and all young women in her family and neighborhood who refused to convert to Islam were captured as sex slaves. Sold as a slave to several militants, Murad was repeatedly raped and beaten. Finally, she dared to escape and found refuge in Germany, where Yazidis were welcomed.

Providentially, Amal Clooney — British-Lebanese wife of American actor George Clooney and a renowned human rights lawyer, author and activist — heard about her plight, took up the case and introduced Murad to the United Nations. Murad eventually became a leading human rights advocate for survivors of genocide and sexual violence, demanding that the Islamic State group face justice. She spoke at the U.N. Security Council a few times.



Medical Mission Sr. Celine Paramundayil, left, with Nadia Murad at the United Nations (Guru Dileepji)

I last met Murad at her book launch of *The Last Girl*, the story of her own life. Her resilience and determination were inspiring and in 2018, Murad and Dr. Denis Mukwege were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. In the forward to the book, Amal Clooney wrote, "Nadia is not just my client, but she is my friend."

Murad wanted to be the last girl who faced untold sufferings. But unfortunately, in India, a government-commissioned survey said 53% of children are subjected to sexual abuse. I have read about the sexual brutality done to children as young as 2 and 3 years old; some are even killed. And the news is no longer even shocking!

Human trafficking and modern-day slavery are happening in every corner of the globe, affecting both men and women of all ages. Human beings traffic other human beings, mainly for sexual exploitation — including child marriage, child pornography, forced labor, and organ removal. It is estimated to generate US$150 billion a year. Combined with drug trafficking, human trafficking is a "boon for the goons."

In 2000, the U.N. General Assembly adopted the Palermo Protocol to "Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children." It later declared July 30 as the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons.

Every year, the U.S. State Department publishes the Trafficking in Persons Report, which ranks countries as first, second or third tier — based on their efforts to acknowledge and combat human trafficking. According to the 2021 report, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in vulnerability to human trafficking, and interrupted existing anti-trafficking efforts.

Despite the international protocol, the traffickers are more vigilant and organized than the governments who want to prevent it but are not doing enough to prosecute the culprits. A paradigm shift is needed from the prevalent patriarchal mindset that gives men the impunity to abuse women.

Though women deities are worshipped in India and the Indian tradition is to respect all women as mothers, daily news of violence against women and girls is shocking! Though both the church and Earth are feminine, religion and politics misuse Earth and women for their gains globally.

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Women deserve to be treated with much more respect and dignity, since they, too, are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). As Pope Francis rightly said, "To hurt a woman is to insult God." What is more spiritual than to see the image of God in another human being on Mother Earth? The urgent need of our time is to protect

women and become stewards of Earth — our common home that sustains and nurtures life.

More than laws, a concerted effort is needed to change the mindset of society, to promote human dignity and respect for girls and women. To break the cycle of patriarchy, gender sensitization must start in families and continue in schools, religious spaces and society. One Oct. 11 "Day of the Girl Child," I conducted an essay competition for village boys on the topic "How can I protect my sister?" When a girl or a woman is hurt, it is no more a woman's issue — it is a family issue, a community issue and a spiritual issue.

The invitation given by Francis through the synod is an invitation to walk together and to listen to one another — a golden opportunity for a paradigm shift in the church that man and woman are partners in building the kingdom of God. It is a sign of hope to see the pope appointing women to leadership roles, which is a historical change. Gender must not get in the way for any effort toward the common good.

Jesus welcomed children coming to him and when they were prevented, he was indignant (Mark 10:13-16). He broke the Jewish custom by talking to women individually, like the woman at the well, and as a group. Jesus interacted closely with Mary Magdalene, and Lazarus' sisters Mary and Martha. His respect for women indicates that gender was not an issue for his mission of building the kingdom of God.

The moment one is viewed as an object of pleasure or profit, respect vanishes. It is this attitude society needs to eradicate, right from the beginning, from the minds of men and boys. I guess this is the paradigm shift Francis envisions when he says that hurting a woman is hurting God.

Let us pray to Mother Mary to intercede for us and protect us, especially the vulnerable girls and women. May your Son Jesus awaken the world to that heaven of freedom where girls and boys, men and women live in harmony with mutual respect, dignity and love.