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People are pictured in a file photo displaying signs in Los Angeles during the "Walk 4 Freedom" in advance of the Jan. 11, 2024, National Human Trafficking Awareness Day. January is Human Trafficking Awareness month in the U.S. (OSV News/CNS file/Vida Nueva/Victor Aleman)

by The Life Panelists

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January is National Human Trafficking Prevention Month in the United States. Since 2010, January has been dedicated to raising awareness and preventing the devastating realities of human trafficking.

This month, we asked our panelists: *What does your community do to address the issue of trafficking and exploitation, particularly of vulnerable women and children?*

Their responses, rooted in their congregational charisms, offer hope, healing and advocacy to those affected by this profound injustice.



Anthonia O. Uche, a Nigerian, is a member of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus. With a strong academic background in education, languages, refugee studies and psycho-spiritual counseling, she lives and works in Nigeria. Her diverse ministry experience includes roles as a French teacher, school administrator at both primary and secondary levels, and university lecturer. Currently, she serves as a counselor at Veritas University in Abuja. She is also involved in parish ministry and

women's rights advocacy, and has served on a provincial leadership team within her congregation.

One morning, Ada (not her real name), a cleaner at a private health facility in Uyo, Nigeria, announced her imminent resignation to her co-workers. Euphoric, she shared that she had been offered a higher-paying job as a caterer in a neighboring country. A widow in her 30s with only a basic education and four children, the prospect of earning her annual salary each month at the new job, along with other promised benefits, seemed too good to turn down.

However, her more savvy friends suspected a trap linked to human trafficking — a global scourge involving the exploitation of vulnerable individuals for profit. Human traffickers, often operating through faceless cartels, use deception to lure victims into dangerous situations, where they are stripped of their rights and subjected to forced labor, sexual exploitation, and other abuses. Thanks to her friends' vigilance, Ada avoided a potentially horrific fate.

A 2022 United Nations report published by the International Organization for Migration, the International Labour Organization and Walk Free revealed that about 50 million people were trapped in the modern slavery of trafficking in 2021. This highlights the scale of the global crisis. Efforts to combat trafficking range from initiatives led by international organizations, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime to local programs addressing the issue at its roots.



Blessing Obuson, 19, from Nigeria, rescued from human traffickers, poses for a portrait in a shelter on the outskirts of Moscow in this Feb. 21, 2019, file photo. The Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus is among those leading grassroots interventions in Nigeria. (CNS/Reuters/Maxim Shemetov)

In Nigeria, which "serves as a country of origin, a transit route and destination for human trafficking victims," according to the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus is among those leading grassroots interventions. Their work focuses on creating awareness, rescuing trafficked individuals, and rehabilitating survivors to reintegrate them into society.

The congregation's proactive approach targets risk factors for trafficking, particularly in communities where these challenges are most acute. For instance, they rescued Ngozi (not her real name), a 14-year-old girl trapped in sex slavery, through coordinated efforts with international and local organizations. Through the congregation, Ngozi received necessary health care and was granted a scholarship

to return to school.

Beyond this, the congregation helps other survivors rebuild their lives by offering free vocational training. In southeastern Nigeria, the Handmaids collaborate with nongovernmental organizations and government agencies to combat trafficking, prosecute perpetrators, and advocate for justice. Their future plans include establishing a shelter and training center for rescued individuals to continue to support their long-term recovery and empowerment.



Deepa Moonjely is a member of the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation, currently residing in Kerala, India. She is preparing to embark on an exciting new mission to Indonesia, where her congregation is establishing new communities. With a strong background in education, she has dedicated much of her life to teaching and nurturing young minds. She has also served in various administrative roles, including as a school principal, provincial councilor, and provincial, gaining valuable leadership and organizational experience in service to God. Her journey has taken her across India and several other countries, broadening her perspective on faith, education and service. Deeply passionate about her vocation, she is eager to serve those in need as she embarks on this new chapter in Indonesia.

Human trafficking, particularly the exploitation of vulnerable women and children, is one of the gravest violations of human dignity. This injustice demands urgent and united action. Inspired by the charism of our foundress, Blessed Marie Poussepin, whose compassion for the suffering guides our mission, the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation respond with tangible actions rooted in prevention, intervention and rehabilitation.

During my years in India, and now in Indonesia, I have witnessed the harsh realities of trafficking and the immense courage required to combat it. In India, the Poussepin Alliance for Social Service, or PASS, leads our efforts, partnering with organizations

like Dream India; the Overseas Women's Foundation; the Development Initiative by Social Animation, or Disa, in Uttar Pradesh; SANKALP Tribal Development Initiative in Jharkhand; and the Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural Development in Kerala. These partnerships amplify our impact, ensuring survivors receive holistic support to rebuild their lives and regain dignity.



Through educational campaigns in schools, parishes and communities, the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation create awareness about the dangers of trafficking. They conduct street plays and workshops to empower women and young girls with knowledge about their rights and the skills to pursue dignified livelihoods. (Courtesy of Deepa Moonjely)

Our prevention efforts focus on addressing vulnerabilities before they are exploited. Through educational campaigns in schools, parishes and communities, we create awareness about the dangers of trafficking. In rural areas, we conduct street plays and workshops to empower women and young girls with knowledge about their rights and the skills to pursue dignified livelihoods.

Intervention requires swift and compassionate action. In collaboration with law enforcement and NGOs, we ensure victims receive medical care, counseling and legal support. Shelters offer safety, helping survivors begin their recovery. Reintegration is supported through education and employment opportunities, giving survivors the tools to rebuild their lives and regain independence.

Rehabilitation is vital for survivors to rebuild their lives with dignity. PASS and partner agencies work with local shelters to provide physical and psychological care, including counseling and trauma therapy. In rural areas, we educate women and girls about their rights and equip them with skills for dignified livelihoods through street plays and workshops.

Vocational training programs such as tailoring, computer literacy, and sustainable farming offer alternative income sources, reducing vulnerability to exploitation. Scholarships ensure at-risk children have access to quality education, while initiatives like the Children's Parliament foster leadership and rights awareness.

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Women are encouraged to join self-help groups, to access microloans, savings programs, and entrepreneurial training, promoting financial independence. Tailored support, including legal aid and secure housing for migrant women and children, helps break cycles of exploitation and build a foundation for stability and hope.

The fight against trafficking is not merely an act of charity, but a fundamental human responsibility. Blessed Marie Poussepin, throughout her life, taught that to serve the poor is to serve Christ. We must respond with urgency, compassion and a deep sense of duty, striving to create a world where all people live free from exploitation, surrounded by dignity and hope.



Editruda Mbegu is a member of the Congregation of Our Lady Queen of Africa in Tanzania. Born and raised in Zimba, a small village near Lake Rukwa, she completed her primary education there. During secondary school, she won an essay competition and received recognition from the U.K. Embassy for her writing. She later earned a diploma and a bachelor's degree in education science from the University of Dar es Salaam and a master's degree in biology of conservation from the University of Nairobi, Kenya. A dedicated teacher and natural conservationist, she works as a teacher, counselor and caretaker.

Although human trafficking occurs everywhere in the world, I will address the issue of trafficking in Sumbawanga-Rukwa, Tanzania, where my community, the Sisters of Our Lady, Queen of Africa, primarily operates.

In Sumbawanga, children under 18 often work as housemaids, cowboys, or in other exploitative roles, transported from rural to urban areas for meager wages. Women, driven by poverty, engage in underpaid farm or domestic work and are sometimes forced into prostitution. By definition this is human trafficking as practiced in our part of the world.

Several factors contribute to the vulnerability of children and women in Sumbawanga, including family breakdown, poverty, school dropouts, inadequate health care, and social discrimination. Boys are often trafficked for forced farm labor and informal work, while girls face early marriages, domestic servitude, and sexual exploitation. Women, affected by widowhood, early marriages, gender-based violence, limited education and opportunities, are similarly at risk. Economic vulnerability and social exclusion make women and children particularly susceptible to traffickers.



Sisters of Our Lady, Queen of Africa, care for vulnerable children at St. Martin de Porres in Sumbawanga, Tanzania. They provide them with parental care, education and a protective environment to reduce their risk of exploitation. (Courtesy of the Congregation of Our Lady, Queen of Africa)

Our community has adopted several strategies to combat trafficking and exploitation.

One is education for sisters. Through seminars and courses, our sisters learn about trafficking to avoid unknowingly engaging in it or enabling it. They are educated on recognizing and preventing trafficking practices, such as underage employment or low-wage exploitation (for example, employing children under 18 years of age, transporting people in poverty from rural to urban areas to work for wealthy people or for relatives at low wages or only for food).



Sr. Anet Pesambili prepares children for their first Communion while educating them about human trafficking. (Courtesy of the Congregation of Our Lady, Queen of Africa)

Another is education for women and children. Sisters working as teachers and catechists educate children about trafficking and empower women to pursue small businesses, farming and livestock rearing. These efforts help women increase their daily earnings.

We also provide support for vulnerable children. Our orphanage centers, St. Martin de Porres in Sumbawanga and St. John Paul II in Mpanda, care for children who are orphaned, abandoned or otherwise vulnerable, such as children with albinism. We provide them with parental care, education and a protective environment to reduce their risk of exploitation.

Many in Sumbawanga remain unaware of the issue of human trafficking, often not knowing they are being trafficked or are trafficking other people. Poverty among women increases the risk of trafficking for themselves and their children. In order to eradicate the issue of human trafficking we have to empower women through education and economic opportunities, enabling them to recognize and escape exploitation.



Jean Fernandez, a member of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, served as a missionary in the United States for more than 30 years with the Province of Mid-North America. In 2021, she returned to Singapore, where she now ministers within the Singapore-Malaysia province. With a degree in counseling psychology, she focuses on spiritual mentorship and counseling, accompanying individuals on their faith journeys and offering services in mental health. She also serves as a supervisor and educator at Marymount Convent School in Singapore, dedicated to guiding both youth and adults.

Human trafficking is a grave wound to human dignity that demands a response rooted in compassion and love. For me, this mission became profoundly personal.

One quiet night during the pandemic, as part of a small group, we walked desolate streets, searching for women trapped in the shadows of exploitation. Each step felt heavy with the weight of untold stories, but amid the darkness, we encountered glimpses of resilience.

One encounter remains etched in my soul—a deaf woman whose pain spoke volumes even in silence. Using sign language and a notepad, we bridged the gap with fragile threads of written words. In her presence, I felt a stirring call: to embody Christ the Good Shepherd, reflecting God's merciful love. Her story was sacred, reminding me of our Good Shepherd charism "One person is of more value than the whole world."



Sisters and partners-in-mission gather in Sabah, Malaysia. (Courtesy of the Good Shepherd Sisters)

The Good Shepherd mission extends far beyond the streets, across the Asia-Pacific region. In Malaysia, Global Shepherds — a ministry within the larger Good Shepherd network — has managed shelters for the past 50 years. Here, our sisters and partners in mission reach out to those trafficked, displaced, or subjected to gender-based violence.

In Singapore, we helped establish the Inter-Agency Taskforce on Trafficking in Persons in 2010 to combat trafficking. It is co-led by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Manpower. Many women are trafficked for the sex trade from across Asia to Singapore. In 2012, Good Shepherd services in Singapore became a designated center to house victims of trafficking. In our centers, women and children fleeing domestic violence find refuge, migrant workers recover from abuse, and

survivors of the sex trade begin to heal.

Our efforts are supported by partnerships with governments, NGO offices in New York and Geneva, and other faith-based organizations. We advocate tirelessly for stronger anti-trafficking measures and an end to violence against women and children.



At the Sisters Anti-Trafficking Awards held in Rome on May 23, 2024, Sr. Marie Claude Naddaf, from the Lebanon-Syria Province, receives the Human Dignity Award for her lifetime achievement in addressing exploitation and protecting women and children in the Middle East from human trafficking. The award was presented by Sr. Jane Wakahiu, from the Catholic Sisters initiative at Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. (Courtesy of the Good Shepherd Sisters)

We are deeply grateful to our Good Shepherd Contemplatives, who uphold us through daily prayers and sacrifices. Annually, moments like the International Day of the Girl Child and the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons renew our commitment, reminding us that justice is a spiritual journey rooted in Christ's call to set captives free.

As I walk this path, I am deeply inspired by the courage of every woman and child. Their resilience fuels my hope for a world where dignity and justice prevail. Together, trusting in God's grace, we continue this synodal journey, knowing that love has the power to heal, restore and renew.



Joel Urumpil is a dedicated member of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Patna Province, whose motherhouse is in Nazareth, Kentucky, in the United States. At 81, she remains a full-time social activist, committed to systemic change and grassroots development. In 1988, she left formal convent life to immerse herself in a people's movement in remote Jharkhand, where she has lived for 35 years. Together with local communities, she founded Chetna Bharati, an organization focused on rights-based issues and educational empowerment. As chief functionary and patron of a women's organization, she oversees remedial coaching, residential camps for marginalized youth, and support for aboriginal tribes and Mahadalits in vulnerable circumstances.

A dangerous culture is creeping into society — one of indifference, silence, helplessness and even irritation. A child crammed in a factory or a woman in a brothel fails to arouse the collective conscience of society, including that of many religious devotees.

Too often, establishments unwittingly participate in this exploitation. What everyone sees has become too ordinary; few observe, and even fewer respond. School dropouts, plastic pickers, tractor loaders—young girls bought and sold—are lost in this cycle of exploitation.



Twenty-two children rescued from child labor receive care and support from the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth in Jharkhand, India. (Courtesy of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Patna Province)

The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, founded in 1812 in the United States, expanded to India in 1947 with a mission to combat exploitation and illiteracy through health, social and educational initiatives. Addressing trafficking and exploitation is a crosscutting issue, pursued with a preferential option for vulnerable populations.

Since these issues intersect across various systems and policies, collaboration is essential. We work with people's movements and both secular and religious groups, targeting specific issues such as the "Movement Against Migrant Menace."

Our focus spans *awareness*, *advocacy*, and *direct action*. Awareness campaigns are critical to sparking societal change. Efforts include:

- Displaying visibility signs at crossroad junctions and marketplaces;
- Organizing events such as walkathons for children's rights, rallies advocating for women's rights as human rights, and campaigns promoting child dignity;
- Utilizing institutions and community-based organizations as strategic points for disseminating information to achieve wider coverage.

Advocacy efforts address systemic changes, including:

- Establishing task forces and budget planning for long-term impact;
- Issuing corporate statements and working with legislators to push for legal reforms;
- Collaborating with police departments and jail ministries;
- Strategic initiatives like a five-year plan aimed at reducing trafficking and unsafe migration rates.

Other measures include:

- Living among economically and politically disadvantaged populations to build trust;
- Reaching out to red-light districts for both service and advocacy;
- Providing mass education to children outside the formal school system;
- Strengthening community-based organizations, fostering responsibility within society, and promoting self-governance;
- Introducing policy interventions to create gender-friendly environments and employing "gatekeeping" mechanisms to protect at-risk populations;
- Integrating exposure to social realities into religious formation programs.

We are acutely aware of the missing links and strive to address them strategically. These include:

- Reaching a sizeable population of women and girls in remote villages who lack basic facilities;

- Shifting our focus from wealthier, more accessible populations to the marginalized and scattered;
- Moving beyond statistics, seminars and residential care to systemic advocacy for lasting change;
- Equipping institutions with technical expertise and preparedness to connect these missing links;
- Developing awareness of the broader intersections of caste, gender, poverty, politics and isolation, and fostering political will to address them effectively.

A concerted effort is in process. With political will and a depth of spirituality, we are "sent on a mission" to confront trafficking and exploitation head-on, ensuring dignity and justice for the most vulnerable.

This story appears in the **The Life** feature series. View the full series.