

**World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women – 9<sup>th</sup> Joint European Areas Seminar. Forward together... ..in hope. Hotel Selena – Pomezia, near Rome, Italy**

It was a great privilege and an absolute joy to participate at the above named conference and I gladly led a workshop on *-Hope in a foreign land*. The bible studies were splendid and the keynote speakers amazing however Elise Lindqvist stole the show for me. She was a dynamic speaker with an in-depth knowledge on human trafficking. Her personal story and life challenged us to do more to support and win the victims of human trafficking for Jesus. Prior to attending the conference I had visited a programme to rehabilitate and help victims of human trafficking in Palermo. This programme was an initiative of the Methodist Church Italy (OPCEMI) with support from the World Mission Fund as well as Methodist Women in Britain grant. Here is my report...

***Pilgrims of the Earth Programme- Alternative to street life!***  
***Palermo, Italy – June 2014***

I was met by Vivian Wiwoloku and Osas at Palermo having heard lots about human trafficking in Italy. The next day I was privileged to meet with over twenty ladies who were being trained acquire skills to live an alternative life outside human trafficking.

I had many questions that needed to be asked sensitively - *How did you get into the sex trade? Why Palermo or Italy? How did you cope with the language barrier?* However I started by asking what I thought was a simple question – *Where would you like to be in two or three years time?* The response was silence! I rephrased the question, *how do you see yourself in two to three years' time.* The response was still silence. I asked again, *what were your interests and how could these be achieved?*

Then I had a breakthrough eventually.... the floor was open. One by one each spoke of her aspirations. Some wished to complete the tailoring training, others wished to own their sewing machines and go back to Nigeria. Few wished to complete the catering training and work in the kitchen in Italy or run their private businesses. Some wished to start small businesses whilst some were open to employment opportunities available in Italy or Nigeria. They all wanted to experience dignity in labour and care for their children without the fear of Pims! What a horrible experience they to lose the ability to dream because of fear!



**Vivian and Bunmi in Palermo**



**Memorial for one of the Palermo victims**

At a later discussion with the programme coordinators, I was later told how the bodies of three Nigerian victims of human trafficking weeks apart identified in Palermo. It caused public outrage and the police were still investigating the murder cases to identify the perpetrators. One of the victims had renounced the sex trade and chosen an alternative lifestyle before she was murdered. The council responded to the outrage positively by providing an office/ training centre and support. It also named one of the parks in Palermo after her – Nike Adekunle (see photo above).

Up till date over one hundred ladies have been trained ready for employment opportunities and more than twenty ladies were being trained. Initially Vivian and his had a thriving cultural centre where Nigerian meals were sold to raise funds and multi-cultural entertainment arranged. Business was booming because it was a place of integration. Unfortunately the mafia in Palermo demanded unlawful contribution which was declined because it was a church initiative. The business had to close and fundraising for this programme became more challenging.

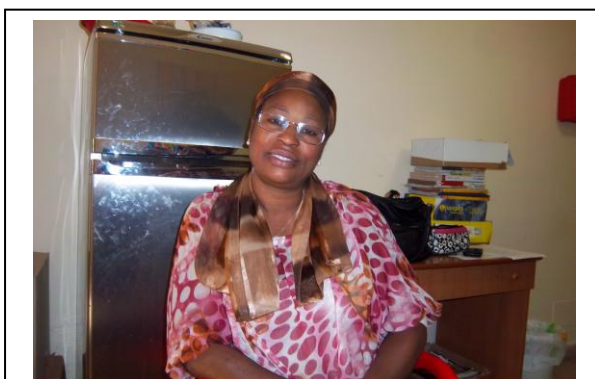
This initiative to provide an alternative way of life to sex trafficking arose in 1986 when a significant influx of migrants brought into Italy by sex lords including Palermo in Sicily. Nigerian ladies unable to speak the Italian language were promised opportunities in the fashion industry and other appeal jobs. Many of them also had to raise funds up to 35,000 Euros to come over.

On arrival, there were no jobs, no friends, and no support system. Those they paid had deserted them and the new masters offer accommodation tied to the sex trade! Most of them had their passports seized by the Pims until full payment for rent and meals were paid. The women reported that they were scared and vulnerable and knew no one. What other options were available in a strange land?

The Pims collected money from them daily whilst on duty to ensure profits were not diverted. Each sex worker had to pay 500 Euros per month for a spot on the street and expected to raise up to 100,000 Euros per annum to the sex lords meaning each lady was expected to sleep with up to fifteen men daily. The Pims often send representatives to monitor and or accompany them to ensure business was as usual and keep away or avoid law enforcement officers. If suspicions were raised, she would be moved to another city or country without her consent. What a life of enslavement!

This was a treacherous issue, a social scourge! Who could the ladies trust? Who would help? Many sex lords were well connected and wove their influences within the society. OPCEMI – the Methodist church in Italy decided to step up support. Mr Vivian Wiwoloku – a Methodist Lay preacher prayed and worked alongside catholic priests. He had to win their trust before they approached him and his wife for assistance particularly when faced with difficulties. After prolonged fellowship and counselling, the social worker would formally interview the ladies willing to risk leaving the sex trade and write up her case history as well as helping the police on investigations..

On many occasions Vivian’s car was vandalised, he has been threatened, blackmailed, the willing ladies have changed their minds due to threats, some had their siblings killed in Nigeria for disclosure etc, others endure great fear, assault and unexpected relocations. As new Christians, they were encouraged to build up relations with Jesus and receive counselling and would need other practical help. Support from OPCEMI has been crucial in the programme but when I met with the executives of this NGO, they asked for financial assistance especially for those with children living with the threat of losing their kids when there is no job.



**A re-trained victim ready to return to Nigeria**



**Ciss Human Right NGO officers in Parlema**

To date, over 300 ladies have completed the programme though some still return for financial when out of job. Many were also re-stationed to other places in Italy. There are currently 100 that have been trained but awaiting job opportunities and another 30 were about to complete various training.

Mr Vivian Wiwoloku, the programme co-ordinator also had support from the Police, Home Office, NGOs, Council, the Mayor, other churches especially the Catholic Church plus various employers to offer employment opportunity when possible, trainers and tutors to offer skills and knowledge, language teachers, volunteers etc; for which he is grateful for. Professionals also offer legal advice, medical advice, counselling and practical support. This is not work for the faint hearted because he gets calls from ladies anytime of the day as well as from police and law enforcement officers.

### What next?

Many of these ladies were brought in illegally hence do not have legal status making them vulnerable to their exploiters and feeling trapped. They also have no state support for housing, childcare, daily maintenance etc. OPCEMI has been co-funded by WCR Office to assist the ladies in getting legal stay by cooperating with the police to catch the criminals. The ladies then ask a very good question – what is the alternative? They have been brainwashed that no one else cares for them. The Methodist Church in Italy representative – Vivian through his network get the ladies trained in domestic work, catering, tailoring, Ice-cream making and other job openings at the co-operatives.



**Pilgrims of the Earth executive members**



**Promoting alternatives to human trafficking**

The ultimate plan is to repatriate the ladies willing to go back to Nigeria by paying for their return journey, offer a start up basic business package, work with the Nigerian Ambassador in Italy and help re-establish them back into Nigeria. I plan to link up the Methodist Church Nigeria to also help with the follow up and offer the ladies opportunities to inform young Nigerian ladies to be wary of overseas offers too good to be true. Unfortunately these girls and their parents are targeted due to poverty and or illiteracy. Others were taken by the deceitfulness of easy wealth by evil perpetrators. With God on our side, exploitation would be stemmed and dignity in labour promoted. Or do we stand aside and do nothing?

It was an enriching moment to meet with CISS a Human Right organisation based in Palermo but also work in developing countries. The programme officers were willing to work with each lady to develop a business plan based on their interest and skills. The aim was to offer professional assistance that would give each lady the best possible chance to become self-sufficient and continue in their new chosen career. As the Africa Partnership Coordinator I wish to work with MC Nigeria and Pilgrim of Earth NGO to create a support system in Nigeria to encourage repatriation and ensure that their acquired skills become beneficial by transforming lives and families and creating awareness

about human trafficking in communities. OPCEMI was grateful for continued support and partnership with MCB on this issue.

*Proverbs 3<sup>3-4</sup>: Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favour and a good name in the sight of God and man.*

*Dr Bunmi Olayisade  
Africa Partnership Coordinator  
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