

Statement of Loretta Bondi, Be Free Cooperative, Italy

BeFree began its work of countering violence against women and girls, human trafficking and discrimination in 2007 in Italy and beyond. These are three interlinked domains to which we apply a gender-based approach. Our country has equipped itself with a potentially far-reaching—although largely untapped—law for the protection of victims of trafficking in human beings. The law grants them a social protection path, predicated on proper identification of victims.

To steer women and girls into social protection programs is a process that requires months, actually years, of painstaking individual assistance, including providing shelter, as well as social, psychological, cultural mediation, and legal and job-orientation support. BeFree also litigates cases in court on their behalf. In one landmark judgment in 2012, we obtained compensation for 17 Nigerian women victims of trafficking against the assets of 14 perpetrators. The compensation of Euro 50,000 each was awarded during criminal proceedings, thereby sparing the victims a lengthy pursuit of their rights and possible re-traumatization in a separate civil suit. Today, and with the UN VF support, we are also retracing victims of trafficking who are entitled to compensation under a new law.

Over the course of time, human trafficking to and through Italy has evolved. Today, the vast majority of victims we meet come from Africa, particularly Nigeria, through Niger and Libya. They are mainly trafficked for sexual exploitation. Most are enslaved and experience sexual violence and a vast array of other gross human rights abuses throughout their travels.

Human trafficking is indeed a gender issue. In Europe from 2013-2014, 15,846 persons were identified as victims of human trafficking. Seventy-six percent of them are women; 67 percent are victims of forced prostitution.

Women and girls we assist leave their countries because of gender-related factors, such as the feminization of poverty, sexual and domestic violence, forced marriages, social instability, unequal access to opportunities and services. These factors have remained constant during the years. And so has the traffickers' ability to adapt their strategies to a context that, instead, has profoundly mutated, due to the political upheavals in Northern Africa coupled with increasing intolerance towards migrants in Europe and elsewhere. These changes have also influenced the profile and vulnerabilities of victims and have made our job at identifying them and obtaining protection all the more difficult.

A year ago, we set out to investigate the trends we had observed from 2011 onward.

First, we took stock of factors underlying the increased numbers of trafficked victims. In 2015, 5,000 Nigerian women and girls arrived in Italy, a four-fold increase over the previous year. Through more than 100 in-depth interviews, we concluded that this escalation was due not only to the general spike in migration flows, but also to a fragmentation of criminal networks and to the emergence of opportunistic exploiters who have mushroomed in Libya. These often competing and multiplying traffickers required more and more victims at their disposal to keep profits flowing at a constant level.

Second, African women arriving to our shores were increasingly younger and less educated and, thus, more easily exploited and less likely to seek help. We don't know how many minors were among them. Traffickers, in fact, instruct younger victims to claim an older age in order to let them move more easily in less controlled reception places. Methods to ascertain minor age are still rudimentary and often fallacious. One thing is well established, however: in the first six months of 2016, more than 70,000 persons landed on Italian coasts; 11,608 were minors, 90 percent of them unaccompanied.

Third, there was an escalation in asylum requests. Traffickers force their victims to claim asylum in order to avoid or forestall their expulsion, thereby making it more difficult for them to be identified as trafficked persons and obtain appropriate protection.

Dear Colleagues,

I take statistics on human trafficking with a grain of salt, as I believe that they can only partially account for the magnitude of the phenomenon. Incomplete as they are, however, these statistics relate to numbers and yearly increases that point to structural factors, not recurrent emergencies as they are all too often depicted. Emergencies justify swift and possibly draconian measures, such as mass expulsions. Structural problems require medium and long-term strategies and investments in the resourcefulness of survivors. They require the thorough re-thinking of gender roles that underpin structural discrimination. We should ask ourselves whether we have equipped our institutions, operators and communities to deal with such structural phenomena. Should a narrative of "emergencies" continue unchallenged, I fear that we will end up being none the wiser.

It is often remarked that victims are difficult to intercept. However, many of them, including women and children are very visible on our streets and sidewalks. They are very openly forced there for purposes of sexual and labor exploitation or for begging. We encounter them in our daily lives. Claiming "invisibility", however, allows us to escape the painstaking task of properly identifying and protecting these victims. And above all, it allows us to conveniently skirt questions that pertain to those who demand and buy their services and who could very well be our neighbors, our spouses, our friends.

Thank you