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## Human Rights Council

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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Associazione Comunita Papa Giovanni XXIII, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2022]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.

## **Sex slavery in Roma Communities**

Associazione Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) welcomes the Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery and would like to draw the attention to the sexual slavery that is still one of the most widespread modern forms of slavery in the world.

Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms”.

Article 6 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) sets out the legal obligation of States parties to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of trafficking in women and exploitation of the prostitution of women.

Despite slavery being prohibited in international human rights law, sexual exploitation involves the vast majority of trafficked women in Europe. Especially, ethnic groups are more than others affected by human trafficking for sexual slavery and exploitation.

According to data (1), among European countries, Bulgaria together with Romania and Hungary are the main source countries of sex trafficking victims; the most marginalised young girls and women, mainly from Roma communities, are often the invisible victims of human trafficking, sexual slavery as well as forced marriage.

In Romania, traffickers from international organised crime groups, subject women, and children to sex trafficking in the country or in other European nations, including Finland, France, Italy, Spain, and the UK; nearly 50 percent of the victims of sexual exploitation in Romania are children and many of them belong to the Roma ethnic group. The same phenomenon happens in Bulgaria where traffickers exploit Bulgarian girls, including young women and children of both Turkish and Romani ethnicity, in sex trafficking throughout Western Europe, but also inside the country. Around 15 percent of the victims of trafficking identified in Bulgaria are minors and many of them are forced into sex slavery in the resort areas and border towns.

Unfortunately, not even in the context of the pandemic-related restrictions, the sex market has stopped. In fact, some ethnic groups have continued to be trafficked from East to West Europe to respond to the demand for commercial sex; many girls have been involved in indoor prostitution, especially in apartments. The COVID-19 health crises have exacerbated the condition of extreme poverty in which several marginalised groups already lived.

Vulnerability, isolation, discriminatory behaviour and prejudice on one hand, lack of social inclusion and early school leaving, on the other, have increased the risk for girls and children belonging to minorities of being trafficked.

It is meaningful to underline how the recruitment of young girls and children has occurred using different channels such as inter alia, internet websites and social networks. The wide internet coverage and widespread availability of mobile devices have facilitated the spread of these channels for criminal intent.

According to EUROPOL, it should be noted that during the pandemic, online sexual coercion and extortion have become one of the new criminal phenomena of the digital age, affecting both adults and minors equally; traffickers, working in well-developed networks, recruit sex trafficking victims with fraudulent offers of employment in restaurants and domestic services or by posing as potential romantic partners.

APG23 is firmly engaged in fighting human trafficking, helping, and supporting victims of sex slavery, as well as welcoming them into its protected structures and family homes. Moreover, APG23 has implemented several specific projects and initiatives of social inclusion for survivors of prostitution.

According to our field experience, gained even more through the work of our street units in all regions of Italy, it is quite clear that young girls are trafficked under the deceptive promise of a well-paid work and then forced into commercial sex and slavery conditions. Often in Roma communities, girls are deceived to follow men that their families have chosen for them, only to find themselves forced into prostitution through different and brutal forms of violence.

Among the different testimonies collected, the one from a Roma girl that APG23 volunteers have met on the street, is particularly significant:

“I had to follow the man they had chosen for me; he was my boyfriend.... When you grow up, you are already destined for a man... my mother has already done so much for me .... Fortunately, they didn't send me away when I was a child”.

She is twenty-five years old, but she was sixteen when she left her home. During her life, she has been trained to sell herself on the street and she has been trafficked and sold several times in different European countries; despite the abuse and violence she has suffered, she found the courage to ask for help and leave the life. In the streets.

The story is taken from a project called “MIRIAM: Free Migrant Women Against GBV (Gender Based Violence) through identification and access to specialised support service”, promoted by APG23 and carried out in collaboration with *Differenza Donna* in Italy e *Fundaciòn de Solidaridad Amaranta* in Spain. It is a European project funded by the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union, aimed at preventing and combating all forms of violence against children, youth, and women. It intends to strengthen services for early detection, protection and specialised support services for migrant women who are already or potentially victims of GBV with a strong focus on victims of sexual exploitation, intimate partner violence and forced marriage (2).

Roma girls are highly vulnerable to trafficking due to structural forms of ethnic and gender discrimination, poverty and social exclusion; the beliefs that women and girls freely choose to prostitute themselves, may prevent the identification of the victims and the need for support and protection by the authorities. This discriminatory narrative against the Roma community makes young girls and children even more vulnerable. We as APG23 strongly believe that only by working together with the government and other stakeholders is possible to reduce vulnerability factors and social and structural barriers; Roma girls and children should be protected and supported by ensuring social inclusion and access to public services such as schools, health, and employment services. Furthermore, it is imperative to change the paradigm that sees prostitution as a free choice of work.

As the Special Rapporteur underlines in his report, “much more needs to be done to tackle deep-rooted intersecting forms of discrimination against minorities”.

We would like to conclude with the words of Pope Francis during the Meeting with the Roma Community in the Apostolic Journey to Budapest (3):” .... Restoring dignity means passing from prejudice to dialogue, from introspection to integration.....Judgment and prejudice only increase distances. Hostility and sharp words are not helpful. Marginalising others accomplishes nothing. Segregating ourselves and other people eventually leads to anger. The path to peaceful coexistence is integration: an organic, gradual, and vital process that starts with coming to know one another, then patiently grows, keeping its gaze fixed on the future.”

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(1) 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report,\*TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf (state.gov)

(2) <https://www.apg23.org/it/progettomiriam/>

(3)<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210914-kosice-rom.html>