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Caritas Gives Voice to Migrant Women

Hosts Conference in Senegal on "Female Face of Migration"

By Traci Osuna

SALY, Senegal, JAN. 7, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Historically, men have been the providers and protectors of the family unit, to the point of even leaving their homeland in search of a better life for themselves and their family. Today, more and more women have either stepped into that dominant role or been forced to do so; whatever the reason, today half of all migrants are women.

In late November, Caritas International hosted a conference in Saly, Senegal titled "The Female Face of Migration" in which the Catholic humanitarian organization worked to address the major issues facing women migrants in particular. According to Martina Liebsch, head of policy for Caritas International, the conference was attended by 110 participants from 49 countries, as well as high level representatives from the Pontifical Council of Migrants and Travelers.

While many countries have historically been categorized as countries of origin (such as Mali, Senegal, Sri Lanka), countries of transition (such as Algeria, Morocco and Guatemala), and destination countries (such as Belgium, Sweden, The United States, Argentina), Liebsch says the lines have been blurred in recent years. There is no clear cut plan for many of these women. They may plan to travel from Africa to Europe via Morocco, but remain in the transition country because reaching the final destination is either too dangerous, too expensive, or both.

"Women migrate because they might have better chances of finding a job in the service sector, such as domestic work and care work," says Liebsch. "With this job, they manage to maintain their families in their home countries, pay for the education of the children, health care for their parents and subsistence of their spouses." Other reasons women leave their homelands is to seek protection from violent relationships as well as violent regimes, to seek out educational opportunities and to dare to achieve their dream of a better life.

In setting out to explore their options, women are often taken advantage of in the process. "As the service sector is unregulated or poorly regulated in many countries, women find themselves, very often, in exploitative working conditions," says Liebsch. Many times, women are lured to foreign countries through promises of work and prosperity, only to end up surrendering their passports or being indebted to recruitment agencies charging high fees for job placement.

Liebsch goes on to describe incidents, which occur all too often, in which women migrate under the pretext of making a new life for themselves, only to be "forced into exploitive working conditions or even prostitution." These women often turn to the men in their new surroundings for help or protection and find that they are the very ones who are taking advantage of their situation. "In some countries, they are raped, even by state authorities; for example, the police."

A key issue for Caritas, she says, is to advocate for the recognition of domestic work as regulated work.

Liebsch explains that Caritas is comprised of 165 organizations, many of which are engaged in some form of assistance to migrants. Caritas "provides both accompaniment and services to migrants and refugees at the local level and engages in advocacy for the protection and the rights of migrants and refugees at the national and global level," she says.

For example, Caritas Senegal focuses on issues such as improving urban living conditions of migrants and also coping with climate change. Caritas Sri Lanka provides pre-departure counseling; Caritas Libya aids migrants who are in transition in their country and are in need of assistance. Many Caritas organizations in Europe help migrants to connect with others in similar situations and with host societies as well. And, she explains, Caritas also supports and helps in the voluntary return of migrants to their homelands.

"Depending on the national context and the links Caritas has with governments, the expertise of Caritas is requested to shape policies."

Liebsch says that the majority of these countries generally respect the work of Caritas because the organization has proven itself in how it has helped migrants, especially women. "When it comes to shaping or changing policies in favor of migrant women, often the first step is to raise public awareness involving governmental officials themselves about a specific problem."

Progress

Great advances have been made in traditionally oppressive countries. Liebsch says that Caritas Lebanon was able to ensure that domestic workers are now granted regular contracts. In Columbia, where displaced people were traditionally given no rights, Caritas has recently witnessed movement towards justice for this same class of people.

"These are long processes where the global and the national level support each other, as well as the expertise exchanged among the network," she says. "We also highly benefit from the moral authority of the Church, [which] has always defended the rights of migrants and refugees as care for the stranger is a topic rooted in the teachings of the Church."

As the three day conference concluded, Caritas hoped that by reemphasizing the root causes of migration, such as poverty, hunger, violence, and lack of opportunity, the global community would be better equipped to identify and eradicate the mistreatment of migrants.

Liebsch says that, without recognizing the rights of these migrant women, there is no possibility for integral human development. "This is in sharp contrast to the benefits which migrants produce for the receiving societies, such as filling the care gap."

The group calls for Caritas to continue its work, striving for the rights and benefits of refugees and migrants on both regional and national levels. "Caritas organizations should better use the potential of the Caritas Confederation, which brings together countries of origin, transit and destination and increase the cooperation among them," she says.

The organization recommends that "governments should sign, ratify and implement key conventions, international humanitarian agreements and regional accords to protect the basic rights and the dignity of migrants and refugees." Caritas also feels that governments need to prioritize the rights and protection of the migrant and her family, including "economic and social opportunities

for families to remain intact, and migration policies should incorporate opportunities for families to migrate together or reunite in a timely manner."

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