

Steps towards preventing human trafficking

Nga mihi atawhai – greetings to all in Mercy! Even before her House of Mercy in Baggot Street was built, Catherine McAuley realised that teaching young women to become self-reliant and able to support themselves was a step towards human dignity and independent living. She taught needlework and handicrafts in the Middle Abbey Street School, and rented a house nearby in which sewing made in the classes she taught could be sold. The profits were used to support her pupils and their families.

“As early as 1823, more than 50 years before the idea was formulated at the higher levels of the State, Catherine McAuley advocated and pioneered the ideals of technical or vocational education,” wrote Sr Angela Bolster in her biography of the founder, *Catherine McAuley: Venerable for Mercy*. “Provision of systematic education for the poor remained her immediate priority which she intended to pursue as a lay woman assisted by like-minded associates.”

So it’s no surprise to find last month the Sisters of Mercy making a formal statement to the United Nations Commission on Social Development, urging that the root causes of poverty be addressed as a way to prevent human trafficking around the world. “The goal of empowerment remains dangerously imperilled by rampant and worldwide gender inequality, exclusion and disempowerment,” say the Sisters of Mercy. These negative forces leave women poor, vulnerable and, too often, prey to human trafficking.

It’s the prevailing model of development, with its focus on growth and profit, which keeps women and girls vulnerable, the Sisters of Mercy say. “Every girl or woman considered ‘less than’ has little or no value and can be objectified, sold, raped and beaten into servitude for labour or sexual exploitation.”

In their statement to the UN Commission, the Sisters of Mercy say that governments continue to treat the symp-

Imaging Mercy Today



Graphic from Mercy Global Concern

toms rather than the root causes of poverty, and to promote a model of development that values profit over life. In doing so, they fail to address the systemic drivers of inequality and discrimination: “women are excluded from decision-making, land ownership, access to natural, financial and technological resources critical to livelihood, education and decent jobs. Well-being comes at great social cost.”

The Sisters of Mercy acknowledge that progress has been made, but insist that more needs to be done. Protocols aimed at preventing and punishing the trafficking of women and children need to be tightened and more strictly enforced. Another important initiative among some nations has been to decriminalise the provider of sex and to criminalise the purchaser of sex. The sisters’ statement praises the grass-roots work of non-governmental coalitions, such as the Australian Catholic Religious against Trafficking in Humans (acrath.org.au). A similar group (ANZRATH) is now operating among religious in New Zealand.

The sisters’ statement outlines a series of recommendations, including specific goals and targets to provide a living wage, to close the gender pay gap, and to create decent and permanent labour opportunities for women.

You can read the full text of the statement by the Sisters of Mercy, on addressing the root causes of poverty to prevent human trafficking, if you go to the website of the UN Commission on Social Development and check the NGO list.

Or, for a simpler outline of the issues, pick up from our mission office a copy of Mercy Global Concern’s leaflet, *Just Imagine if this girl were you*. Or visit YouTube and watch *The Girl Effect*, or its sequel, *The Girl Effect: the clock is ticking*, to see what happens when girls believe that they can become powerful agents for positive change in our world.

No work of charity produces more than ‘the careful instruction of women’, said Catherine McAuley, ‘since their example and advice will always have great influence.’ Now there’s a wisdom that even in our digital age can scarcely be faulted! – Dennis Horton

A better way

Amen, we acknowledge:

the lives that are damaged when girls and women are not able to access the rights and resources that set them free to choose a better path.

E pai ana, Amene.

Amen, we encourage:

politicians and law-makers, who put human rights ahead of profits, who set goals to close the gender pay gap and work to end the root causes of poverty and the spiral that leads to trafficking.

He whakahou, Amene.

Amen, we celebrate:

the growing recognition that girls and women have rights, which men need to respect, honour and affirm.

Mercy’s commitment to end abuse and restore wholeness, especially for women and girls at risk.

E whakaae ana whakanuia, Amene.