

The value of a human life

All children come into this world with the potential to live protected, cherished and loved. They look towards the future with optimism, only to discover that as little girls, they are undervalued, stigmatized on account of their sex, and are at risk of being aggressed by those closest to them. In addition, they confront the painful reality that those entrusted to protect them – their families, communities and security services – are at best ineffective or outright deficient.

We once thought that slavery had been abolished forever. But today, it has reappeared in a modern form.

The trading of human beings across borders is unfortunately a fact of life. It is a grave violation of human rights and poses great danger to human security. This complex issue requires a multi-disciplinary approach to study interlinked issues contributing to its growth. Contrary to other forms of illicit trade like arms and drugs, women and children are treated as commodities that can be sold and resold again and again. And once they are HIV infected, they are sold at a cheaper price.

In 1989, Albina du Boisrouvray created the Association François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB), an international NGO leading 87 programs throughout 18 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the United States. FXB created programs in three major areas: First, research and the medical education of AIDS. Second, care and support for orphans and families infected and/or affected by HIV and AIDS. And third, public policy initiatives to raise awareness of the AIDS pandemic and take action to provide relief to its victims, particularly children.

The rights of the child lie at the heart of FXB and its activities, as well as the implementation and action of the inextricable link between health and human rights.

In 1992, after undertaking an investigation into the local underworld of women and children trafficking, Albina du Boisrouvray received a call for help in Thailand from young women who were forced into sex work at the border between Thailand and Myanmar. They faced increased risk of HIV infection and were horrifically treated and beaten; some of them were killed.

Albina alerted Minister Chutikul, then Councilor to the Thai Prime Minister and responsible for women's well-being and child prostitution, who assisted her in initiating the police to undertake a raid and release 253 young women. Up to 95 of them were Burmese and close to 50% of them were HIV positive.

This action led to a rethinking of the sex work industry in Thailand and inspired the Thai Government, in 1992, to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on measures to prevent the trafficking of individuals across its borders in the Mekong region, and protect victims of this trade, many of whom were HIV positive. The MOU led to the eventual improvement of a number of significant legislations related to the protection of the rights of the victims of human trafficking, who were for the most part women and children. There was recognition that it was essential to have a structural mechanism through which child prostitution and trafficking could be fought.

In 1994, a National Committee within the Office of the Prime Minister of Thailand was established, bringing together representatives from a wide range of governmental bodies as well as NGOs and international organizations, such as UNICEF, the ILO and IOM. The National Committee helped formulate a National Plan of Action to combat child prostitution and trafficking through a complete cycle of assistance to the victims – from assistance in the form of prevention, rescue and protection, legislation and prosecution; to repatriation, recovery and reintegration.

Today, how many people are aware of the magnitude of the problem? How many victims expect to end up where they do? How many who are already embroiled in terrible situations know there is help?

While the prime responsibility lies within governments, a successful global strategy requires the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders – NGOs, the security sector, the public, the business community.

Awareness-raising among the public is also much needed.

It took one person, fifteen years ago, to show us that acknowledging the problem in the first place and then denouncing it, can go a long way.

--//--