

Expert: Pandemic exacerbated human trafficking

Hindered global response, says Roza Pati, appointed to Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development

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Tom Tracy – Catholic News Service



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St. Thomas University law professor Roza Pati, seen here talking with some students, has been appointed by Pope Francis to the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. She had previously been appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

MIAMI | The pandemic-related economic downturn, business closures, increase in global unemployment and reduced incomes have contributed to greater human trafficking of children, women, domestic workers and undocumented migrants.

That is the assessment of a Miami law professor and newly appointed member of Pope Francis' Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, created in 2016 through the merger of four Pontifical Councils. The dicastery is charged with developing and promoting the Church's teaching in the fields of justice, peace, the safeguarding of creation, as well as issues that concern health and works of charity. It now includes several COVID-19 related working groups.

“There is evidence of an increase in the commercial sexual exploitation of children, child work, girl-child marriages to alleviate families' hardship, domestic servitude and sexual exploitation of women and children living in internally displaced person (IDP) camps, including camps in Haiti,” said professor Roza Pati, of St. Thomas University's College of Law.



Photographer: *COURTESY*

St. Thomas University law professor Roza Pati says anti-human trafficking bodies in Florida have reported that many of their resources have been re-directed to providing other services to vulnerable populations affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Roza Pati has been appointed by Pope Francis to the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. She had previously been appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Pati is executive director of STU's Intercultural Human Rights program and founding director of the Miami-based John J. Brunetti Human Trafficking Academy. She cited recent reports from the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, the United Nations and Polaris, an NGO that operates the National Human Trafficking Hotline, to note that the COVID-19 global pandemic has set the stage for greater illegal activity related to human trafficking.

“There is an increased supply of new criminal recruits in human trafficking organizations, as they adapt their strategies in response to the pandemic, which in turn makes it very difficult for law enforcement and anti-trafficking organizations to identify and rescue victims,” Pati said.

She cited some of the indications of increased global trafficking activity including:

- Global school closures for many children have prevented access not only to education but also to shelter and nourishment; hence children are forced on the streets to search for food and income, and subject to exploitation.
- Cyber-trafficking crime syndicates are taking advantage of online teaching and learning, with children constantly online, at times with no controls. This has aggravated the vulnerability of children to online sexual predators, who are themselves confined at home.
- Europol reports an increase in the demand for child pornography and sexual exploitation material.
- Greater vulnerability is seen in prison populations being exploited in forced labor. Female inmates have reportedly been forced to work long hours and night shifts to produce face masks.

COVID DISRUPTIONS

There also has been a pandemic-related disruption of victim assistance and support services, including in-person counseling, representation and legal aid.

“Such services being offered exclusively online has proven to be a barrier for victims — many of whom do not even have access to a computer or internet,” Pati said. “Victims are forced into isolation, with the chances of them being identified and removed from their exploitative situations drastically reduced.”



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Also impacted: victim rescue missions and availability of shelters, despite a reported increase in calls to trafficking hotlines during the pandemic.

In Florida specifically, Pati said, anti-human trafficking bodies have reported that many of their resources have been re-directed to providing other services to vulnerable populations affected by the pandemic. And many anti-trafficking organizations are losing their grants and donations as donors and foundations switch priorities to focus on pandemic-related issues.

Pati said those Florida trends have been noted by the Statewide Council on Human Trafficking Annual Report 2020, the Department of Children and Families, the Department of Health, the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Agency for Health Care Administration.

Critically, the pandemic has also impacted the work of the law enforcement and the justice system in responding, investigating, prosecuting and convicting perpetrators of human trafficking.

“In many cases, such work has become lower priority while the law enforcement agencies get mobilized to implement pandemic measures and states of emergency,” Pati said. “And of course, limited judicial services while courthouses were closed and justice for victims got delayed.”

UPHOLDING HUMAN DIGNITY

Born in Albania, Pati grew up under a dictatorship and atheist regime, in a Catholic family that was part of a 10% minority in an overwhelming Muslim country.

Roza said she was among the last born to have been baptized, shortly before the regime prohibited all religion, closed and destroyed houses of worship, imprisoned and even executed priests and other clerics, and made good on its threats involving anyone who dared to think about God.

Her work on the Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development will mirror her own passions for supporting causes that uphold human dignity, bring about awareness and seek effective law and policy solutions towards abolishing all forms of human suffering, including human-trafficking.

According to the Holy Father’s *motu proprio*, “This dicastery will be competent particularly in issues regarding migrants, those in need, the sick, the excluded and marginalized, the imprisoned and the unemployed, as well as victims of armed conflict, natural disasters, and all forms of slavery and torture.”

The dicastery’s prefect is African-born Cardinal Peter Turkson. Pati’s appointment by Pope Francis was preceded by her appointment by Pope Benedict XVI to solely represent the United States as a member of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2012 – 2017).

Addressing human trafficking has been at the top of the Pope Francis’ agenda “from day one,” Pati said, and has been a theme of constant concern since his election in 2013.

“People at the fringes of humanity such as the poor, migrants, refugees, trafficked victims occupy the very core of the pontificate of the Holy Father Pope Francis. Many say it is his trademark,” she added, noting the pope’s harsh critique of a “culture of indifference.”

Pope Francis has on numerous occasions addressed human trafficking from a variety of angles, including with the creation of the Migration and Refugee Section — which he personally leads — to help the Church accompany refugees and all those forced to migrate as well as victims of human trafficking. The pope also touched on human trafficking in his comments immediately following his recent visit to Iraq.

FLORIDA EFFORTS

In Florida, a variety of ongoing initiatives and public awareness campaigns address human trafficking, including public information posters and signage being displayed in healthcare facilities, hotels, massage establishments, airports, highway rest areas and other settings.



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St. Thomas University law professor Roza Pati says the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted assistance to victims as well as investigation and prosecution of human trafficking crimes. Roza Pati has been appointed by Pope Francis to the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development. She had previously been appointed by Pope Benedict XVI to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

Florida's Statewide Council on Human Trafficking Annual Report for 2020 discusses the launching of the Florida Department of Health's 2020-2024 Statewide Human Trafficking Surveillance Plan, whose goal is to enhance the collection of human trafficking data, according to Pati.

The National Human Trafficking Hotline reports from 2015 to 2019 detail the number of calls in Florida in any given year, the number of trafficking cases reported, the type of trafficking, and the top venues for trafficking.

"In 2019, for instance there were 2,068 contacts made, of 896 human trafficking cases reported, with sex trafficking leading the typology, and with domestic servitude leading labor trafficking, followed by agriculture, construction, travelling sales crews, and restaurant/food service," Pati noted.

Illicit massage and spa businesses lead the top venues-industries for occurrence of sex trafficking, followed by residence-based commercial sex, hotel-motel-based commercial sex, and pornography.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a watershed crisis of our times and one which has brought to light the inequality in human development, according to Pati. "As Pope Francis has stated, we may come out of it better or worse. Of course, we should commit to overcome it, and come out better and with hope."

If you or someone you know is a victim of human trafficking, call the National Human Trafficking Hotline at: 1 (888) 373-7888.