

01 November, 2001

## **Italian haven offers hope to trafficked women**

By Kristine Crane | Special to The Christian Science Monitor

ROME - When Angela Slobodciuk left her native Moldova four years ago, she thought she was headed for a nanny's job in Greece.

Instead, she was forced to work as a prostitute in Turkey, unwittingly joining the ranks of thousands of women trafficked each year from impoverished countries in East Europe, Asia and Africa.

Her painful odyssey, which also led through the former Yugoslavia and Albania, ended when Italian police stopped her and the trafficker at a train station in Lecce, at the southern tip of Italy's Adriatic Coast. The trafficker was arrested, and she was sent to the New Wings center, where trafficked women have a chance to begin rebuilding their lives.

In a novel approach to a growing global problem, New Wings tries both to help victims and to change the economic conditions in their home countries that make them vulnerable.

Rev. Cesare Lodeserto, a Catholic priest, started New Wings four years ago in San Foca, 10 miles from Lecce, which is a common entry point for people-smuggling.

As the women go through the legal process of denouncing their traffickers - one way of breaking the chain of these criminal networks - they work in the bakeries and restaurants of the nearby town, and the youngest cook and clean at the refugee center. Most of the women stay in Italy, where immigration laws offer special protection to trafficked women.

For those who want to go back home, New Wings' satellite projects in Moldova and Ukraine help reintegrate the women and warn potential victims against the false promises of traffickers.

Throughout Italy, 48 various programs assist female victims of traffickers. Italian law gives participants six-month legal residency, even if they do not denounce their traffickers; and they can renew residency if they have found jobs. These provisions distinguish the law from others in Europe, where denouncement is obligatory to obtain residency and is sometimes followed by repatriation. According to government figures, there are an estimated 3,500 trafficked women in Italy, and 1,200 have taken part in the programs.

According to the UN, 3 million people are trafficked each year in the world, and the figure is rising.

An estimated 50 international crime groups now traffic 400,000 people into Western Europe annually. Across Europe, there are an estimated 50,000 trafficked women, according to the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration.

"On an international level, the response has been stupor," says Father Lodeserto. "Italy has the only extensive social protection program. We are a model for other countries."

Vittoria Tola, president of the Italian governmental committee that oversees programs aiding trafficked women, says that New Wings, funded by the Italian government and the Roman Catholic church, is especially effective because "they have resources to house a lot of women, and an excellent relationship with the local police. And the women are self-sufficient."

After two years at the center, Ms. Slobodciuk is heading north to work in a pizzeria. "I speak Italian well by now. No one will know me or my story there. I think I can do it," she says.

The youngest New Wings participant is 14, with the average age 20. Most are from Moldova and Ukraine. Some say that to escape poverty and personal problems, they left home to become prostitutes. But most thought that they were going to the West as nannies or waitresses.

Ms. Slobodciuk recalls her ordeal with a shiver. "I thought I would be living on the streets. I could go crazy thinking about what would have happened. I never imagined that things would work out, that Italy would help me."

When she arrived at the center, Father Lodeserto asked that she first call her son. Her mother-in-law told her that the boy, who had been born with a twisted leg, needed corrective surgery urgently. The priest had money sent immediately, and the boy had the operation that week.

Angela proudly shows photos of her son with Father Lodeserto that were taken in Moldova during one of his monthly trips there to visit the women's families. "When you talk to families in homes without electricity and water, you begin to look at the girl differently," he says. "Moldova is a country of great illusions. You see 20 people inside McDonald's, and 50 outside, begging or selling popcorn. A well-known newspaper advertises waitressing jobs, and even prostitution in Italy for as much as \$800 weekly."

Several New Wings participants have returned home to work at satellite projects in Moldova and Ukraine, where they staff information and assistance centers, and work on projects for building wells and roads. These will merge into a New Wings economic-development project, inaugurated this month in Moldova, to stimulate employment and pave the way toward eventual entry into the EU. Several Italian textile, agricultural and industrial businesses have already signed on to invest, and Father Lodeserto hopes for funding from the EU.

"In combating trafficking, It is not enough to take the girl from the street without confronting the underlying problems that contribute to this emigration," he says. "We need to create incentives for them to not leave in the first place."