

Rescuing Women From Forced Prostitution

Sister Lea Ackermann on the Flesh Trade in Germany

THESE are excerpts from a tape-recorded interview with Sister Lea Ackermann, conducted in October 1999. Sister Lea belongs to a Catholic order in Germany. In 1985, she began working to ameliorate the condition of prostitutes in Kenya, by helping them to acquire alternative skills as well as by encouraging them to resume school and obtain professional education. After some years, she was forced to leave Kenya. She returned to Germany, where she started working for women who were trapped in the sex trafficking industry, in addition to helping victims of domestic violence.

Her organisation **Solwood** extends help to about 500 women each year. Since she began her work, the number of cases taken up by the court for prosecution and resulting in conviction has risen substantially, in part, because her organisation provides effective protection to women who testify against those who pushed them into the sex trade. Most importantly, the organisation attempts to help such women rebuild their lives.

Throughout history, people from resource-poor societies have tried to escape poverty by migrating to wealthier lands. That is how millions of Europeans went to North America, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Africa and Asia. In many instances, the migrants even wiped out the local population and became rulers of those lands. The twentieth century, however, has witnessed the progressive closing down of borders, creating serious obstacles to the free movement of people across arbitrarily determined political borders. Sr. Lea's account clearly shows how it has prevented people from the currently impoverished societies from improving their lot by migrating to wealthier societies. Most of the women who became victims of the flesh trade in Germany came in search of work or marriage alliances, but because they were dubbed "illegal" migrants, they became easy prey for anti-social elements in Germany.

In this context, we would do well to remember that Sr. Lea's account only describes the plight of those women who came to be trapped in brutal marriages or other forms of sexual exploitation. She does not claim to speak for those women migrants - legal and illegal - who may have actually succeeded in bettering their economic and social conditions.

In this interview with **Madhu Kishwar**, Sr. Lea Ackermann talks about the risks, the challenges, and the frustrations inherent in this work.

□ *How did you become involved in the issue of the trafficking of women?*

It stemmed from my research about trafficking in human beings. My fellow researchers and I discovered this trafficking through the investigations work we did way back in 1987-88. We filed court cases, met women who were lured to Germany and then forced into prostitution. First, we started with all kinds of women who came to Germany because the economic situation was very precarious in their home countries.

They come from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Since the opening of the borders to Eastern Europe, they have also been coming from there. They came here to work, and then they discovered that they had no legal work permit here in Germany, and therefore were in a lot of trouble. These women were cheated and deceived.

□ *So, initially these women were unaware that prostitution awaits them? They are lured to Germany by false promises of legitimate work?*

Yes, most of them are brought on false pretenses. Generally they think they will have legal, good work in Germany. They come to be *au pairs*, aspire to learn German, work in a family, care for children, and go to school. This is the promise in the beginning. But other kinds of allurements are also used. Sometimes, young men speak to young women and say: "You are so friendly, and so nice. We could be good friends, won't you come with me to Germany? Later on, we could even marry." Many

young women are enticed to Germany in hopes of bettering their lives through marriage. Asian women in particular are pulled in through marriage agencies. They come with the understanding that they will marry a good German man.

□ *From which countries in Asia do most of the women come?*

They mainly come from the Philippines, Thailand, and Malaysia. Relatively few women come from India.

□ *Who is responsible for bringing these women? Are there agents in their home countries or is it German operatives working alone?*

That varies. Some of the marriage agencies are linked to local agencies. They advertise in Asian newspapers for marriage or friendship or pen friends. That is the first step. When the women arrive in Germany, some of the marriage agencies put them in contact with men who want to meet foreign women, and perhaps really consider marriage. But some are more interested in using the women, and then dumping them.

□ *When you say "dumping," you mean they are returned to the agency?*

Yes, the woman goes back to the agency, who gives her to a second client, and then a third client. We even have a woman in one of our contact offices who was the ninth woman for the same client! This client kept 'trying out' various women. The women's predicament is exacerbated by the fact that they normally come with a visa for only three months. So when a man takes a woman for one month to 'try her out,' and gives her back, after two or three months the agency tell her: "We didn't get any money for you because the deposit the man has given will belong to the agency only at the moment of the legal marriage." Suddenly, the woman finds herself in debt and in imminent danger of being ousted from Germany.



Sr. Dr. Lea Ackermann

□ *Exactly what kind of money are we talking about?*

Normally, the male client leaves a deposit of 15,000 German Marks (DM) with the marriage agency. But this is only a deposit. It is only when they marry that this money officially belongs to the agency. If the marriage is not legally realised, the man can have his money back. The agency now asks the woman to pay 15,000 DM for the supposed loss they suffered. So the woman is in debt and has to pay the amount back. When she cannot, they propose that the woman should earn the money through prostitution.

□ *Now, are there any cases where marriages genuinely take place, or are they all frauds?*

Yes, sometimes marriage does take place, and in some cases, they may even be successful. It's difficult to say how many or what percentage end up as genuine marriages. The marriage agencies say that a lot of marriages are successful. We have experience only with the ones which have led to the exploitation and brutalisation of women. In these instances, which often involve forced prostitution, the women have no chance of getting out unless

the police make a raid and discover their illegal status. The police ask them if they can give testimony as to who brought them here. Most of the women are very afraid, and don't give this testimony. So they are simply sent back to the country they came from. But when some are ready to testify, the police can bring them to another judge and their testimony before the judge can be used in court cases.

We started with trafficking which involved German sex tourists going to tourist paradises, like Thailand, Manila and Kenya, literally buying women there, bringing them back to Germany and putting them in brothels. Then we discovered this other commerce by marriage agencies. And then a step further was this forced prostitution - women being brought here and put immediately into brothels, sometimes with unbelievable brutality. Three years ago, we had a young girl of sixteen years, from an African country who was brought by a young man and put in a brothel. She was shocked and offered a lot of resistance. Similar things have happened to women of Asian countries. This African woman kept crying, and was not willing to prostitute herself. So, she was subjected to a lot of violence. One night, three men violated her the whole night. The next day, she was sick, and was given drugs and alcohol. This made her vomit everything and she was beaten up again. They took away all her clothes and kept her naked, so she could not even run away. She had to serve, everyday, 26 to 30 men. She was in such despair that the clients must have noticed. Her pimp got fed up with her and sold her to another pimp, who was even more cruel. She was saved by a police raid, after which it was discovered that she was there illegally. She gave testimony about all this. This happened about three years ago.

So she became one of the witnesses. Did your organisation help her?

Yes. The police did not know that we were willing to accompany her, to give her shelter, to give her a livelihood and other support. We brought her to a school to learn German. Previously, the women we had helped had come through marriage agencies and sex tourism. We only knew about this whole tragic event after the police asked for our assistance. Through my research, however, I have learned of many other sad cases. I have obtained inside documentation regarding the police records in thirty-three cases of trafficking. In each of these cases, there had been more than one woman victim. For instance, in a nearby town, the police were aware of one woman who was unwilling to prostitute herself and so was confined in a cellar. She was somehow able to free herself and run into the street and cry for help. She was brought to the police station, and it was revealed that she was a victim of human trafficking. She told them where she had been held captive and about other such places. This made the police think there must be several criminals behind this. They built up a working group of five policemen, and conducted extensive raids. They discovered other women, who in turn told them about more cases. This period of search went on for two or three years.

This one case led to three years of raids?

Yes. In this case, there was one man who was involved in trafficking three hundred African women. Bear in mind that the police were able to file only thirty-three cases in all. Yet, from these thirty three cases, only fifteen accusations could be formulated.

In the other cases, prosecution had to be closed. Out of these fifteen, only five went to court, and only one criminal was sentenced to more than two years. Why is it that only so few were sentenced? The reason was that the women testifying were being sent back to their home countries, and so there were no witnesses or testimonies. That is why we said the women must be allowed to stay in Germany to testify, and we must work to protect them. To give you another example, in 1998, we accompanied eight testifying victims of human trafficking to court, and there were thirty-one convictions. This illustrates that when the women stay here, it makes a big difference.

What is your estimate of the number of women being brought to Germany per year?

The UN says about four million women and children are trafficked worldwide per annum. But this is only an estimate. Trafficking brings the

criminals about seven billion US Dollars. Yesterday, I was opening a new counselling center in Hanover, and recent figures there indicate about four hundred projects of prostitution - that means brothels, contact houses, or mobile cars. They say that in one area there are fifteen houses that earn fourteen million marks in one year. The woman pays for the room, which ranges from 250-300 DM per day.

On average, what do these women earn?

That depends on her practice. She has to serve between five and twenty clients daily. She has to pay three hundred marks to the brothel owner, and in addition she has to buy her food, liquor, cosmetics, hygienic articles. Importantly, she is not allowed to buy things outside at regular prices. Instead she must pay 2.50 marks for a Coke, like in a restaurant, when it would only be 90 cents at a store. Therefore these women not only have difficulty saving money, but also fall easily into debt. They can just barely survive.

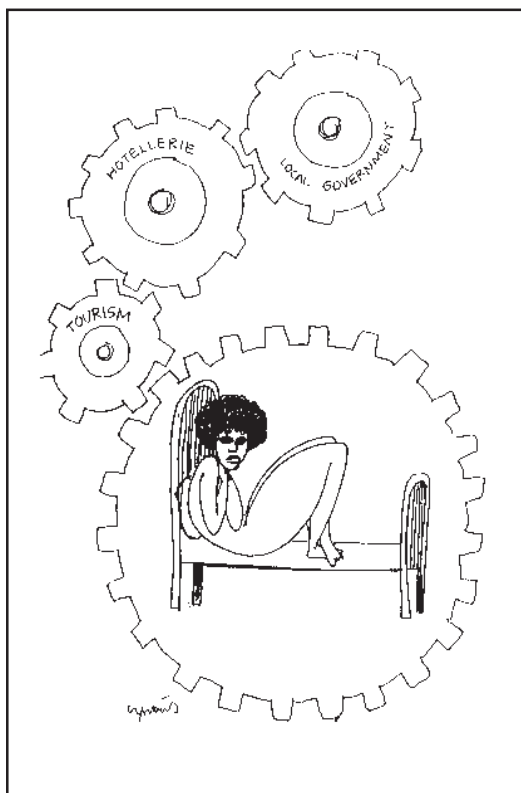
Are there any women who manage to save money, and after, say, five years, leave the profession?

I have never heard of it. It's very difficult. There is always hope I suppose. These women also risk death by disease. They are very vulnerable.

As the German police are known for their efficiency, how can so many brothels run without their knowledge?

They know about it, but prostitution is legal in some places and not in others. In some cities there are restricted areas and in others it is permitted everywhere.

So the difference is that they are allowed to arrest those who have been brought illegally and forcibly, not those who are there willingly?



Yes. Some are here willingly because they were told that they would earn more money here than they did as prostitutes in their home countries. Or they are so desperate that they don't see any other solution. But, they are not permitted. When they work as prostitutes in Germany, they criminalise themselves not because they are in prostitution but because they are here illegally. The authorities were going to recognise prostitution as a profession, so women would have to pay taxes and have social security. You see, prostitution is allowed in Germany but it is not a recognised profession. You do not receive a green card if you are a prostitute. Now there is discussion about whether or not to allow prostitution as a profession, but if it is allowed, finding the victims of trafficking would become more difficult. Every day, one million men go to prostitutes in Germany alone. The prostitutes are seen as outcasts but not the men!

□ *So why not let the clients pay a tax every time they go to a brothel, which then goes towards the social welfare of the prostitutes ?*

That's an excellent solution, but the Swedish government adopted another solution. They say there is no market if there are no clients. That's why they say we will not look at the women, but we will deal with the clients. A man who asks for services of this kind has to pay. A new law has been passed in Sweden which punishes the client. It's very innovative. It takes away some of the stigma on women. If women wear tight clothes, people say she forced the man to violate her; if the woman is clothed decently, they say she was making a pass with her eyes. They are always wrong. So I find it marvellous that in Sweden, they say it's only the men who should be punished.

□ *In many countries we find that the police are often actively involved in the prostitution rackets. Is this the case in Germany?*

I don't know. But in 1993, we had a case with twenty people from the government involved, including police and immigration officers. We are very careful with the police as well. We don't tell them where we have kept the girls. The problem is that without the police, the women often can't get in touch with any organisation. The police make raids. And whoever does not have papers, they take away.

□ *And what if someone does have papers, but is being abused, then the police do not do anything?*

Police have also brought German women to us.

So whoever says they want to be rescued, are taken out?

It is hard work to make the police sensitive to these problems. So most of the time, they just want to take them to prison and then send them back to their countries. Its hard work to persuade the police to let us help these women. Sometimes they help, sometimes they don't.

□ *Then it depends on the individual police officer? You can't convince the central government that it should be compulsory for the police to inform you?*

We are working on that. But as far as I am informed by my colleagues, if they cooperate well with police, then they get good information. And then it just depends on the individual policeman. If he is a good man, then he does his best. If he is not interested, or if he has too much work, then he won't bother. Because this adds to his work, even though reporting is easy and quick.

□ *Are there any cases where the police are involved themselves?*

Yes, and sometimes the army as well. We have heard that someone

in the army has organised for women of Eastern Europe to come to Germany to join illegal prostitution. We have just received this information. In addition, the embassies are often involved, from the women's home countries, especially in Eastern Europe, Ghana and Nigeria. Therefore, it is very difficult to organise a passport for these women. You don't know if you can trust the embassy employees. Maybe they are involved. For example, it happened in the Romanian embassy. The staff of the Romanian embassy helped these women get passports to bring them for prostitution.

□ *You are taking these cases to court, and you are providing shelter for these women. What is the duration of the court case normally ?*

Normally two to four months. Sometimes those convicted do appeal and it takes longer. At the moment, we are looking after forty-eight women testifying in court. That's a very high figure. About two hundred pimps would be involved with forty-eight women.

□ *In most of these cases, do women want to go back to their home countries?*

No, most of the time they feel very insecure going back to their countries because they have testified against these men. Some are in a bad situation. Last week I saw some women from Ukraine, and I was very interested to learn from them what we could do for women who would like to go back. That was very difficult, because they were very desperate and without hope. In the Ukraine, if they go out and buy a sewing machine, the state will be there, and ask for 80 percent of everything. If she has a bit of land, she cannot make a living from it. I feel the situation there is much more depressive than in Africa or Asia For

those women who want to go home, we can help them because we have a network in their home countries, like church congregations or NGOs. They help with the reintegration project.

When someone wants to remain in Germany, can you help them?

There are few cases where we have been successful. In most of these cases, it is useless even to try. The women have to go back. Then we are happy to offer them help reintegrating in their own country.

Do you feel that a good number of them really will be reintegrated? Or will they end up as victims again elsewhere? What is your assessment of their futures ?

It depends very much on the organisation that works with her in her home country. If they have a good organisation there, the woman has a chance. If the follow-up is poor, then they have no chance. There are some women who do not learn anything, who are not very courageous, or are very damaged.

In the few cases in which the pimps were sentenced, did the court also give the women some compensation money?

No, that is something we tried, but until now, no money has been given. Behind it is the thinking that women knew they were bound for prostitution and accepted it. We knew one lady who tried escaping and managed to come out. Now she is going to school, and is very sincere in her desire to learn. She testified and we were able to get the men punished, but we weren't able to get compensation for her. The state prosecutor said she was only there for one month, and since that was not a very long time, she did not require compensation. The judge agreed with this! It is rare for us to even secure money to cover our expenses, let alone compensation for the woman. One



time in Bonn, I made a raid, and found 200,000 DM in the wall of the bathroom. But then the police had to prove that the money belonged to one of the prostitutes, and they weren't able to do that. The pimp claimed it was from his grandmother and was allowed to keep the money.

Why not institute a law that says that for every month of damage, the perpetrator must pay a given amount. You don't have anything like that?

No. We have something for victims of the state, but not for victims of individual action.

Do you see yourself campaigning for such legislation? Where even private persons are made to pay?

Of course, we would like for at least part of the funds recovered in a raid to be awarded to the victim.

How do you rehabilitate the women? What are the problems they face ?

I don't like the word 'rehabilitate' because we try to help them provide skills with which they can orient themselves to another profession. But they are very damaged. First, the woman has no faith in anyone.

Second, she cannot face any stress or tension. She runs away. One woman told me that when other women in the hospital accuse her of not washing her pots or something, she thinks these women are against her. And she runs away. She says, "everyone always thinks I am in the wrong, everyone always blames me." But we have no money to get her the therapy she needs. When she tried to commit suicide, she did it in such a way that she was noticed. It was a cry for help. That's why, we must stay with her, but we can't take responsibility for looking after her all the time. We can try to prolong her life, try to help, but the doctor believes that one day her suicide attempt will succeed. I want her to accept our help. She killed one man who abused her, and so people are afraid of her violence and rage. She is very young, merely seventeen years old. She, and others like her, don't trust anyone, act aggressively, don't trust one another. They need to have a structured life. They are incapable of organising their own day and so on.

What is their background? What kinds of families are these women coming from?

From all types. Most of them come from very poor families. Some even come from good families. It is hard to believe, but it happens mostly when the father has abused her. I have seen that almost all the women who end up in prostitution were victims of child abuse. They accept prostitution more easily if they have been subjected to abuse when they were young. This is a greater factor than any economic one.

□ *On average, what age are the women you find at these brothels?*

They are different ages. From children up to forty. I have seen children of ten, eight and six years old. We try to inform the Youth Office, but often it is useless. I would say that it is the individual people rather than institutions that I find useful.

□ *Once the prostitutes are brought to you by the police, what is the exact process involved?*

Social workers in the women's shelter houses or other organisations to which the women go for help call us, and ask for advice, as many organisations don't know how to handle these illegal immigrants. They don't know about the rules and laws. The target group of our project is people from developing countries.

□ *How common is physical abuse of these women?*

It seems very common. These women have been abused in childhood, and have self-destructive behaviour. They abuse themselves as well. Sometimes these women are put in a freezer, then beaten severely. Also they are deprived of food. There are other things, like perverse forms of sex. One woman said, one day she encountered a group of men, and was forced to have sex with three men. It was filmed. Then they put a bottle up her vagina, and it stuck inside of her. So they broke it, cutting

her up badly. Then she was forced to crawl like a dog, and was put into a bath, and was urinated on. Yet, she survived.

□ *Was she taken to the hospital for treatment?*

No.

□ *Even in her condition, she had to service men?*

Then she would have been sold to another. It's slavery. It has nothing to do with sex; it has to do with violence and power.

□ *Do any of the women that you rescue from brothels manage to build a better life for themselves?*

Well, first of all, a lot of the women that we help through the reintegration project are not from prostitution but from bad marriages. They had been married in Germany with German husbands, and so when the marriage went very bad for them, they saw no future in Germany, and had to return.

□ *What does a 'very bad marriage' mean?*

Wives who are beaten by their husbands, and often treated as slaves. There was one woman who came from India. She was educated, and was married to a German academic. He was absolutely perverse. He wouldn't give her clothes to wear in the house. He urinated over her. It was unbelievable. It was a marriage with a lot of abuse. We found her in the hospital. She was just 40 kilos. She was ready to die. Someone at the clinic knew me, and phoned me. She was undernourished. She lost her child. He had deprived her of food. We couldn't even file a case, since legally, she was his wife. We had to file a case so that she could stay and finish her studies.

□ *Why did she not try to run away?*

She did not know where to go. She had no knowledge of any people outside. She was educated, but had

no money, and no knowledge of German. At one time she thought of going back to India. Her parents had died before her marriage, and her brother was looking after her. He told her that she couldn't marry this man, and subsequently disowned her when she did. In the beginning, this German man had been very nice and well behaved; so she thought she would have a good future with him. It was only when she came to Germany that her misery started.

□ *And is she still here?*

Yes, she is, and doing better.]

□ *These women who come for marriages, are they always very poor? Uneducated? Or are they also educated women who fall in this trap?*

Maybe they are educated but they don't find a job in their country. Or their job does not pay enough. For example, a lot of people from the Philippines have a college degree but then they decide to go to Bahrain or somewhere to be a cleaning lady as they can earn more money. Currently, we have ten women out of eighty-six who have A level and perhaps a university degree. Women from Thailand normally only have four years of school. A lot of women already have children back home, and they have to support them.

□ *So why do they get married here?*

They are hoping that their husbands will give them money to support their families. Sometimes they write it in their contract.

□ *What kind of men order these wives? What kind of money goes into it? How much does a man pay to get a wife?*

Five or six thousand German marks. They don't always pay though. Sometimes they go to another country and find a woman there. Or other times, the woman has to pay to leave her country. I was

told by a woman from Thailand that she is in debt from flying to Germany, to the amount of 3,000 DM. She arrived in Germany and found herself in prostitution, when she thought she had come for work. So she fled, and went to a cousin in Germany, who told her not to worry, that they would find a German husband for her. He contacted a German man, and she has lived with him for three or four months now. He beat her very badly. The police came. She is now very traumatised, and has to pay back her money! We have decided to help her, but we cannot pay for the debts. We can only give her some money or a little loan for starting a business.



illegally to leave, we are not the authority. But we can explain the situation to them, and many times, we can help them stay for a few months anyway. Sometimes we have a woman from a country with which we have no contacts, and so we need some time to arrange help for her. We tell this to the authorities, and very often they agree.

Do you work with any organisations from India ?

Not yet. We knew some Indian women in this situation, but none have returned. We had one woman who came from Berlin. She was Tamil, and was married to a man who was very ill. She had to work like a slave, and she had to

We have a special project right now, with special means, and we can give them loans to start their own business. Or we can give them scholarships so they can get training. We can pay their money for the flight. For example, there is a woman coming to us who has to leave Germany, and she has no money for the flight, but does not want to be deported as she would never be able to travel again. Very often we have to talk to the authorities and say we know this woman, and we will organise her transfer back, so please be quiet; let her get out without a deportation stamp.

Have you had many successes with reintegration projects?

It's been difficult, but we have had some success. Normally we keep in contact with the women for three or four years.

What sorts of businesses do these women start?

A communication center with telephone, fax, email and so on. Some

have opted for little stores and washing centres. In one case, a woman bought a car to run a taxi service.

We try to help all those women who have been living illegally in Germany looking for jobs. Sometimes they have to work in prostitution, but very often they worked as cleaning women and so on.

What's the problem with working as cleaning women? Why would they need your help?

Because that is not legal. They are staying with friends, and have to move around, sometimes they get pregnant, and then they have babies, but they do not earn enough money. They get sick.

When the authorities know that you are also helping illegal migrants, aren't they angry with you?

We've never asked them about that. We are taking up the fight for legal status for the women. We can't force a woman who is staying here

take care of him. He was an Indian as well. She was beaten by the family, and was forced to go to bed with other men who visited her family. In the end she was taken back to India by her family. She had been sent to Germany to be married to this man.

Out of the eighty-six present cases, how many want to go back to their home countries?

All of them have to go back because they are all illegal and the police knew about them. Some of them do want to go back. Sometimes they want to go back because they feel they can't integrate into this society. Especially women from Africa. They say they want to stay here and earn some money, but Germany is not the country they want to stay in for a long time.

What is the attitude of your church towards the work that you do?

Very positive. We have in all thirty-one people working with us. Some are full-time, some are half-time. Twelve come out of various religious congregations; one of them is from

the Protestant Church. There was once a Muslim woman who wanted to work with us, and I would have liked that. But she was very fundamentalist, and wore the veil, and so we could not integrate her in our work.

□ *Does your work involve initiating them into religion as well?*

No. I am a Catholic nun. So I believe in Jesus Christ. He became human to show us how to live like human beings. We try to show the women how to live like human beings. I think it's very challenging to change things.

I feel I receive a lot of protection from God because I help marginalised women. One day, in Mombasa, I met a woman who told me of her misery. She told me that her life was so bad that she had been planning to kill herself that day. If she hadn't met me, she said, she would have committed suicide. I have often had these experiences. I don't think I can get rid of all the evil in the world, but I can help. I feel very protected. I am often in dangerous situations, but I don't feel in danger.

□ *Who runs the shelter homes?*

Social workers. We have special projects. We have a colleague who is responsible for a project especially for women from Eastern Europe since she speaks Russian and Polish. She specially advises these women. Two or three colleagues are responsible for providing support to witnesses. They work through shelters but also do other counselling services. Our shelters have places for six or seven women, and most of them are victims of prostitution.

□ *So since you have five shelters, you have on average thirty or forty women to care for at a time?*

Actually, more. We have other cases as well. We also take care of women who are staying in other normal shelters. So in fact we have many more women. Fifty or sixty I would say. We feel responsible for the children as well as the women.

□ *And so some are promised marriage. A second kind is promised a job, and so the family says go. And the third kind come as prostitutes.*

Four hundred and sixty-eight women asked for help last year. Out of all the problems that women had, 190 had problems with their residence. They had no papers, or had illegal papers, or sometimes some had been in prison. In about hundred cases, there were problems with their German husbands. In seventy, there was violence in the partnership. In fifty cases there were instances of trafficking.

□ *What made you decide to make this particular work your first priority? A lot of Catholics are in education or hospitals.*

My motivations are profoundly religious. I believe that God is the creator of all men and women. So we can say he is our parent, our mother. And when you ask a normal human mother or father about the dreams

they have about the lives of their children, they will say, I dream that they grow up very well, and are successful in life. Parents always dream about their children. I would like to be very near the heart of God. I feel attracted very closely to God, and then I think I will do everything so his plans for humans can be realised.

□ *So then why did God make all this misery?*

I don't think that God made misery. I think he gave us free will, and that made for a lot of misery.

□ *But kids who are sexually abused as little children had no free will. They are then trained to become victims if they are abused as children. So they have no choice. I can't understand the methods of God, to tell you the truth. Looking at the world, it is hard to believe that God is very nice or sensible. If I met him I would punch him in the nose. I feel so angry with the kind of world he has created.*

I believe that evil is in the world, and I am with God if I fight evil.

Why couldn't God fight against evil? Why leave poor human beings to fight against it?

He left us free to choose. □

Gandhi and Women

by
Madhu Kishwar

Manushi Prakashan, 1986

An essay on Mahatma Gandhi's lifelong involvement with women's issues, and his drawing of women into the freedom movement

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