

IIMA and VIDES for the reintegration of girl victims of trafficking, prostitution, and early marriages

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Thank you, Madame Moderator.

Today, I would like to share with you **two of the Good Practices of IIMA and VIDES** in the field of child rights' promotion in Benin and in India. I have the privilege to work directly with both IIMA - *Istituto Internazionale Maria Ausiliatrice* and VIDES International. Our successful methodology relies on the so-called "positive denounce". We want to show how victims of violation became the main actors of a social change for them and their communities.

IIMA and VIDES work with and for various categories of children in street situations. All of them are at risk or are victims of abuse, exploitation, or other worst forms of violence such as domestic servitude, prostitution or sex trafficking.

Reintegration of the Vidomegon Girls in Cotonou, Benin

Firstly, I would like to present to you a best practice carried out by IIMA and VIDES for the rehabilitation and reintegration of Vidomegon Girls in Cotonou, Benin.

In 2013, the Government of Benin reported that around 5,000 children, and that included 3,776 girls, were working in the Cotonou Market alone at Dantokpa. 10.5% of them were either sexually abused or intimidated, or emotionally and materially exploited. In fact, until today, the vidomegon girls are the easy victims of "informal" prostitution.

Vidomegon, is a common social practice, in Benin and elsewhere in Africa, whereby a child, usually a daughter of poor, rural families, is sold or sent to live, as a servant with a wealthier family. Today, however, the practice is exploited by criminal organizations which go from village to village to collect children, mostly from ages 3 to 15, to sell them to others or to other nations. Benin has become the major supplier of illicit child labor or forced child slavery.

IIMA having seen the plight of the vidomegon girls in the Dantokpa market, established in **2001** the "**SOS Vidomégon (Baraque) Center**", located at the very heart of the Dantokpa market. The Center aims to protect and to promote the vidomegon girls who are economically neglected, physically and psychologically abused. It is actually the first stage of the process of reintegration of these girls in street situations. The Center offers them literacy classes, a basic training on income generating projects, a place to rest and relax, and a home where love, care, and support are experienced. More and more girls come to the Center. From 2001 to date, it has already welcomed around 3,119 vidomegon girls.

Likewise, the Center coordinates the **patrol activities undertaken every week by around 15 professional social workers to reach out to the children living and working in this market.**

After the identification process, a multidisciplinary team provides psychosocial support to **strengthen the girls' resilience and to start the family reunification procedure where possible.**

Meanwhile, IIMA and their collaborators reach out to the “*tutrice*” or the “buyer-owner” of the girls so as to raise their awareness about the conditions of the vidomegon and their human rights. This marks the start of an educative collaboration with them. The girls are then allowed to attend the literacy classes and economic training held every afternoon at the SOS Center. In 2017 around 555 working girls have participated in the literacy program.

In **2008, IIMA opened a dormitory** near the market area to provide a safe place for the night and access to drinking water to many of the vidomegon girls who usually spend the night in the market and are frequently subjected to sexual abuse. Since its opening, the dormitory has hosted more than 6,002 young women.

Additionally, IIMA got the license to operate the “**Foyer Laura Vicuña**” in **2001** for sexually abused girls and the “**Maison du Soleil**” in 2011 for pregnant girls in street situation. Both Centers are duly accredited by the Ministry of the Interior and by the Ministry of the Family. We work in close collaboration with these two ministries.

The “**Foyer Laura Vicuña**” is a **rehabilitation shelter for physically and sexually abused girls, mainly vidomegon girls in street situations**. Here they are provided with their basic needs, such as food, psychological and medical assistance. A Vital part of the rehabilitation process is the **school reinsertion program**. They are enrolled in a school or in a vocational training Center. Then after a thorough personal social survey, **a meeting with their families or communities of origin are organized**. So far the Foyer has welcomed more than 4000 girls since its establishment.

The other long-term shelter is the “**Maison du Soleil**”, which provide specialized protection and care to girls who become pregnant due to rape. **Every year around 10 young mothers and their babies are reintegrated within their families and are enrolled in the school or vocational training institutions**.

For IIMA and VIDES the key to the social rehabilitation and reintegration of these exploited girls in street situations is education.

So in **2004** IIMA with the support of VIDES opened an **Alternative School** which is accredited by the Government and caters only to working children in street situations. It provides a primary education diploma thanks to an accelerated three-year program. This school offers a **holistic education and includes birth registration, family sensitization, an individual plan to continue with studies or to enter into the job market**.

Four years later, in 2008: IIMA opened the “**Maison de l'Esperance**”, a professional training center and dormitory for girls in street situations, situated just 5 minutes away from the market. Here the young girls receive the essential cooking and baking skills as well as a cosmetology course. **The training is followed by an internship program in local firms, restaurants, bars, and shops.**

To better protect minors in street situations the Salesian sisters cooperate with the Central Office for the Protection of Minors (OCPM). In 2016 IIMA and VIDES implemented a project for the **capacity**

building of police staff and social workers of the OCPM with the aim of rendering the best service to children.

All these child protection programs and projects are greatly appreciated by the local government and international agencies in as much as the comprehensive approach of IIMA and VIDES guarantee the effective rehabilitation and reintegration of girls in street situations into the mainstream of society. Another important contribution of these programs is the palpable change in the territory due to the communications campaigns which involve local leaders of women and youth groups.

Reintegration of girl victims of child marriage in Tamil Nadu, India

I would like to highlight another best practice of IIMA and VIDES in the Dharmapuri District, in the North Western Corner of Tamil Nadu, India. A district notorious for female infanticide.

IIMA, together with the VIDES volunteers, during its round of visits to many local villages, are often confronted by cases of numerous girls who are severely malnourished, forced to work or to get married at an early age. Education is denied them as roughly 49% of them go to school, while the others work as unpaid servants in families or are forced to work in the fields under abusive conditions.

To address the above challenges IIMA opened a House called **“Home of Hope”** to provide a temporary shelter to around 50 young girls mainly **victims of child marriage**. The Home of Hope offers a safe environment to these girls where they receive counseling from specialists, are accompanied in the respective courts and/or reunited with their parents or are placed in the Government juvenile home. For this project, IIMA has established a broad network with the Social welfare board, all women police station, Child protection officer, and with UNICEF.

Also, local population, sensitised on this issue of child marriage, sustained the project. Taxi drivers use to help us by providing free drive to bring to the House the girls that run away from forced marriages.

All these activities highlight a MULTIPRONGED METHOD which entails a holistic child-rights approach in line with the UN General Comment No 21 (2017) on Children in Street Situation.

What are the key elements that make these two programs Best Practices?

They are as follows:

- a. Early Intervention – Prevention:** through **early childhood education** and the creation of educational facilities adapted to the needs of children in street situations or working children. Prevention is guaranteed by the critical role played by street-based workers in early detection and by investing in their in-depth training on child rights approach.
- b. Holistic and long-term Service provision** for children and young people in street situation which includes birth registration, psycho-social, medical, legal assistance, family mediation, personalized educational or professional path.

- c. **Empowerment of victims as socio-economic actors.** Through the reinforcement of economic and vocational training, it is possible to ensure a better chance of economic independence.
- d. **Formation and capacity building of duty bearers.** States and the private sectors need to collaborate and invest in the in-service training of police staff, judicial, teachers, etc. on child rights and child protection.
- e. **Community sensitization and training, and networking with civil society actors and the UN agencies for children's rights protection.**

Lastly, there is no one-fit-all solution or methodology while working with Children in street situations. The success of every program depends on a deep understanding of the local context, on a personalized approach and support to every child which responds to his/her story, personal desire, and dreams. It is worthwhile remembering that children and youth are the center of the rehabilitation and reintegration processes since they are the main actors of their own life and journey.