

Systemic Change

in the Face of New Vulnerabilities to Human Trafficking

Talitha Kum Study Packet,
a Kit for Prayer and Action

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INTRODUCTION

The Second General Assembly of Talitha Kum (Rome, May 18–24, 2024) gathered more than 150 delegates from 71 countries to mark 15 years of global commitment against human trafficking. Guided by the theme:

“Journeying Together to End Human Trafficking: Transforming Compassion into Action” the Assembly adopted a synodal, bottom-up approach through a process rooted in listening, discernment, and collective responsibility.

This study packet addresses the first priority: **Systemic change in the face of emerging vulnerabilities** (2025–2030).

Talitha Kum’s first priority calls members worldwide to dismantle the **complex systems** that enable human trafficking through social, economic, political, and cultural transformation. Given its presence in more than 100 countries, Talitha Kum is uniquely positioned to connect grassroots realities with international advocacy. Our network witnesses how local vulnerabilities are shaped by global forces and contemporary challenges. Our action reminds us that genuine change cannot occur without a shared willingness to question existing systems and to build together alternatives that are centred on human rights, justice, and equity.

This study packet invites members to deepen their systemic analysis and strengthen coordinated action.

Human trafficking is not only the result of individual criminal acts. It is a structural issue sustained by complex systems - economic systems, social norms, migration policies, armed conflicts, exploitation facilitated by or in the digital environment, gender inequity, and global demand for cheap labor and sexual exploitation. Therefore, addressing trafficking requires **structural transformation**: it requires confronting the root causes of injustice and systemic violence embedded in social, economic, political, and cultural systems. Systemic change means identifying and transforming the structures that perpetuate human trafficking, imagining bold alternatives, and acting collectively to dismantle cycles of vulnerability.

PART I

A. What Is Systemic Change in the Fight Against Human Trafficking?

Systemic change involves sustainable transformation of the systems that enable human trafficking. This requires:

- Identifying root factors that create vulnerability to human trafficking
- Addressing or neutralizing these factors to reduce risk
- Strengthening human rights protections
- Acting upstream to prevent human trafficking before it occurs

For example, when lack of employment fuels vulnerability to human trafficking, systemic prevention includes investing in education, vocational training, and especially economic empowerment of women and girls. By strengthening financial autonomy, access to resources, and decision-making power, communities become agents of their own resilience. This approach moves beyond emergency responses and transforms the structural conditions that allow human trafficking to thrive.

B. Emerging Trends and New Vulnerabilities to Human Trafficking

Human trafficking today evolves within global systems of structural, inequity, deprivation, demand for victims' services, which determine the commodification of human beings. Major and emerging vulnerabilities include:

- Poverty, economic marginalization and lack of social protection
- Migration and forced displacement due to conflicts, disasters, systemic violations or human rights, forms of persecution, and climate change
- Discrimination against women and girls
- Age-based vulnerabilities
- Ethnic, religious, and nationality-based discrimination
- Restrictive laws limiting access to protection and services
- Substance abuse and social exclusion

C. New Forms of Human Trafficking Reflect Systemic Failure

1. Forced Criminality and Cyber Exploitation

Thousands are trafficked into online scam operations, especially in Southeast Asia. Many are migrants, educated, multilingual, and deceived by fraudulent recruitment. They are often punished as criminals rather than recognized as victims.

2. Exploitation in Global Supply Chains and in the [Gig Economy](#)

Trafficking is embedded in sectors such as agriculture, construction, the garment sector, domestic work, fishing, food delivery and electronics manufacturing. Debt bondage, wage theft, and document confiscation persist within global production systems.

3. Armed Conflicts, Displacement, and Climate Change

Armed conflicts, internal and transnational displacement, droughts, and environmental degradation caused by climate change increase vulnerability to human trafficking. Women and girls are disproportionately affected.

4. The Prostitution System and Gender Inequity

The global prostitution system reflects structural discrimination, male demand, economic inequity, militarization, racial injustice, and colonial legacies. Marginalized and displaced women are particularly targeted.

Understanding how different structures and systems intersect with traffickers and victims is essential for developing a strategic and systemic response to human trafficking.

D. The Role of Advocacy in Systemic Change Against Human Trafficking

Systemic change against human trafficking cannot occur without strong advocacy.

Advocacy:

- Brings field realities of human trafficking to the attention of policymakers
- Identifies gaps in laws and protection systems
- Promotes legal and structural reform
- Amplifies the voices of victims and survivors of human trafficking
- Encourages collaborative action across civil society organizations

Advocacy is a key tool for strengthening protection in both the short and long term. Actors involved in supporting survivors witness the flaws in the system and the obstacles that hinder their rehabilitation. By reporting these concrete experiences to the authorities, it becomes possible to highlight the shortcomings of existing laws and policies and to encourage meaningful reforms.

In addition, by amplifying the voices of survivors of human trafficking and relaying their stories, advocacy becomes a powerful tool for social and legal transformation. In this way, advocacy contributes to lasting systemic change, where compassion is translated into concrete action to eradicate human trafficking.

Advocacy can be promoted through tools that include media campaigns, academic and awareness raising events, studies, research and policy briefs, submissions, and lobbying. These activities aim to directly influence decision-makers and policies to bring about lasting structural change. Advocacy is often most effective when it is conducted collaboratively, involving various stakeholders such as civil society organizations and affected communities.

In global networks such as Talitha Kum, solidarity and mutual support make it possible to give a voice to the victims and survivors, but also to the people who help them, who often cannot express themselves freely in their own community/country, particularly where local actors face risks or retaliations.

Through coordinated campaigns, research, policy submissions, and engagement with decision-makers, advocacy transforms compassion into structural reform aimed at eradicating human trafficking. A strategic response must be intersectional, transnational, and collaborative.

PART II

A. Biblical and Catholic Foundations for Structural Justice

Faith calls believers not only to compassion, but to transformation.

Scripture: Courage That Challenges Systems

Esther – Reforming Unjust Laws

(Esther 4–8)

Esther risks her life to challenge a genocidal decree and works strategically to reverse unjust legislation.

Lesson: Access to power must serve justice. Silence sustains oppression. Laws can and must be reformed.

Joseph – Ethical Governance in Crisis

(Genesis 41; 47)

Joseph designs economic policies that prevent famine-related catastrophe. Yet his crisis management also centralizes power, raising ethical questions.

Lesson: Economic systems shape vulnerability. Leadership must prioritize dignity over control.

Mary Magdalene – Women as Agents of Transformation

(Luke 8; John 20)

Liberated by Christ, Mary Magdalene becomes the first witness of the Resurrection, highlighting the transformative role of women in the Gospel narrative.

Lesson: The Gospel dismantles exclusion. Women are central to mission and systemic renewal.

Paul – Unity Across Divisions

(1 Corinthians 12; Acts 16)

Paul proclaims equality beyond ethnic, cultural, and social divisions.

Lesson: Structural change requires unity across boundaries and shared responsibility for the common good.

B. Catholic Social Teaching

Fratelli Tutti

Denounces modern slavery and human trafficking as consequences of profit-driven systems rooted in indifference. Calls for fraternity and global solidarity.

1. Issues 24 and 25: Pope Francis denounced the many forms of exploitation, including modern slavery, human trafficking, and organ trafficking. He emphasized that these realities are consequences of economic and social systems that promote indifference and marginalization.
2. Issue 168: Francis denounced a profit-driven economy that marginalizes the poorest and ignores human dignity

3. Number 18-21: These sections highlighted the "global marginalization" caused by economic policies that favor growth at the expense of integral human development.
4. Number 123-127: These passages addressed global inequalities and call for international solidarity to reduce the gap between rich and poor.

Laudato Si'

This encyclical linked environmental destruction to poverty, displacement, and vulnerability. Calls for an ethical economic paradigm. Pope Francis criticized the excesses of the market economy and calls for a more humane and solidarity-based approach.

1. Issue 48: Pope Francis emphasized that the poor disproportionately suffer the impacts of environmental degradation, due to inequitable economic systems.
2. Issue 139: Francis called for a radical change in economic and political systems, so that they include an ethical dimension and real solidarity with the poorest.
3. Number 109: Francis pointed to the negative impacts of a profit-centered economy, which neglects the needs of the most vulnerable.
4. Issue 189: The Pope called for a paradigm shift, with an emphasis on an economy that respects human dignity and the environment.

Dignitas Infinita

Affirms human trafficking as a grave violation of infinite human dignity and demands reform of unjust systems.

1. Criticism of unjust economic systems: The text points out that current economic structures promote inequalities and marginalize the most vulnerable.
2. Call for social reform: The document emphasizes the need to transform social structures so that they are inclusive and respectful of human dignity.
3. International solidarity: Francis calls for global cooperation to reduce the gaps between rich and poor. "Solidarity between nations is essential to overcome the systemic injustices that affect the poorest."

Document on Human Fraternity (2019)

Promotes interreligious solidarity and collective responsibility for protecting vulnerable populations.

1. Critique of social injustices: The document highlights the social injustices, corruption, and inequalities that marginalize the most vulnerable. It calls for collective action to overcome these obstacles.
2. Condemnation of wars and persecutions: It denounces systems that generate conflict, destruction and suffering for the poorest populations.
3. Call for global solidarity: The document calls on nations and individuals to work together to build a more just and equitable society.

Papal messages for the World Day of Prayer Against Trafficking insist that the fight against trafficking must address root causes — unjust economic models, discrimination, and relational systems based on domination.

1. Message for the World Day of Prayer and Awareness against Trafficking in Persons (2024): Pope Francis emphasized that the fight against human trafficking required addressing its root causes, including the social and economic systems that exploit the most vulnerable. He stated, "We know that the fight against trafficking can be won, but it is necessary to get to the root of the problem and eliminate its causes."
2. Video message for the World Day of Prayer against Trafficking in Persons (2022): Francis denounced economic and social models that perpetuate the exploitation of women and girls, and calls for a transformation of relationships based on discrimination. "The thousands of women and girls trafficked each year show the dramatic consequences of relationship models based on discrimination and submission."
3. Message for the World Day of Prayer and Awareness against Trafficking in Persons (2024): The Pope emphasized the importance of recognizing the dignity of every person and confronting systems that promote exploitation. "Saint Bakhita encourages us to open our eyes and ears to see those who are invisible and hear those who have no voice."

PART III

Discussion Guide: Process for Discernment and Action

Pray – Listen – Reflect – Judge – Act

This process may be adapted according to the needs of your group. You are welcome to use the following process. Participants are encouraged to read Part 1 & 2 and at least one of the reference resources before gathering. Move through each step slowly, allowing time for silence, sharing, and collective discernment.

1. PRAY

Prayer for Discernment under the Holy Spirit

*Lord, source of light and justice,
 We turn to You, seeking discernment under Your Holy Spirit.
 Open our eyes to invisible realities,
 to the injustices that shatter lives,
 to the systems that trap the most vulnerable in exploitation.
 Give us hearts that feel the pain of victims and survivors of human trafficking.
 Grant us wisdom to recognize the deep roots of the evil that binds them.
 Free us from fear and powerlessness in the face of this complexity.
 Spirit of truth, enlighten our reflection.
 Spirit of courage, strengthen our commitment.
 May our prayer become justice.
 May our faith become action.
 Through Saint Josephine Bakhita, guide us in hope.
 Amen.*

2. LISTEN

Listening to Reality and to One Another

This stage invites deep listening — without judgment — to lived experience and context.

- How can we listen attentively to the experiences of survivors, recognize emerging vulnerabilities, understand the impacts on women, children, migrants and marginalized and become aware of areas of silence, fear, or stigma?

Listening includes: Listening to survivors, communities, social realities and to the signs of the times.

This step allows reality to speak before we analyze it.

3. REFLECT

Understanding Systems and Root Factors

In this phase, we move from experience to deeper analysis.

- What do social, economic, political, cultural, and digital systems along with poverty, unemployment, lack of education, migration laws, global supply chains, demand for cheap labor or sexual exploitation, and climate change, increase vulnerability and allow trafficking to continue?

Reflect also on the international dimension:

- How do global economic systems influence local realities?
- How do international conflicts or policies affect migration and human trafficking flows?

Reflection means naming structures, not only individual crimes.

4. JUDGE

Discern in the Light of Faith and Catholic Social Teaching

Now we interpret reality through Scripture and Church teaching.

- What does Esther teach us about courage within systems of power?
- How does Joseph's governance during famine illuminate responsibility in crisis?
- How does Paul's vision of unity call us beyond divisions of nationality, class, or status?

From Catholic Social Teaching:

- How does Fratelli Tutti challenge profit-driven systems that marginalize the poor?
- How does Laudato Si' connect environmental injustice with social exploitation?
- How does Dignitas Infinita affirm the dignity of those trafficked?
- How does the call to fraternity challenge discrimination and exclusion?

Discern:

- What is unjust?
- What contradicts human dignity?
- Where is the Spirit inviting transformation?

This step brings moral clarity and prophetic insight.

5. ACT

Commit to Concrete and Systemic Transformation

Discernment leads to action.

A. Advocacy and Structural Reform

- How can we promote legal reforms, strengthen advocacy, improve protection for migrants, refugees, and displaced persons, and reduce the root causes of demand to effectively combat human trafficking and exploitation?

B. Prevention and Empowerment

- How can we promote women's economic autonomy, empower youth and local communities, support safe migration and address climate change-related vulnerabilities to prevent human trafficking?

C. Digital and Emerging Risks

- How can we raise awareness about online trafficking and promote digital safety, and cybersecurity, especially for young people?

D. Network and Partnership

- What synergies are we called to strengthen within the Talitha Kum network?
- Which partners—Church actors, civil society organizations, UN mechanisms, and local authorities—can we engage to strengthen advocacy and systemic transformation?

Collective Commitment Exercise

As a group, construct a statement beginning with:

We denounce...

We call for...

We are committed to...

Relate your statement to the first priority of Talitha Kum (2025–2030) - Annex
Share your commitment with Talitha Kum International.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

*Lord, in this challenging time,
You call us to let ourselves be transformed
by active compassion towards our brothers and sisters
who bend under the weight of unjust, dehumanizing systems.
Give us a heart of solidarity so that we can work together
for adequate changes that will break their unjust chains.
Makes our hearts sensitive to the victims of our world's new vulnerabilities
and give us strength, courage and determination
to build bridges for a more just and fraternal world.
Amen.*

RESOURCES

International Reports and Advocacy Resources

- Alsalem, Reem. *Prostitution and Violence against Women and Girls: Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls, Its Causes and Consequences*. United Nations Human Rights Council, 7 May 2024. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/48>
- Bhoola, Urmila. *Visit to Togo: Report of the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery including its causes and consequences*. United Nations Human Rights Council, 6 August 2020. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/45/8/Add.1>
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- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Emergency Handbook*. Available at: <https://emergency.unhcr.org>
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Biblical References

Esther 4:13–16; 5:1–2; 7:3–6; 8:5–8
Genesis 41:47–57; 47:13–26
Luke 8:1–3
John 20:11–18
1 Corinthians 12:12–13
Acts 16:9–10

Catholic Social Teaching

- Pope Francis. *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Encyclical Letter). Vatican Press, 2020. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html
- Pope Francis. *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Encyclical Letter). Vatican Press, 2015. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html
- Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith. *Declaration "Dignitas Infinita" on Human Dignity*. Vatican Press, 2024. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddd_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html
- Pope Francis & the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmad Al-Tayyeb. *A Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together*. Vatican Press, 2019. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html
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ANNEX

Three priorities emerged from the emerging realities calling on all Talitha Kum members to commit to our next three priorities for 2025-2030:

1. Systemic change in response to emerging vulnerabilities
2. Holistic and survivor-centred approach
3. Expand collaboration and partnerships

This discussion paper addresses the first priority: Systemic change in the face of emerging vulnerabilities. Excerpt from the [official statement of May 2024](#) regarding priority 1:

"The complex systems that enable human trafficking must be dismantled through concrete measures of social, economic, cultural and political transformation. We denounce the many factors that cause people to be trapped in modern forms of slavery: discrimination and violence against women and minorities, exploitation of vulnerable people, especially children, patriarchal systems, internal displacement, forced migration, terrorism, conflicts and wars, unfettered market capitalism, corruption, racism, organized crime, inadequate immigration laws and inconsistent law enforcement. These realities challenge us and that is why we are committed to:

- Empower women, children and youth to access more just and equitable societies;
- Adopt effective strategies to reduce demand at the root of the trafficking of people, including through the education of boys and men and the promotion of regular migration routes;
- Advocate for the prosecution of traffickers and for effective policy and legal changes for at-risk populations, including migrants, refugees and displaced persons;
- Address the push and pull factors for migration and displacement, advocating for the protection and integration of people on the move;
- Expose the risks of online trafficking and social media by raising awareness among young people and their families and promoting cybersecurity."