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Women Trafficking from West Africa to Europe: Cultural Dimensions and Strategies

This article intends to give a general overview of the problem of trafficking of women from West Africa, principally from Nigeria, for prostitution in Italy. It shall briefly explain some of the social, economic and cultural dynamics of trafficking, as well as its psychological and social effects. It shall also examine the development of the phenomenon of trafficking and present a variety of social activities carried out by Italian governmental and non-governmental agencies to assist victims of trafficking.

TRAFFICKING IN ITALY

Trafficking of persons in Italy involves minors, workers and young women. Minors are exploited in various illegal activities, which include begging, stealing and illegal international adoptions, and there are fears that they may also be involved in pornographic activities and in the trade of organs, etc. Workers are exploited in jobs where they are forced to work in sub-human conditions and are employed in criminal activities. Women and young girls are exploited in prostitution.

It is estimated that there are between 25.000 and 75.000 women and children sold into prostitution in Italy. The main country of origin of the girls sold for prostitution is Nigeria (although Kenya, Ghana and Ivory Coast appear sporadically as well) and the number of Nigerian women continues to grow. Nigerian victims constitute more than 65 percent of victims trafficked into prostitution in Italy. Of that number, more than 85 percent are from the Edo ethnic group in the south central region of the country.

Other countries of origin are, in order of highest numbers, Romania, Moldavia, Albania, Russia and Bulgaria. There are, however, differences in the modalities of trafficking between girls and women trafficked from Africa and those trafficked from Eastern Europe.

TRAFFICKING FOR PROSTITUTION FROM NIGERIA

The trafficking of Nigerian women into Italy for prostitution started in the second half of the 1980s following the increasing economic difficulties caused by the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the then-Nigerian government on the orders of the International Monetary Fund. Women and girls started leaving the country on promises of fantastic well-paid jobs in Europe, in factories, offices and farms.

They arrived in Italy only to find themselves sold into sexual slavery and forced to prostitute themselves to pay the so-called debts which they were told they had incurred in being 'helped' to come to Europe. A number of those who came in this earlier period ended up as 'madams,' who were later to perpetuate the trade and to become exploiters of their fellow countrywomen.

It is, however, necessary to remember that, in the last few years, from 1995–96 onwards, most of the girls who agree to come to Italy know that they are likely to fall into the

prostitution market. It is also necessary to underline the fact that most of them are illiterate and have never had any experience of urban life before they find themselves in the enormous urban centres of Turin, Milan and Rome.

All this notwithstanding, they don't have the slightest idea of what prostitution is really all about, since most of them have never been in prostitution. They therefore find themselves having to cope with a new country and new social context without any friends or family support network, a lot of violence and exploitation, and most important of all, a new kind of reality—such that they never imagined even in their wildest dreams.

The Nigerian girls are made to believe that they are being sponsored to come to Italy to work and are told that the 'madam' who paid for the trip is in Nigeria, while the person they are to stay with is just the support person of the 'madam.' In reality they are accomplices, both the 'madam' in Nigeria and the 'hostess' in Italy.

Thus, the girls tend to see this sponsorship as having been 'helped' to leave the misery of their lives and come to the European 'paradise.' That is, until they are exposed to the harshness of the circumstances they are forced to live in, the blows and the cold they have to suffer and the money they receive from their prostitution, but which is taken from them.

CONTROLLING FACTORS IN EXPLOITATION

The traffickers are usually men who bring in the girls on a 'commission' by the 'madams,' or on their own initiative, intending to sell them to the highest bidder. The girls are made to undergo special black magic *juju* rites, in which parts of their bodies (pubic hair, nails, menstrual blood, hair and pieces of intimate clothing) are taken and placed before traditional shrines.

The girls are made to swear an oath not to disclose the origin of their trip abroad, to pay their 'debt' (usually not stated at the moment of stipulating the 'blood contract') and never to reveal the identity of their traffickers and madams to the police. Their failure to respect this oath means that some grave ill or misfortune will befall themselves and/or their families.

These are rites of great significance and have a notable efficacy in assuring the payment of the 'debt.' It is a special phenomenon noted by the Italian police that Nigerian girls undergo much less physical control/check-up from their exploiters, compared to other foreign girls trafficked into prostitution. They have no need of physical control, because the rites they are made to undergo psychologically impose the control on them.

The debts, imposed on the girls by their traffickers upon their arrival in Italy, are large amounts, which range from 30.000 to 60.000 EUR. The 'debts' must be paid within a few months, at the risk of violence against them and/or their families in Nigeria by their madams. It should be noted that the girls charge an average of 10–15 EUR per client and at times, as little as 5 EUR.

Moreover, they are also requested to make an advance



payment per month of a minimum of 500 EUR to 'rent' the roadside spot where they work. Other payments they have to make include: a weekly contribution to food, purchase of expensive provocative clothing and monthly expensive gifts to their madams. The last few years have seen an increasing number of very young girls, in most cases minors, trafficked to satisfy the ever more exigent requests of the clients.

It should be clearly stated, however, that these girls do not all depart from Nigeria only due to economic difficulties. Studies confirm the hypothesis that sending female children abroad has become a sort of status symbol for some families. This is a result of the breakdown of social and cultural values, the disintegration of traditional family structures and the lack of valid, efficient social reference models in their place.

The crisis of family structures is such that the weight of taking care of the family is increasingly falling on the shoulders of the women. Traditionally, polygamy is a part of the social family structure in Nigeria. Most of the interviewed families tacitly accepted the idea of prostitution as a solution where extreme poverty has made life difficult. They were, however, less ready to accept this when the violence and humiliation involved in it was made clear to them.

CULTURAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF TRAFFICKING

It should be noted that one of the most curious aspects of the international trafficking of Nigerian girls is the fact that most of them come from the mid-south region and belong to the Edo (Benin) ethnic group. This is curious because traditionally this ethnic group does not socially accept prostitution.

Promiscuous behaviour was customarily sufficient to ostracise any young girl or woman, both by her family and by the society. The social stigma was such that she could no more aspire to marry within her social group and remained an outcast if she didn't leave the town.

As regards a married woman, she was not allowed to let another man touch her even in the most innocent of ways. If a married woman was inadvertently touched by a man outside her home, she was obliged to report the incident to her husband upon reaching home and was to carry out special purification rites to cleanse her from the 'cursed' action of the strange man.

In the specific social set-up of the Edo ethnic group where polygamy is common, most men who cannot face up to the task of caring for their families abandon the task to their wives. Even if they have jobs, what they earn is not enough to cater for the needs of the whole family. This leads to a situation in which each woman has to cater for her own children, while the head of the family abducts his role as the breadwinner to his wives.

In a polygamous family setting, the patriarchal structure generates continuous conflict and competition among the wives. Women discovered that selling their bodies is a fast and fruitful way to earn a living for themselves and for their families. Their men are equally prepared to close an eye to traditional values, rules and regulations, as long as they benefit from the earnings of their wives.

Another cultural aspect of trafficking in Nigerian girls is the aforementioned black magic *juju* rites. The strong belief which they have in these rites, coupled with an exaggerated sense of duty owed to their 'benefactors,' later develops into strong fear. This fear reaches the extent that even when they do succeed in paying all the 'debt' to their exploiters, they still continue to live in fear of some unmentionable misfortune happening to them or to members of their families, and often misfortunes are attributed to the rite they were made to undergo.

It is also necessary to take into consideration the psychological aspects of trafficking. We are inundated with cases of girls, victims of trafficking for prostitution, who have serious psychological and, in certain cases, psychiatric problems because of the aforementioned rites and the mental and physical violence they are subjected to.



Verbal and physical abuse, rape, forced abortions without anaesthetics, forced prostitution induced by the threat of magic rites and potions—some are forced to drink the water used to wash a dead person's body as part of the magic rites, swearing to pay the debt imposed on them—are all part of the scenario of the violence suffered by these young women.

One of the main factors which triggers grave psychological suffering for these women, it must be noted, is when they are freed from their exploiters but end up moving from one community house to another without any possibility for an immediate means to obtain money to send to their families. The failure of the project which made them leave the shores of Nigeria usually throws them into serious psychological crisis.

STRATEGIES FOR COMBATING AND PREVENTING TRAFFICKING

There have been various religious and lay organisations which have worked to assist the victims of trafficking down the years. The religious organizations such as Caritas, and non-religious organizations such as Associazione Iroko Onlus, SERMIG and Gruppo Abele, which already had community-housing facilities for other situations of social disadvantage, put those facilities to use in assisting victims.

With the passage of the law on immigration in 1998, a legal framework was created for the assistance of victims of trafficking in the process of rehabilitation and social reintegration. This rehabilitation and reintegration involves admittance to community housing from the first period of emergency, and then, subsequently, integration into the temporary employment scholarship programme.

When they finally get a regular job, they are provided with guided independent single housing before they are able to obtain their own housing facilities. There is also provision of Italian language courses and technical training programmes in accordance with individual needs. Within the programme they are also accompanied to police headquarters to make a report on their exploitation, and thereafter they are entitled to obtain a temporary residence permit.

As founder and President of the IROKO Association (ASSOCIAZIONE IROKO O.N.L.U.S.), a multicultural non-profit organization founded in Italy in 1998, I have provided direct assistance to many victims of trafficking and prostitution.

IROKO's services include protected accommodation facilities and temporary economic assistance; cultural mediation and accompaniment of immigrants to various social, health and assistance services; free legal counselling; translation of personal documents and interpretation; employment orientation and integration for victims; defence and promotion of immigrants' rights; and preventive intervention.

IROKO collaborates with local and international groups and associations to further assist victims of trafficking and prostitution in searching for jobs and housing, in learning the basic concepts of Italian language for easier communication, in providing psychological sustenance that makes use of cultural aspects in assisting victims of trafficking, and in preventing trafficking through the use and diffusion of informative materials.

IROKO also carries out primary research on trafficking and violence against women and children. Much of the information in this article about the situation of Nigerian victims of trafficking comes from case studies gathered from the author's direct service work with victims of trafficking in a network of social services in Italy.

The other major source is IROKO's research on trafficking from Nigeria entitled *Research and Case Studies on the International Trafficking of Nigerian Women and Girls for Prostitution in Italy*. This research includes information on the political, social, and cultural motivations behind the sex trafficking of young girls and women from Nigeria and Eastern European countries to Italy, obtained from interviews with families, young people, and government officials.

Strategies for the prevention need a more global collaboration in combating trafficking. I believe the programmes and strategies already in use in Italy constitute a best practice that can be introduced in other countries.

THE WAY FORWARD

There is of course much room for improvement in the Italian system, but it is a good start. The collaboration that exists between government agencies, NGOs, religious institutions and police headquarters, and the networking between them are, I think, good examples of working together on trafficking.

I believe that the huge work we are doing in Italy with the girls cannot be fully effective if a corresponding level of activity is not being carried out in their countries of origin. Also regarding prevention of prostitution, it is important to address the problem of unemployment of women in the countries of origin, which forces them to come to Italy. Some work needs to be done to address the poverty that makes them run away from their own countries.

The toughening of immigration laws which is to be carried out will certainly worsen matters for trafficking, but will not solve the problem. As regards assistance, there is a need for more community-housing facilities, better funding of the agencies working with victims and language training programmes. Information campaigns are needed as well.

Many European countries have recently introduced provisions for equality between men and women. This is a very welcome move, but as long as the commercialisation of women's bodies is still accepted as part of the social order, equality shall continue to be a mirage and not a reality.

It is not acceptable that the dignity and human rights of half the human race should be the object of commercial exchange. Women in prostitution must not be penalized for their own exploitation. Full attention must be paid to the male users who buy women in prostitution. There is a need to address the negative social impact of the demand for prostitution.

Moreover, in a global patriarchal society, which legitimates male use of female bodies as disposable commodities, it is not possible to successfully combat trafficking. As long as prostitution is tolerated and governments permit it to be practiced as a 'legal and valid' employment, violence against women shall continue to be perpetrated and it will not be possible to eliminate trafficking.

Suggested Reading

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Esohe AGHATISE graduated in law from the University of Ife and obtained a Master's degree in international economic and trade law from the University of Benin, Nigeria. In 1998, she received her doctorate in international economic and trade law from the universities of "La Bocconi" of Milan, Turin and Bergamo. In 1998, she founded the IROKO Association for victims of trafficking to Italy. In 2002, she was appointed expert on trafficking to the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) Experts' Groups Meeting. She has published articles on legal aspects of trade agreements, changing global economic determinants, immigration, and the trafficking of Nigerian women to Italy. She has also produced a short film/documentary on trafficking entitled *Viaggio di Non Ritorno* (Journey of No Return), which is being widely used in Nigeria to combat trafficking. Her e-mail is esoheaghatise@tin.it.

