

MIGRATION OF NIGERIAN WOMEN TO ITALY: ITS IMPLICATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Migration to Italy involves both male and female in search of greener pastures but female migration is in part a different phenomenon from its male counterpart. This article explored the horrific experiences of Nigerian women that have migrated to Italy especially since the 80s till date. The paper identified poverty as the prime motivating factor for this migration. The paper used the analytical method to bring to the fore the risks which these women are facing which range from forced prostitution to acts of violence to the extent of some of them losing their lives in the process. The paper concluded by identifying poor governance and lack of proper moral upbringing of children as the root causes of the illegal migrations that have destroyed many Nigerian youths and called on the government to improve the standard of living in the country.

Introduction

Migration¹ has always been an inseparable aspect of human existence. People migrate from one village or rural area to the other, after a while, the desire to migrate to the city comes, from one city to the other and still not satisfied, from one country to the other. It is in the nature of human beings to move from one place to another, all in search of a better life. “Many people’s oral histories include accounts of their movements which explain when and why they left places, how they travelled, and how they found and settled in the places where they now live. Some of these histories of movements are found in stories, songs,

¹Migration is the movement of people from one location to another for temporary or permanent living. It is presently a worldwide phenomenon. This covers persons of various categories, such as migrant workers and their families, students, refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons, stateless persons, victims of human trafficking, particularly women and children, and others. (Georgy 2012. The Bible: A Story of Migration. Available at www.turnbacktgod.com/the-bible-a-story-of-migration)

chants...., which people carry with them”². For example, history has it in my village Oberete Asa in Obioma Ngwa LGA in Abia State that my great grandparents settled at the named place in search of a medicinal leaf known as “Utazi”. Finding the leaf in large quantity, they decided to settle there. Migration becomes the story of humanity. Going through the biblical stories, Abraham was asked to leave his country to an unknown place, Joseph gave asylum to his people in Egypt, and even the parents of Jesus migrated with him to Egypt for refuge.

People migrate for different reasons. “Migration may thus be either voluntary or forced, may involve individuals or families and even a whole community. One therefore needs to consider the life choices and circumstances of all categories of migrant women while simultaneously addressing the range of gender-specific types of work and their impact on women”.³ Migration of Nigerian women to Italy started increasing in the 1980s. In this paper, we shall present a brief survey of Nigerian women migrants in Italy; discuss the causes of migration, the sex work, its implications and solutions.

A Brief Survey Of Nigerian Women Migrants In Italy

Reports from International Organization for Migrants, (OMF) published 21st July 2017 says that between 2015 and 2017 Italy witnessed an almost 600 per cent increase in the number of potential sex trafficking victims. The report says that 80 percent of these women or girls were from Nigeria with the numbers soaring from 1,454 in 2014 to 11,009 in 2016. These are potential victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. They arrive by air, land or sea; through the Sahara Desert and across the Mediterranean Sea. The report states that sexual exploitation increasingly involves younger girls – often minors – who are already subject to violence and abuse on their way to Europe. The report is based on data collected

² Cluny Macpherson, 2000. “Some Social and Economic Consequences of Migration” UNESCO Migration Text, available at www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/SHS/.../Migration-in-Samoa.pdf. Pg.4. Accessed 4th of May, 2019.

³Meenakshi Thapan. *Women and Migration in Asia*, Volume 2, Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London, 2006. Pg.14.

by IOM (International Organization for Migrants) at landing sites and in reception centers for migrants in the regions of southern Italy, where the Organization carries out identification of potential victims and assists those who, once identified, decide to escape their exploiters and accept support.⁴

Italian and European authorities estimate as many as 16,000 Nigerian women in 2017 some as young as 16 or 17-years-old, have been trafficked into Italy in the past two years by Nigerian racketeers and crime gangs, the most notorious a syndicate known as Black Axe. Like the Italian authorities, IOM argues the Nigerian women are forced unwillingly into prostitution, tricked by traffickers, who charge the women as much as 35,000 euros for the trip to Europe. The traffickers terrify the women into submission, using violence, voodoo religious rites and threats to harm the women's families back in Nigeria, say authorities.⁵

Reasons For Migrating To Italy

Vanguard News reported on 16th February 2019 that over 91 million Nigerians are now living in extreme poverty. It says that at least three million Nigerians have slipped into extreme poverty between November 2018 and February 2019. According to the World Poverty Clock, created by Vienna-based World Data Lab, 91.16 million Nigerians were living below a dollar a day as of February 13, 2019.⁶ It is true that Nigeria is a multicultural country with diverse ethnic and religious identities. Its population is estimated of 180 million people. But this country is also blessed with abundant natural resources. She possesses much more than simply oil and gas. Nigeria is blessed with coal, iron ore, lead,

⁴ International Organization for Migrants (IOM) 2017. "UN Migration Agency Issues Report on Arrivals of Sexually Exploited Migrants, Chiefly from Nigeria". Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/italy/un-migration-agency-issues-report-arrivals-sexually-e>. Accessed on 25th April 2019⁹⁹

⁵Jamie Dettmer, 2017. "Prey to Violence, Vulnerable Nigerian Women Struggle on Italian Streets". Available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/prey-to-violence-vulnerable-nigerian-women-struggle-on-italian-streets-/3972244.html>. Accessed on 25th April 2019.

⁶Emmanuel Okogba, 2019. "91 million Nigerians now live in extreme poverty-World Poverty Clock". Vanguard News, Available at <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2019/02/91-million-nigerians-now-live-in-extreme-poverty-world-poverty-clock/>. Accessed 25th April 2019.

limestone, tin and zinc etc. It is a fact to say that Nigeria is the most blessed African nation and more blessed than many other nations in the world. But in the midst of these riches, it has been recorded that:

Over 60% of the population live below the poverty line and women and children, especially those in rural areas, form a large part of the poor. Many families, unable to cope with exorbitant costs of education are forced to withdraw their girls from school, hence there is a high rate of illiteracy among women. In Nigeria, women contribute to the domestic economy as farmers, petty traders, domestic workers and homemakers. Their work is grossly undervalued and poorly rewarded, and to worsen their condition, they have no direct access to credit facilities because of low income and lack of collateral. Their lack of formal training means that they are not able to access other opportunities available in the better paying employment sectors of the economy. Consequently, women have become prime targets of recruiters involved in trafficking for sexual exploitation.⁷

Poverty was the primary reason why some women in the early 80s started leaving the country. "At the beginning were mainly married women or separated women on the lookout for a way to cater for their families. Later those trafficked were mainly young girls who went on promises of fantastic and well-paying jobs in Italy and of course few other parts of Europe, in factories, offices and farms. Their aim was to go abroad to suffer for a few months, earn huge amounts of money and return home to help their families. However, the reality was often different".⁸ The fact now is also that some girls at present are aware of what misfortune those who travelled unknowingly faced and are still facing because awareness has been created well enough in Nigeria today through many groups but because of the same reason of poverty, some girls prefer to travel to Italy at all cost to join the trend.

I recall an experience I had in the year 1997 while coming back from school in Italy. I was inside a town service bus, which was packed full. Two Nigerian girls

⁷Okogie, C.E.E. 2003. "Trafficking of Nigerian Girls to Italy. Report of Field Survey in Edo State, Nigeria". Available at <https://childhub.org/en/.../okojie-c-ee-2003-trafficking-nigerian-girls-italy-report-field>. Accessed 25th April 2019.

⁸Okogie, C.E.E. 2003.

were inside the same bus, not knowing that a Nigerian could be there, they began their conversation in Pigeon English, and one asked the other, 'girl how was the night?' She responded, 'too bad because, he carried me for his dog'. And the other asked, 'then what did you do?' She said, 'what will I do, will I miss a whole night while hunger is killing my people at home'. This confirms that "acute poverty is the single most important reason for women joining sex work.... Studies... suggest that economic survival, lack of employment opportunities and poverty are reasons for entering prostitution".⁹

Apart from poverty, corruption is another factor that has encouraged trafficking of women and girls. It is no more news in Nigeria that some persons are taking advantage of lack of employment and poverty in the country to enrich themselves through the business of trafficking.

A 2015 report by Human Rights Watch noted that 'Endemic public sector corruption continued to undermine the enjoyment of social and economic rights in Nigeria.' Corruption can facilitate trafficking, for instance it can ease the transportation of victims within countries and across borders without detection or requests for paperwork... Corruption prevents traffickers from being held accountable and can also prevent victims from seeking justice. In fact, when corruption is found within political institutions, the laws in place are not implemented to their full capacity, if at all. Also, corruption leads law enforcement to succumb to bribery or charge victim's outrageous amounts of money in order to have access to justice. Furthermore, gender inequality in a society impacts all other factors.¹⁰

Migration Patterns And Status

Sex trafficking is big business in today's world. It is also a complex and highly coordinated process in Nigeria and many other parts of the world. "There are local chapters of the criminal syndicates operating in Nigeria that are tasked with

⁹Geetanjali Gangoli, "Sex Work, Poverty and Migration in Eastern India" in *Women and Migration in Asia*, Volume 2, Sage Publications, New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London, 2006. Pg.215

¹⁰ Nigeria: COI Compilation on Human Trafficking, 2017. ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation. Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD. Pg.11

recruiting vulnerable women often who are desperate for a better life abroad”.¹¹ The UN migration agency estimates that about 80 percent of Nigerian women who arrive in Italy are destined for sexual exploitation. Most are brought to Europe by these same Nigerian crime fraternities which are always looking for new ways of making money. They are organized criminal groups which operate across many countries and they play important roles in the movement of people across borders. These criminal networks stretch all the way from African towns like Benin City in Nigeria to Italy, Spain, the UK, Austria and Germany, via Libya and Niger. Each group along the route takes its cut. Not all of them are directly linked, but they are all getting rich from selling humans into the sex trade. Often unrealistic promises are made to the migrant women and different tactics are used to lure them away from their homes to a life that does not simply exist.¹² Research has shown too that there is a high degree of collaboration between the Italian mafia and Nigerian criminal groups.

As part of the strategies for keeping the trafficked women under their control, the traffickers force them to undertake a ritualized promissory known as juju oath. This subjects them to spiritual oppression and psychological trauma. This keeps them in perpetual fear and bondage until they pay the fee for their journey which could amount to 40,000 Euros or more. They are threatened with the condition that failure to pay would incur the consequences of the juju oath. Sometimes, the oath taking involves the family members of the migrant women.

Before leaving Nigeria to Italy, traffickers give the migrants a phone number of a madam in Italy and tell them to call as soon as they arrive. This madam or madams are older Nigerian ladies who have graduated in the sex work / business. Most often, a younger male is also involved, who is working for the madam by monitoring the young girls for her. Research through interviews shows that:

¹¹John Filitz, 2018. “Women’s Ill-fated Pursuit of a Better Life: Understanding the Dynamics of Migration”. Available at <https://oefresearch.org/think-peace/nigerian-women-understanding-dynamics-migration>. Accessed 2nd May 2019.

¹² Emma Wallis, 2019. “Tricked, trafficked and sold: How criminal gangs are bringing Nigerian women to Italy” <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/14725/tricked-trafficked-and-sold-how-criminal-gangs-are-bringing-nigerian-women-to-italy>

Once the women make it ashore in Europe they are quickly and forcibly introduced to a life of prostitution and exploitation. Under the control of Nigerian gangs in Italy, they sell their bodies for as little as 20 Euros in an effort to pay off the 40,000 to 70,000 Euros debt incurred from the cost of their voyage. Unsuspecting women living in refugee camps are also recruited into the sex trade business by madams who are affiliated to the gangs.¹³

Some were bought to Italy by their aunts or boyfriends. On arrival, they asked them to go into prostitution persuaded that since they are in a foreign land, nobody will recognize their identity. This is a story of one of the victims:

I came in 2008 through my boyfriend. He was already in Italy and he asked his friend to bring me from Nigeria. We passed through France to Torino and when I arrived, my boyfriend and I were together for a month and he introduced me to sex work the next month. He said this is Europe you have to hustle, we need money, and I said, don't worry I will work but I never knew it is sex work. He took me to the street, showed me other girls and I started working for him and giving him money. He bought me clothes and shoes and also taught me how to position myself to attract clients. I was really shy because I have not done this before so I was crying. My parents were in support of my trip to Italy because I was going to meet my boyfriend. My boyfriend bought my ticket and I used a fake passport.¹⁴

Consequences

Migrating from one place to the other is good. It is what one does as one migrates that can turn the good to evil. On the positive note, people who migrate find jobs, that way their economic wellbeing improves; even the host countries are enriched through cultural diversity etc. But the migration of many women to

¹³John Filitz, 2018. "Women's Ill-fated Pursuit of a Better Life: Understanding the Dynamics of Migration". Available at <https://oefresearch.org/think-peace/nigerian-women-understanding-dynamics-migration>. Accessed 2nd May 2019.

¹⁴Eneze Modupe-OluwaBaye & Silke Heumann, 2014. "Migration, Sex Work and Exploitative Labor Conditions: Experiences of Nigerian Women in the Sex Industry in Turin, Italy, and Counter-Trafficking Measures". Gender, Technology and Development, Asian Institute of Technology Sage Publications Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC. Pg 89

Italy for sex work or trafficking has devastating consequences on both the physical and mental well-being of many of them; that is if they survive the torture that goes with it together with the economic exploitation. Some go through series of violent attacks, being beaten by the clients. Some have been drugged and some killed etc. "In November 2017, the bodies of 26 Nigerian women were found adrift off the coast of Italy. They were thought to be part of a contingent of trafficked women destined to work in Italy's notorious sex trade industry".¹⁵ Some die without anyone discovering their bodies. Many suffer different types of health disorders such as vaginal infections, exhaustion, frequent viral illness, STDs, back pains, sleeplessness, depression, headaches, stomach aches etc. Some of the victims are often alienated from their families and communities, part of the reasons being that they are seen as failures for not living up to the expectations of their families, especially for being unable to repay the family investment sold in order to send them out. Sometimes it could be land or other valuables. "According to the HRW (Human Rights Watch), the abuses committed by trafficking include debt bondage, forced labour, torture, illegal detention, deprivation of freedom of movement, speech and association, and discrimination".¹⁶

One of the stories of what these girls suffer in their journey experience in Italy was told by Simona Taliani¹⁷ about one of the girls called Precious from Benin City. Simona said that three years ago, precious was,

Found lying outside a hospital in Turin, where her madam had 'dumped' her. She had been scalped, and one of her ears bitten off. She could not walk, because she had deep wounds on her knees that had become infected and were suppurating. To rebuild the skin on her skull she had to

¹⁵John Filitz, 2018. "Women's Ill-fated Pursuit of a Better Life: Understanding the Dynamics of Migration". Available at <https://oefresearch.org/think-peace/nigerian-women-understanding-dynamics-migration>. Accessed 2nd May 2019.

¹⁶Okogie, C.E.E. 2003. "Trafficking of Nigerian Girls to Italy. Report of Field Survey in Edo State, Nigeria". Available at <https://childhub.org/en/.../okojie-c-ee-2003-trafficking-nigerian-girls-italy-report-field>

¹⁷SIMONA TALIANI is a researcher and professor at the University of Turin. She obtained a PhD in Anthropology in 2005 and a postgraduate degree in psychoanalytic psychotherapy in 2009. She has worked since 1997 at the Frantz Fanon Centre in Turin (see note 1 below). She undertook field research among the Bulu of Cameroon and has conducted field research in Italy among African immigrant women.

undergo surgery several times. She was finally sent to the Frantz Fanon Centre in Turin for psychological support.¹⁸

It is obvious that women/girl trafficking is connected with violence against women and also an abuse of their human rights. Therefore, it is necessary that governments, especially the Nigerian government should take appropriate measures to eliminate trafficking of women and find a way to assist the victims.

Going back to their country sometimes is not a better option for the victims because their experience back home can be difficult too to bear. They feel some sense of shame and many of them suffer social stigma, psychological imbalance, discrimination from friends and family members especially those born in polygamous homes, and some are ostracized from the community, seen as undignified persons because of their involvement in prostitution. Of course they have little or no opportunity to marry at home because of the social stigma.

Solutions

There is so much to write on this but because of space, the solutions will be summarized. This problem is everybody's problem, therefore all hands should be on deck. It is not enough to make laws, the problem of Nigeria for example is not the making of laws but implementing them. Nigeria has two codes of criminal law; the Criminal Code covering the Southern states of Nigeria and the Penal Code applied to the North. Even though that the Criminal Code does not define what constitutes trafficking nor does it deal with the various forms of trafficking, it deals with the offences which may constitute external trafficking for prostitution and slavery.

For example the Criminal Code makes it an offence to procure women and girls for prostitution in or outside Nigeria (223(2)). There are also provisions dealing with offences of unlawful deprivation of liberty, slave dealing, forced labour, and sexual offences. For instance, section 365 deals with unlawful confinement or detention against a person's will while

¹⁸ Simona Taliani, 2012. "Coercion, Fetishes and Suffering in the Daily Lives of Young Nigerian Women in Italy". *Africa: The Journal of the International African Institute*, Vol.82,no 4. Pg 579. Available at www.jstor.org/stable/23356106.

Section 366 covers compelling someone to do something by threats, surveillance or other intimidation and is punishable by one year of imprisonment. If this involves assault, the penalty increases to five years. The Criminal Code prohibits slave dealing, and Section 369 punishes slave dealing with imprisonment for 14 years upon conviction of any offender. The Penal Code contains similar provisions on trafficking. Section 275 prohibits to induce girls below 18 to incitation of prostitution and other similar practices. Section 278 provides that any person who buys, sells, hires, lets to hire or otherwise obtains possession or disposes of any person below 18 years with intent that the person will be or is likely to be employed or used for prostitution or other unlawful or immoral purposes is guilty of an offence punishable with imprisonment up to ten years and liable to pay a fine in addition. Section 279 creates the offence of slave dealing and provides that any person who exports, imports, removes, buys, sells, disposes of, traffics or deals in any person as a slave or accepts, receives or detains such person is liable to imprisonment for a maximum of 14 years and a fine. Section 280 punishes forced labor with a fine and one year imprisonment; enticement or leading away of any woman or girl (with or without her consent); for immoral purpose with imprisonment of up to 7 years and a fine. The Penal Code does not define the term traffic.¹⁹

Nigeria has an agency called the National Agency for Prohibition and prevention of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP). This agency also has its own sanctions. In Nigeria, there are different groups and NGOs involved in dealing with this issue, but more still need to be done. The major problem of Nigeria is that of greed which is at the root of corruption. There is need for a change of heart. Furthermore, Nigerians involve themselves in all sorts of crimes because the nation lacks credible rulers. Thus, there is an urgent need to arrest and prosecute the men and women involved in this trafficking. There is also the need to provide proper education that is free or at least affordable, and to create job opportunities with adequate remuneration for the citizens. This will discourage people from migrating outside the country in search of jobs.

In addition, this paper adds its voice to numerous others to ask that Nigerians should continue to create awareness about the ills of sex trafficking through the

¹⁹ Nigeria: COI Compilation on Human Trafficking, 2017. ACCORD - Austrian Centre for Country of Origin & Asylum Research and Documentation. Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD. Pg.55.

media, in schools, churches, mosques and other avenues. People should be discouraged from travelling abroad for jobs that they will not see.

Conclusion

The migration of some Nigerian women to Italy solely for sex trafficking has been briefly analyzed in this paper. It has been addressed by different authors as a modern form of slavery going on in the world today. This is a new trend of depriving people of their rights and fundamental freedoms and comes as a threat to global development, safety, and peace. Indeed, trafficking is harmful to the individuals trafficked as well as to society at large. This paper has therefore tried to look at various ways Nigerian women are taken to Italy, its causes and consequences and some recommendations made.

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