

EXTERNALISATION OF BORDERS

detention practices and denial of the right to asylum

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The phenomenon of trafficking: social conditions before departure from a gender perspective

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I grew up in Benin City, Edo State. To my bini people, wa koyo ooo. Edo State is, infamously, one of the largest hubs of sex trafficking in Africa.

So did Joy who you met yesterday.

But you see, I came from a family of privilege; one that prioritized education. Hers could not afford to.

I had access to healthcare, good schools and the security that was able to prevent my life from being marred by the crippling force of childhood violence. Joy's life, however, was consumed by scarcity.

We ended up with diverging destinies because although it is said that where you are born is most predictive of your future, I am living proof of the fact that it is not. The reality is that in the developing world, here in Nigeria, it's to whom you are born. It is the extent to which you are marginalized, to which your vulnerabilities are abused or systemically condoned and exploited.

You see, on November 6, 2017, Joy found herself on an seaworthy vessel on the Mediterranean Sea, dying. Dying because of a dream to have access. Access to education; access to healthcare; access to the freedom of dignity and agency.

Joy will tell you that she would have chosen death over being rescued by the Libyan Coast Guard. If you listened closely enough, you could still hear the trauma in her voice yesterday when she recalled the month she was forced to spend in a Libyan detention centre. She witnessed brutal killings and multiple rapes and torture. She was exploited in what was essentially a torture chamber.

The story was not much different for Blessing, who was also trafficked via the graveyard that is the Mediterranean Sea to Italy. You see, Blessing too left Nigeria in the hopes of having access- access to the same hopes and dreams that we all have. Instead, every day, she was forced to have sex with 10-15 Italian men and when she refused to "work," she was starved and tortured.

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There was the one time when she was gang raped by a group of 12 men and discarded on the streets in the dead of winter. Naked. And the other time when within 8 hours of a forced abortion, her trafficker had her back on the streets.

For four years, she serviced Italian society, everyone from the average Italian man to police officers and priests, all in an effort to repay her trafficker a debt of 55,000 Euros, earning 5-10 Euros per customer. In addition to her debt, she was forced to also pay for her food, her clothing, her rent and even the condoms that many of her clients refused.

Even though she reported the crimes, neither her trafficker nor any of the thousands of men who purchased and recycled her body were ever charged and prosecuted. She is now HIV+.

Both Joy and Blessing returned to Nigeria in broken pieces- physically, mentally and emotionally. This is the story of every single woman we serve.

So when we look at the subject of my talk, *i.e.*, the phenomenon of trafficking: social conditions *before* departure from a gendered lens, I think it's easy, almost convenient even, to point straight to Nigeria and to start to look for the socio-cultural conditions here, as they relate to potential victims of trafficking, particularly women and girls, that allow for the proliferation of trafficking.

But if we take a step back, take a more panoramic view of the issue, where should the finger pointing really begin? Are the social conditions here in Nigeria the only contributing factors to the phenomenon of trafficking from Nigeria? The simple, yet simultaneously complicated answer, is no. No, they are not.

When we take a more nuanced look, it is evident that there are also global social conditions, many of which are thousands of miles away in the West, particularly in Europe, *i.e.*, European demand for cheap labour- whether that appears in the prostituted bodies of African women or the exploited low wages paid to African men on European farms. Without taking anything away from some of the good work that has been done by the EU in Africa, the reality is that there are European laws, foreign policy dialogues and initiatives, or the lack thereof, particularly when it comes to the issue of prostitution, that have far reaching implications on the reality of our women and girls, men and boys in and from Africa.

IOM contends that at least 80% of all Nigerian women who arrive Europe by Sea, I believe that percentage is higher, are being trafficked into the European sex industry. These are not women voluntarily servicing the underbelly of European society. For them, there is no such thing as "sex work." It is not work- they are trapped in modern day slavery, with no recourse, no support and no way out. And every day, one of them, somewhere... is dying.

Europe's failure to uniformly address this "demand problem", *i.e.*, its failure to demand that women's bodies are not purchased and discarded, the fact that buyers, particularly of known trafficking victims, are rarely held accountable, that traffickers can flourish with impunity, are, in fact, "social conditions before departure" that contribute to the proliferation of trafficking, to violence against women and men, to organized crime and to corruption here in Nigeria.

And so does the EU's complicity and complacency in the torture and human rights abuses that continue to occur in Libya. Its externalization of border control and asylum law (which we discussed extensively yesterday), its funding of the so called "Libyan Coast Guard" (if we can say there is such a thing), its pushbacks by proxy, its prosecution of those assisting asylum seekers, its

legislative wall and the successful shutdown of search and rescue NGOs in the Mediterranean, all of which are aimed at limiting free movement, migration and asylum, particularly of the “other” into Europe, are “social conditions” that are contributing to the torture and death of hundreds, if not thousands of migrants every year, including Nigerians.

All of these result in the unfettered trafficking of the prostituted bodies of Nigerian men and women. That is, indeed, one of the unspoken tragedies of the EU’s broken migration system and policies.

Because you see, this phenomenon of trafficking does not conveniently begin and end just here in Nigeria. It would be intellectually dishonest and a reflection of rather myopic thinking to argue otherwise.

That being said, the truth is that when it comes to outlining the pre-departure social conditions that contribute to the phenomenon of trafficking from Nigeria, we can and should start with Nigeria. She is, after all, the self-proclaimed Giant of Africa and as such, should be able to provide for and protect her own. One could argue that doing anything short of that is tantamount to treason.

Of course, trafficking is a phenomenon that happens to both men and women from and in Nigeria. But the reality is that when it comes to the work that we do, working with survivors of sex trafficking, the overwhelming percentage of victims and survivors (upwards of 90%) are women and girls. And as a women’s rights advocate, that is the gender lens that I know best and will focus on.

When we attempt to paint a picture of the reality on the ground for most of the women we work with, it is pretty dismal. That painting reveals the Joys, the Blessings and the Faiths, one of our survivors who died as a result of kidney disease in 2016. That was my first experience with the harrowing face of death in this work. But since then, there have been others. Many of whom are still alive but are a shadow of their former selves. Anyone who has been forced to have sex with 10-20 men a day over a period of 2-5 years would have to be.

In the five years that we have focused on these issues, we have seen, over and over again, repeated themes, repeated patterns...so much so that we have been able to recreate a pre-trafficking profile, i.e., a 12 point vulnerability criteria, for women and girls who are potentially vulnerable to becoming trafficked within the next 6months to a year.

Here are the top five reasons we found: (i) most are living in abject poverty; (ii) unemployed or underemployed, with little to no education and economic prospects; (iii) are waning under parental pressure to serve as a primary financial source of income; (iv) have adopted an eroded value system that considers prostitution a viable alternative to poverty; and (v) are dealing with the trauma of some level of prior physical or sexual abuse.

Trafficking amounts to the abuse of these vulnerabilities because we know that women, in and of ourselves, are not vulnerable beings. It is when those vulnerabilities are intentionally and systemically abused, when access to basic, fundamental human rights is denied, particularly by those in a position of power, that women are rendered vulnerable. **What people who have power choose to not do with that power can be equally as abusive.**

In Nigeria, it is undeniable that in many ways, the social condition of patriarchy still clouds our judgment and serves as the underlying force behind many of these vulnerabilities. It is written into our laws, our customs and our religions. Gender inequity is the reason why in many instances, men

can rape women with impunity, why a woman can be offered as a “money wife,” i.e., collateral, and why a woman candidate for the presidency still cannot yet be taken seriously.

In other situations, girls are also considered unworthy beneficiaries of western education. I remember my mother telling me that when she was growing up, it was common for fathers to send only their male children to school. Often times, the education of a girl was deemed a waste of financial resources, particularly when those resources were scarce. Nigeria is still one of the countries with the most children out of school. I believe 13.5 million. It is estimated 75% of them are girls.

Inequality in wealth distribution, the lack of access to life-sustaining economic opportunity and basic social services are other social conditions that contribute to the proliferation of trafficking of women and girls in Nigeria. From an increasing number of debt funded infrastructure projects to poor public sector financial management to the lack of a social welfare system for the poor, all it takes is one major setback for the Joys, the Blessings and the Faiths of Nigeria to never, ever stand a chance.

There are other social conditions that can be gleaned from the vulnerabilities I outlined here, such as high unemployment rates, Western media that has contributed to an aspirational mindset and policy and legislation that allow sex trafficking with impunity. However, the final one I would like to quickly touch upon that I believe is peculiar to Edo State is the cultural acceptance by some of our people of prostitution as a viable alternative to poverty. It is the reason why mothers have been known to serve as some of the primary recruiters and negotiators of contracts with traffickers. It is why remittances from the spoils of prostitution are applauded with no regard to the brokenness that accompanies the sender.

I could go on but at the end of the day, it is these socio-cultural norms and paradigms, these systemic inequalities and inequities, that lead to gender discrimination and challenge the very fabric of who we are as women and girls: our identity and our value. It should be no surprise therefore that sex trafficking and prostitution emerge as alternatives when women and girls are intentionally rendered vulnerable by systemic injustice.

The reality is that the challenges are disparate, complex, yet interlocking. We recognize that if the problems are interlocking, the solutions must also be interlocking. There is no single variable that can be altered to help the working poor move away from the edge of poverty. One of our findings from the Gap Analysis we conducted in June last year, pursuant to our INSigHT Project, was that only when a full array of factors is employed can there be sustainable and viable solutions.

And so, one of the things we focus on at my NGO is the restoration of a strong sense of identity and esteem. It is weaved into all of our programming because it is at the core of restoring agency and dignity back to women and girls.

We certainly also focus on economic empowerment. We view each woman as an economic asset to Nigeria. And every single one that leaves results in brain drain. We are providing education scholarships, vocational skills training, job placement, creating cooperatives as well as providing start up capital for small businesses. But with that start-up capital, we are asking our women and girls to redefine who they are. Because our goal is structural transformation; moving our people from poverty reduction to wealth creation.

We’re looking ahead, thinking progressively and planning ahead for a Nigeria that will be impacted by climate change and the migration that may result from that; planning ahead for a Nigeria that will

be impacted by unsustainable population growth and urbanization in an economy where the youth unemployment rate is already leading to irreversible atrocity, some of which is contributing to crisis level human trafficking.

For us, it's about adding value. How can we train survivors to think nationally, globally, and add value; how can our survivors create jobs for others and grow their own wealth so that they can contribute and maintain relevance in a world of rapid globalization?

Finally, we are demanding accountability and transparency from those who have the power to end trafficking. We are demanding, in all the spaces that we have access, that both national and international governments adopt laws and policies that prioritize people over profit; that address gender discrimination and inequality. We are also demanding that the EU address Europe's demand problem, criminalise buyers, prosecute traffickers and stand against the morally reprehensible posture that allows human beings to die in the Sahara, to die at sea or to be tortured as a direct result of its funding. Whether on the subject of aid, development, trade, peacekeeping or migration, what routinely manifests is Western consumerism that is powered by indifference and a calloused sense of entitlement to both our human and natural resources. As bridgebuilders, we are endeavoring to bring all stakeholders to the table, to bring perspective of what it feels like to be at the bottom, to lose agency, because we all can and should do better.

At the end of the day, my work isn't just about speaking truth to power. It is also about speaking truth to the seemingly powerless. The Joys, the Blessings, the Faiths- those on whom marginalization has been employed as a tool of oppression.

Because the truth is that the bodies of African women are the most weaponized human resource in the world. Whether burdened by the indifference of neo-colonialism, the rape of modern day slavery or at the hands of the patriarchy that is weaved into their daily existence, our women nonetheless conform with a plasticity that commands that they persevere through it all. That plasticity, that applauded "resilience of the African woman," however, comes at a cost that is reflected in the brevity of our lives, laced into the hollowness of our eyes and muted by an eroding sadness that often goes unspoken.

Those of us that have been given a platform are thus obliged to take a principled stand, to speak, to counter the callousing narrative. We do so not just for ourselves, but for the very soul of humanity.

Thank you for listening.