

The Nigerian Slave Trade

TINA

Tina is a vivacious girl, with a charming habit of swinging her head from side to side, lightly balanced on her long slim neck. She has a smile that suggests innocence, indeed worldly ignorance. How cruel that she should harbour a dark secret. For Tina is not in her native Nigeria, but in Antwerp. She is not with her own family, but with a local Belgian who gave her protection. Tina also carries the shadow of debt. Any day, someone may demand a large sum of money from her, a sum that she is unable to pay.

Her life would be blighted by a complex web of deceits three years ago. A family friend had started to talk to Tina about the greener pastures she could find in Europe. It was a place where she could get an education, something which Tina didn't have, but wanted. It was also a place where she could find a job, also something that Tina didn't have but needed. Her family was desperately poor, living off the trade of vegetables, especially peppers and tomatoes, in the Nigerian town of Benin City. She was told she could help with families in Europe,

Tina recalls, 'They just said, Tina, we like you to come to Europe. They said, you come, you will have money, you will carry baby.'

Tina listened, but did not believe what she was hearing. It all seemed too good, too fanciful. Going to Europe was as possible as her having diamonds, she says. A total impossibility, a nonsense.

She went to her family to see what they thought. They told her not to discard the idea too quickly. They knew poverty only too well and saw the benefits of someone abroad sending them money home. Their situation was not unusual in this part of the country where the rural agriculture was failing to deliver any sort of standard of living.

The family house was full of step sons and step daughters, half-nephews and half-nieces and step mothers. Several women lived together in the house, together with their all children, while their husbands lived in Europe, scraping livings, part of which they could send back to the family.

Tina's early incredulity started to subside. Her hostility began to weaken, the reassurance that there was work holding babies pushed back the word she had heard from people around her town that Nigerian girls were involved in Europe's sex trade. That was something she did not want, would not do.

The fact that she had heard something of the Nigerian involvement in the sex trade is not surprising. For Benin City had become the country's largest source of women to the European sex market. For some 30 years, girls had been trafficked from the town to Italy. But the European net had widened to include Holland and Belgium. Benin City girls were simply getting transported in droves, while their money remittances were being used to feed their families. Nigeria's economy had collapsed, agriculture fell most, and the trade in women was a matter of survival.

The day came for Tina to make the journey from Benin City to Lagos airport. A woman she did not know accompanied her, along with several other girls in the same predicament. They were scared, they were expectant.

They arrived at the airport, and were given their papers by the man who would escort them on the plane, yet another unknown face. She recalls the papers of one of the girls were not accepted by the customs officials, and she saw the man overseeing them passing over a huge wad of money.

'The man is controlling others. I was not the only one on the flight. The Customs didn't want some of them to come, something wrong with the papers. They paid big money to get her through. At the airport in a small room, I saw it, the man hand over big money, to the woman with the uniform.'

The party boarded the aeroplane complete. They sat around the plane, their minder did not want them to be sitting together. They should not be seen as a party and he should not be seen as a guard.

Tina, like many other Nigerian girls, was being trafficked to Europe to work in the sex industry. When she arrived, there were no babies, no well paid jobs and comfortable living; only lies, a huge debt to pay off and cruel traffickers wanting to use her body to make a quick profit.

Tina is not the only Nigerian girl to have suffered such a heinous fate. Human trafficking is a huge problem in Nigeria. On average, twenty children are trafficked across the Nigerian borders every day. In addition, large numbers are trafficked internally, from one part of the country to another.

Both internal and international trafficking are problems in different parts of Nigeria. Clear distinctions may be drawn between the two types of trafficking, which differ in terms of organisation, the profile of typical victims, and their ultimate circumstances.

INTERNAL TRAFFICKING

Most cases of internal trafficking involve taking people from their villages into cities, where they are made to work in various roles, providing a cheap labour market. About a third of victims end up in forced labour gangs – working in factories, construction or agriculture. Another third are put to work in private homes; domestic workers are in high demand amongst the Nigerian urban middle classes and Nigerian children are preferred as they can usually be traced back to their families in cases of theft. The remainder are placed in diverse jobs such as shop assistants, hotel workers, waitresses, beggars or prostitutes. The traffickers are not very particular about whom they recruit, provided they are strong and healthy enough to work. Nevertheless, trafficking victims have a specific demographic: significantly more girls are taken than boys, and normally the traffickers will target children.

Girls are more marketable, particularly as domestic workers, otherwise as prostitutes. They are also more readily available, as the lower status of women means parents are more willing to give up a girl. Families are likely to invest much more in their boys, and, beyond primary level, far fewer girls than boys are sent to school. Girls are widely seen as appendages to male-dominated households, and are expected to show more loyalty to their families than boys, who, it is culturally accepted, are independent individuals in their own right. Therefore there is a higher chance that girls will continue to send money back to their families.

Children are normally told that they are to be fostered by a family in the city where they will receive an education. The traffickers style themselves as sponsors who will help the child move to the city and find a job, and will forward part of their earnings to their families in their home villages. Within the Nigerian social system, children are regularly given away to live with someone other than their parents, depending on who, usually in the extended family, can best afford to raise and accommodate them. The success of Nigerian trafficking relies significantly on its ability to mesh with cultural norms (themselves predicated on poverty).

Some parents are unaware of the realities of the traffickers' 'fostering', and believe it will offer their children the opportunity of an education and good income that would otherwise be unobtainable. Other parents have fewer illusions, but choose to turn a blind eye to the possibility that their children may end up working in appalling conditions, or as prostitutes.

Usually the traffickers ensure that a proportion of the money earned by a child is sent home, to encourage parents to continue to hand over children. It is not uncommon for people to become wealthy, by the standards of their community, through trafficking their daughters. The children consequently go willingly, or under pressure from their families. Ultimately they are often abused and forced into whatever work the trafficker or the so-called foster family requires of them.

The traffickers also exploit the large number of orphans in Nigeria, a product of the country's high mortality rate, from infectious diseases like AIDS, combined with gravely inadequate healthcare and nutrition. The orphans are often unwanted, grudgingly taken in, and easily parted with. Sometimes traffickers legally adopt them, presenting themselves as caring philanthropists. The fate of the orphans is the same as that of the other trafficked children; they go willingly, duped about the nature of their new lifestyles, and are rapidly disillusioned. Ore, a victim of trafficking, explained: "I was not tricked into going but I was tricked into prostitution"

INTERNATIONAL TRAFFICKING

International trafficking in Nigeria predominantly involves the trafficking of girls or women into prostitution. Here the traffickers are more choosy, seeking out attractive females a few years older than the average age for internally-trafficked people. One study found that while girls trafficked internally may be as young as 8, those trafficked externally were never younger than 13, and usually a few years older. Ehiosu, a 26 year old Nigerian trafficker explained: "I help girls who are between the ages of 16 to 21 years to travel, they must be beautiful and slim."

The girls are taken abroad to work as prostitutes. The traffickers in Nigeria do not take people by force. But, like those trafficked internally, their victims are typically deceived about the work they will be doing. Many are fed dreams of education and a better life in a Europe with streets paved with gold. Often expecting to work in hotels or as hairdressers, they obey their traffickers' instructions throughout harsh, clandestine journeys.

Their destinations are widespread: Some are taken to countries elsewhere in Africa, especially North Africa. Others go to the Middle East. Recently groups of trafficked Nigerians have even begun to appear in South America. But the majority are taken to Western Europe, to Holland, Belgium, Spain, Germany, England, and especially to Italy, estimated to be the final stop for 60-80% of Nigerian girls trafficked for prostitution. An estimated 9 million Italian men pay for sex. In developed countries such as Italy and Belgium, huge profits can be made by importing women.

Just like legal patterns of migration, international illegal migration is complex. While many are smuggled out of Nigeria, others are entering below the radar of immigration authorities, for Nigeria is also a transit and destination country for human trafficking. People are trafficked to Nigeria from nearby African countries, either to work there, or as a staging post on a long, enervating journey onwards.

THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The initial contact between traffickers and their human cargo frequently occurs in the victim's home, otherwise at her school or local haunts, and typically the approach is made by a relative or close family friend. The person is a local agent of the trafficking gangs, paid per head he succeeds in procuring.

The recruiter approaches the victim's family or the victim herself, with tales of wealth and opportunity. One girl recalled: "A man who was our former neighbour, he often travels abroad, came to tell me about going abroad. I was not interested initially, but he promised me that I will get work to do"

In other cases, the people trafficked, or their families, hear such stories of success on the grapevine, or see others in their village reaping the rewards of remittances from cities in Nigeria or abroad, sent by family members. Glimpsing the only way to alleviate their abject poverty, they seek out the traffickers themselves, turning to known agents, or to friends who have had a child trafficked. Oresi, a trafficked child, said: "My family was living in abject poverty. I had to go to put things right for them and make them rich just like my mates."

Occasionally victims are lured into migrating by traffickers exploiting a desire for Islamic pilgrimage. Trafficking in some parts of Nigeria is endemic. There are whole regions where virtually everybody knows someone who has been trafficked.

The scale of the problem attests to Nigeria's social and economic problems. 70% of Nigerians live below the poverty line. Average life expectancy is only 47 years and HIV/AIDS is rife. The country's rural population suffers disproportionately from poverty, unemployment, few educational opportunities and low literacy. Human trafficking is a highly profitable enterprise. Endemic corruption in Nigeria and a weak legal framework means that it is also a low-risk crime.

The traffickers impose huge debts on the victims, especially those who are taken to Europe. They are told that they will have to repay their passage by working for the traffickers or their associates once they reach Europe. The traffickers wield great control over their victims, and frequently up the amount of payback demanded. Often the girls are required to work off US\$40,000-50,000; this represents a huge profit for the trafficker, and may be contrasted to the average annual salary in Nigeria of \$350. Uso, a 19-year-old girl trafficked to Italy explains that "until the initiator's specified amount is paid, the trafficked person is the traffickers property"

In addition to the methods commonly used by international traffickers to control closely their charges' everyday lives, Nigerian traffickers are notable for their use of voodoo religious rituals. Religion has a powerful influence on people's outlook in the regions from where most of the Nigerian victims derive. People being trafficked out of Nigeria are usually taken beforehand to a traditional juju (voodoo or religious magic) shrine, where they are made to swear oaths in front of

the priests. These include undertakings to uphold secrecy about the trafficking organisation and to pay off their debts. The ritual typically involves drinking a ceremonial drink prepared by the priests; this will supposedly make the girl more attractive to customers and prevent her from getting AIDS or from being caught by customs officials. The priest also collects fingernails, blood, hair from the head or genitals, or clothes stained by blood from menstruation. The acquisition of bodily relics gives the priests power over the victims. The victims are told that if they break their oaths they will die or go mad. The purpose of the ritual is to instil fear if the women later feel like trying to escape their traffickers.

Alice, a Nigerian trafficking victim, said: "It was in Italy I discovered that we were in for prostitution of the higher order. Though I resisted it at the beginning but there was nothing I could do since I was already committed by the oath I took and the pant the traffickers collected from me"

Of course, other methods of control are used, including physical abuse, denial of food and forceable imprisonment, and the traffickers ensure that their victims live isolated from the surrounding society, so they remain unaware of possible escape routes and reliant on their traffickers.

TRAFFICKING ROUTES

The routes taken by people smuggled out of Nigeria are only sketchily known, and vary considerably as the traffickers constantly alter their arrangements to evade law enforcement agencies.

The victims may travel by air, road and sea to reach their destination. Normally the traffickers will provide their victims with fake identities. Forged passports and documents are provided where necessary, and later retrieved by the traffickers to be used by another person. Fake passports may be obtained by altering stolen ones, borrowing from passport holders who look similar to the person trafficked, or buying them from corrupt officials in passport agencies. Depending on how they are supplied, a passport costs the traffickers in the region of US\$500-2000.

With the aid of forged travel documents, some victims are flown directly to their destinations. However as security has tightened, especially in Italy, fewer have such a simple journey. Instead, victims may travel to a neighbouring country, such as Ghana, with less of a reputation among watchful border guards for people-smuggling, and only then take a flight. Or they may fly to a less established, and consequently less vigilant, destination, such as France and thence, for example, travel by train to Italy.

The girls are picked up at stations, airports or nearby locations, by the local members of the trafficking network, usually a brothel madam or one of her assistants. The traffickers will have sent in advance a passport photograph or a description of the girl's attire to ensure the girl is recognised.

It is easier to fly victims to the Middle East, as they can successfully pass as Islamic pilgrims travelling to Saudi Arabia. Some are then transported on to Europe. Others reach Europe on established smuggling routes via South Africa. Security hurdles for traffickers are largely in the destination countries. In Nigeria itself, immigration controls are poorly enforced and officials are typically bribed to turn a blind eye towards the activities of the traffickers.

Most though are not smuggled by air to Europe, and instead make hard, dangerous journeys by land and sea, typically taking between 2½ and 6 months. At the outset, they usually have no idea that the

journey will take months rather than days. There are often long delays, as local conditions change and complex negotiations with local groups of people smugglers take place.

Of those going to Europe, 90% travel by road through the Sahara desert, either singly or in groups. The Nigerian traffickers organise men known as trolleys, who are usually locals, to escort the women and help smuggle them across borders. Normally they cross the desert in jeeps, sometimes as many as 20 people are packed into one jeep. Between car journeys, they often have to trek long distances. The girls stay in hostels, brothels or safe houses along the route, usually staffed and run by Nigerians. They are compelled to stay in the houses for long periods as onward arrangements are completed. Streams of refugees and migrants from elsewhere in Africa utilise the same routes.

On reaching the North African coast, the Nigerians set out across the Mediterranean on small boats, overladen with people, crossing major shipping lanes at night to avoid detection. The most common route is from Morocco to Spain. Once within Europe, the Nigerians travel to their final destinations more easily, normally by train, although occasionally by plane.

The long journeys are extremely perilous. In the desert the illegal travellers face incredible heat, sandstorms and a scarcity of food and water. Weakened by hunger and thirst, it is not uncommon for some to die in the Sahara. The Mediterranean crossing is fraught with even greater dangers. The rotten, overfilled boats often capsize, drowning all on board.

There are other risks. Sometimes Nigerian girls are sexually abused on the journey by their smugglers, becoming pregnant. On occasion they are captured by police and imprisoned or repatriated. If the traffickers or their agents have logistical difficulties, they may be abandoned somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Vic, a victim of trafficking, described the horrors of the journey: "We left by road after 2 weeks of preparation. On the road things were not smooth at all. We finally got to Morocco where we spent only a month. It was here I got tired of the whole journey and wanted to come back home. We hardly saw food to eat, accommodation was a problem, the man became rude and unaccommodating. We finally left there and arrived in Italy."

ONCE IN EUROPE...

Once in Europe, the victim encounters her madam, a brothel manager who controls the daily lives of the trafficked girls. Many rescued victims of trafficking report being treated well at first by the madam, and taken on shopping trips to buy clothes. It was only made clear subsequently that they would have to become prostitutes. Those who refuse are beaten and reminded of the debt that they owe and the oaths that they have taken. Any telephone contact with their families in Nigeria is closely supervised by the madam. Held virtual prisoner in a foreign country, with no knowledge of local law or language, or legal status, they have little choice but to comply.

Some of the trafficked Nigerian prostitutes work on the street, standing all night, at any time of year, shivering in scanty clothing, waiting for drivers to pick them up. They are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse from their customers. Living conditions are terrible. Four or five people may be cramped into one room to sleep. The girls' wages are collected by the madam. Large amounts are deducted to cover their expenses: cosmetics, clothes, food, accommodation, condoms etc. Further money is deducted as the madam's profit, the girls' debts to the traffickers, and, often, remittance

to the girls' families in Nigeria.. In the end the girls are left with very little to spend. Thus they are kept in debt slavery by their traffickers, at least until the debt has been paid off. Assuming the girls are not arrested and returned to Nigeria by the authorities, it typically takes two to three years for them to pay of their debts. Occasionally the madam will hand her girls over to the local police shortly before their debts run out, to avoid competition from freelancers.

Many remain prostitutes after they are released, unable to see any other avenue open to them. Some return to Nigeria, and others become traffickers themselves, setting up as a madam or recruiter, and start to make large profits. It is often these prostitutes-turned-traffickers who are the basis of the illegal emigration success stories prevalent in Nigeria.

SHAMEFUL TRADE FLOURISHES

The trafficking of prostitutes is a psychologically and physically damaging experience for virtually all the girls involved. After risking the grave perils of the journey, the girls expect to find a haven, but are confronted by a nightmare.

The phenomenon has a harmful effect on a wider scale in Nigeria. The lure of trafficking has removed children from schools, impairing their development and amplifying urban social problems. Returning prostitutes have contributed to the increase in the prevalence of STDs and AIDS in the country, perpetuating Nigeria's health and social crisis.

The Nigerian government is starting to take note and has belatedly put in some measures to prevent trafficking. In 2001 Nigeria ratified the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons and in 2003 the Child Rights Act and the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act were passed. The laws would go some way towards addressing the problem, were they enforced. But the government appears to treat trafficking with little sense of urgency. Meanwhile, the number of children and young adults extracted from their homes through false promises, only to become the victims of twenty-first century slavery, continues to grow alarmingly, to the profit of the Nigerian people traffickers.